

Karen Humanitarian Migrants and Video Calling: Digital Brokering in a Smartphone Age

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Abstract

Smartphones, social media and video-calling applications offer much potential for humanitarian migrants to maintain relationships with family and friends in other countries after resettlement. Experiences of transnational virtual co-presence vary, however, due to issues related to digital literacy and access to technology. Drawing upon in-depth interviews with 30 Karen humanitarian migrants who maintain transnational relationships, this thesis considers the impacts of social media and smartphone use on settlement experiences in a regional Australian city. I engage with refugee resettlement, transnational migration and digital media literature to help interpret these impacts. A key finding of this study is that younger Karen people in the city of Bendigo have actively helped their parents use smartphones and social media to stay connected with family in other countries. This assistance, often to use video calls, is something I call *digital brokering*. I demonstrate that such brokering can resemble, and occur alongside, language brokering in migrant settings. Another finding is that *real-time visual co-presence*, achieved through video calling, offers various opportunities for transnational practices of intimacy to be performed. For participants in this study, digital brokering and real-time visual co-presence have helped strengthen transnational relationships, facilitate family reunions and contribute to a greater sense of belonging in Australia. Collectively, these findings demonstrate the importance of smartphones and social media to transnational communicative experiences. They also demonstrate how active humanitarian migrants can be in shaping their own settlement experiences through the use of technology.

Statement of authorship

“Except where reference is made in the text of the thesis, this thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma. No other person’s work has been used without due acknowledgment in the main text of the thesis. This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution. All research procedures reported in the thesis were approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee (Ethics approval number: E17-056).”

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Chapter 1: Introduction

During her first four years in Australia, Eh Law Gay¹, an ethnic Karen humanitarian migrant, experienced many feelings of disconnection and dislocation. Aged in her fifties when she migrated from a refugee camp in Thailand to a regional Australian city, Eh Law Gay struggled with being so far from one of her daughters, who had resettled in the United States. Although the two of them could talk over the phone, Eh Law Gay found that hearing her daughter's voice was not enough; it did little to bridge the distance between them. Eh Law Gay had other children in Australia, but separation from her daughter left her feeling isolated – even trapped – in her new surrounds. In her early years in Australia, Eh Law Gay considered how she might move to the US herself, while at other times she considered returning to the familiarity of the refugee camp. “It was such a hard life,” she said.

Much to Eh Law Gay's relief, life in Australia eventually changed for the better. That change occurred after she bought a smartphone. With help from her other children who had migrated with her, Eh Law Gay began using Facebook Messenger video calls to communicate with her daughter in the US. The sensation of seeing her daughter “face to face” while they conversed transformed Eh Law Gay's experience of living in Australia. It was a transformation she found profoundly moving:

I felt very close to her. It was like I lived close, not far away, because we could see each other. It brought back a lot of memories of when we were living together and when she looked after me in the refugee camp. I felt much happier, because I was able to see her family through video call. After the video calls, I felt more comfortable [living in Australia].

After sudden, often violent, displacement from their homes and long periods in refugee camps, humanitarian migrants often face separation from family and friends –

¹ Like all participants' names in this thesis, this is a pseudonym

perhaps for the second time – as they resettle in third countries. Eh Law Gay’s experiences are an insight into the enormous challenges involved in dealing with such separation. Before arriving in Australia, Eh Law Gay had never used the internet, let alone social media, nor had she owned a smartphone. She had certainly never video called someone on the other side of the world. Digital technology, however, offered the type of connection that she had sought. Eh Law Gay could see her daughter and converse with her in real-time. It was hardly the same as being there – but it seemed the next best thing. It was a blessing, one that contributed to her sense of belonging in Australia. But it had happened only because Eh Law Gay’s other children had been there to show her what smartphones, social media and video calls could do.

Thesis statement and research questions

Younger humanitarian migrants in regional Australia are helping enhance their parents’ transnational communicative experiences through a process I call *digital brokering*. This thesis is an examination of that phenomenon. Such brokering occurs when younger people help their parents reconnect with family and friends from whom they have been separated during migration. This manifests as assistance to use smartphones and associated video-calling and social media applications (apps). I liken this digital brokering to *language brokering*, which also occurs among migrant families. Language brokering is “an activity whereby children interpret and translate for their migrant parents who have not yet learned the language of the new country” (Bauer 2016, p. 22).

Central to the digital brokering process is the potential of smartphones, social media and videotelephony² platforms to connect and reconnect people separated by distance. In particular, the video call – a type of *virtual co-presence* (Baldassar 2016) that replicates aspects of the face-to-face interaction – provides much potential for intimate transnational

² Social media, messaging and videotelephony platforms can exist as separate, individual apps. Equally, some apps combine all of these features. I am, therefore, fluid in my use of these terms, sometimes describing them all as social media for the sake of clarity in the writing.

communication. The ability to use such technology, however, is not a given for humanitarian migrants. As demonstrated in the example of Eh Law Gay, humanitarian migrants settling in a new country potentially face significant challenges maintaining quality transnational connections with family and friends. Through a study involving 30 Karen humanitarian migrants, I demonstrate that digital brokering can help overcome barriers to transnational communication after resettlement. Central to this thesis is the community to which Eh Law Gay belongs. The transnational communicative experiences of people from this community drive much of my analysis and discussion. At the heart of my research are these questions:

1. What are the impacts of social media and smartphone use on the transnational communicative experiences of Karen who have settled in a regional Australian city?
2. What role do generational differences play in experiences of such technology?
3. What is the relationship between transnational communication and digitally mediated co-presence?

Theoretical underpinnings and rationale

This thesis is a sociological contribution to refugee studies literature. It is concerned with experiences of digital media in the context of refugee resettlement. Three main fields of knowledge underpin this thesis: refugee and resettlement studies; migrant transnationalism; and digital media literature centring on emerging forms of social interaction, particularly *virtual co-presence* (Baldassar 2016) and *digitally mediated co-presence* (Alinejad 2019). I now introduce each of these fields of knowledge.

A refugee context

Migration across national borders “is one of the most salient issues” of this century (Martin 2017, p. 136). A crucial subset of migration is that which concerns refugees, those migrants who have been forced from their homes. About 7 per cent of the world’s migrants

are refugees (Schuster 2016). As Black (2001, p. 63) writes, a “refugee is commonly distinguished from the economic migrant, as someone who is forced to migrate, rather than someone who has moved more or less voluntarily”. Conflicts in various parts of the world resulted in the number of refugees and displaced persons soaring in the second decade of the 21st century to “levels not seen since the end of World War II” (Martin 2017, p. 137). In 2018 alone, more than 13 million people “were newly displaced due to conflict or persecution” (UNHCR 2019c, p. 2).

Refugee studies has also swelled since the 1990s (Black 2001), underscoring that it is a field that has “always evolved in response to the problems of the times” (Chimni 2009, p. 14). The number of articles about refugees or forced migration published in SAGE journals from 2008-2018 was nearly double the number published in the decade prior to that (Salehyan 2019, p. 146). This growing interest in refugee issues reflects the significance of forced migration as “one of the most pressing global issues of our time” (Salehyan 2019, p. 146). Refugee studies encompasses a broad range of academic disciplines, including sociology (Skran & Daughtry 2007). A complex field, refugee studies can, in part, be traced back to the 1920s, when academics began taking a strong interest in First World War refugees (Skran & Daughtry 2007). Despite refugee studies being largely Eurocentric in the decades that followed, it was not exclusively focused on the movement of people in and out of Europe (Skran & Daughtry 2007). Olaf Kleist (2017, pp. 162-163) points out that “the practice of offering protection to others is an even older tradition (and one beyond Europe)”. This emphasises the universality of refugee situations and the lack of a precise historical starting point.

Chimni (2009) divides 20th century refugee studies into three main phases. The first, from 1914-45, spans the first two world wars; the second is set to the backdrop of the post-war refugee camps and the formation of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR); and the third, from 1982 through to the new millennium, was a period of

significant growth in published work in the field. This included the establishment of the Oxford Refugee Studies Program and the *Journal of Refugee Studies*. That journal, in its first edition, sought to push refugee studies into the academic mainstream, justified by the “universality, now, rather than the uniqueness of refugee phenomena” (Zetter 1988, p. 4). The journal also distanced itself from voluntary migration, while adopting a use of the term “refugee” that included “displaced persons and asylum seekers within the context of enforced movement” (Zetter 1988, p. 5).

Refugee studies developed significantly after the establishment of the UNHCR and the 1951 Refugee Convention, while its continual growth has been “intimately connected with policy developments” (Black 2001, p. 58). The UNHCR continues to drive the creation and adoption of global refugee policy, while non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are also influential in this process (Milner 2014). As argued by Milner (2014, p. 490), global refugee policy is both a process and a product. From the 1970s onwards, refugee flows shifted “towards a North-South rather than an East-West focus” (Papagianni 2016, p. 320). Following the refugee crisis in Europe of the 2010s, the UN General Assembly committed to the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants in 2016, effectively confirming its ongoing support for the 1951 Refugee Convention and associated responses to refugee situations (Hansen 2018, p. 132).

Refugee resettlement is also of growing interest to scholars. Garnier, Jubilut and Sandvik (2018) have identified three main research strands in the literature: specific policies and their relation to particular population groups; refugees’ experiences of applying and being selected for third-country resettlement; and refugees’ experiences of integration after resettlement. Third-country resettlement is one of the “three durable solutions” that have become central to refugee protection since the 1950s (Souter 2013, p. 171). This thesis responds to a call for refugee resettlement in third countries to be explored more in academic literature (see Salehyan 2019).

Refugee resettlement is, according to Garnier (2014, p. 942), “a protection instrument allowing for the orderly movement of clearly identified categories of people through active cooperation between states and non-state actors”. The UNHCR itself refers to “resettlement” as “the transfer of refugees from an asylum country to another State that has agreed to admit them and ultimately grant them permanent settlement” (UNHCR 2019b). Few countries, however, participate in the UNHCR-led programme. Indeed, some 86 per cent of refugees end up in developing countries that do not have formal refugee policy (Schuster 2016). Australia is one of the few countries that is part of the UNHCR resettlement programme (UNHCR 2019b). As part of its contribution, Australia “provides a suite of settlement services to refugees and other humanitarian entrants after arrival in the country” (Sampson 2015, p. 98). In excess of 750,000 refugees have resettled in Australia since 1947 (Neumann et al. 2014).

More than half of the literature on refugee resettlement in Australia has been published this century (Neumann et al. 2014). Much of it has been “policy-driven”, reflecting the influence of service providers and policy makers on the funding of research. For this reason, graduate researchers working without such funding can produce original contributions to the literature. Neumann et al. (2014, p. 13) write:

In fact, much of the conceptually innovative work on refugee settlement in Australia had been done by MA and PhD students; they are required to address the broader scholarship in which their own research question is framed, and the focus of their inquiry tends to be less influenced by the priorities of government bodies.

In an Australian context, refugee studies has often focused on “the experiences of – and barriers to – participation in Australian society” (Sampson 2015, p. 99). These experiences and barriers have been explored mainly in terms of employment, health and the locations in which settlement has occurred (Sampson 2015, p. 99). Since the 1950s, refugee resettlement literature in Australia has taken several important turns. One such shift occurred in the 1980s,

when literature began focusing on “groups defined by their ethnicity, age, and/or gender and on their particular problems” (Neumann et al. 2014, p. 7). At the same time, focus shifted from “issues of housing and employment” – prominent since the 1950s – to “education and welfare services” (Neumann et al. 2014, p. 7). This followed sweeping changes in the 1970s that included the abolition of the White Australia policy and the adoption of refugee policy (Neumann et al. 2014, p. 7). The concept of integration and victim and trauma narratives became relevant in the 1990s (Neumann et al. 2014).

A challenge of resettlement is the diversity of refugees in terms of “ages, cultural and religious backgrounds, languages spoken and levels of education” (Lichtenstein & Puma 2018, p. 398). Successful resettlement has historically been measured by employment (Lichtenstein & Puma 2018, p. 398). Although “there is no agreement on one set of clear determinants” (Curry, Smedley & Lenette 2018, p. 434) of “successful” refugee resettlement, relationships, social inclusion and the maintenance of ethnic identity are often cited as important. Increasingly, integration has emerged as central to conversations about “successful” resettlement. Integration is often considered in terms of refugees’ ability “to make local friends, to use their own social capital within the cultural milieu of their new community, and to assimilate into the dominant culture” (Dubus 2018, p. 415).

An important part of Ager and Strang’s (2008) conceptual framework of integration is social connection – consisting of social bridges, social bonds and social links. Ager and Strang’s work has been highly influential, becoming “a common lens through which refugee integration is viewed in research, policy and practice” (Lichtenstein & Puma 2018, p. 400). As Fozdar and Hartley (2013, p. 25) observe, integration “requires a preparedness to adapt to the lifestyle of the host society without having to lose one’s cultural identity”. Integration is often associated with a nation-state perspective, making it potentially problematic for refugees who maintain transnational connections. For migrants with interests in two or more countries, Saharso (2019, p. 2) argues, “it would seem no longer adequate to describe

migrants' lives in terms of integration into the social life and culture of one specific nation state".

Social integration as a concept has long been present in sociology. Since the 1990s, transnational approaches have challenged functionalist approaches to social integration that have focused on assimilation (Stepputat & Nyberg Sørensen 2014). Such a shift has resulted in increased knowledge of transnational practices and the realisation that "engagement in this kind of associational life does not seem to represent a hindrance for integration" (Stepputat & Nyberg Sørensen 2014, p. 91). Marlowe (2017) calls for settlement to be better understood as something transnational, in a way that would allow refugee resettlement research to liberate itself from methodological nationalism. Marlowe (2017, p. 166) writes:

The practices of transnational family and friendship transcend nation-state borders through a sense of connectedness across distance, by sustaining a sense of 'family-hood' in the context of ongoing separation.

Two elements of Marlowe's work are useful here. First, Marlowe (2017, p. 160) differentiates between "resettlement" and "settlement", writing that the former is "about protection from persecution and gross human rights violations and settlement is about belonging, which involves crafting a new existence in a receiving society". Second, Marlowe highlights the value of bringing a transnational perspective to settlement studies, which I also seek to do in this thesis.

A transnational context

This brings me to the second body of literature guiding this project: transnationalism, specifically that which relates to migration. An early approach to transnationalism viewed migrants as active in "a social process in which [they] establish social fields that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders" (Glick Schiller, Basch & Blanc-Szanton 1992, p. xi). Transnational studies is a broad and much-contested field of literature. Its increased focus

on migrants in the 1990s and early 2000s brought “attention to the multiple activities of common people across national borders” (Portes, Guarnizo & Landolt 2017, p. 1489). These cross-border activities, indeed, are “quite variegated phenomena” (Vertovec 2009, p. 3) and demonstrate how migrants “live” across multiple societies, whether or not they physically cross borders after their initial international migration.

Vertovec (2009, p. 4) argues that six main “takes” on transnationalism are worthy of close consideration. This results in a model in which transnationalism is viewed as:

social morphology, as type of consciousness, as mode of cultural reproduction, as avenue of capital, as site of political engagement, and as (re)construction of “place” or locality.

In a thesis about the ways in which smartphones and social media are used for transnational family communication, social morphology is of particular relevance. Social morphology consists of “social formations”, which are essentially relationship systems that span borders (Vertovec 2009). “Migrant transnationalism”, a wide-ranging category, is one such social formation. It refers “to a range of practices and institutions linking migrants, people and organizations in their homeland or elsewhere in a diaspora” (Vertovec 2009, p. 13). Remittances, collective organisations involving migrants and involvement in politics from afar are features of transnationalism, and have “structural importance for sending regions and for immigrant communities themselves” (Portes, Escobar & Walton Radford 2007, p. 244).

Transnationalism expanded rapidly in the social sciences in the 1990s and early 2000s, coinciding with similar growth in globalisation literature (Vertovec 2009). Transnationalism originally focused on migrant groups, particularly from Central America, working in the United States or Western Europe (Roudometof 2005, p. 113). Increased migration “from the global South to the global North has become acknowledged as one of the trademarks of the contemporary capitalist world economy” (Portes, Escobar & Walton

Radford 2007, p. 244). Migrants from a refugee background, however, were often overlooked in early studies of transnationalism. Some discussions around the turn of the century sought to address this (see Al-Ali, Black & Koser 2001a and Al-Ali, Black & Koser 2001b). The early absence of refugees perhaps reflects transnationalism's initial focus on labour-influenced migration (Al-Ali, Black & Koser 2001a, p. 615). Transnational practices, however, can "flourish among refugees" (Al-Ali, Black & Koser 2001a, p. 632).

A much-debated aspect of transnationalism since the 1990s has been whether transnationalism is a new process or just a new lens through which age-old processes are viewed. Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt (1999, p. 218) observed that "in some writings, the phenomenon of transnationalism is portrayed as novel and emergent, whereas in others it is said to be as old as labour immigration itself". Waldinger (2010, p. 22) has questioned whether transnationalism offers much that is new to fields of international migration studies. Transnationalism is an appealing perspective, Waldinger (2010, p. 22) argues, but "in practice, its scholarly implementation has left much to be desired". Although the prefix "trans-" has been used liberally, Waldinger (2010, p. 22) observes, "the literature's own preoccupation with the home country connection of the migrants largely accounts for the slippage back into the immigration frame".

Waldinger and Fitzgerald (2004, p. 1178) observe that social networks across borders create "connectivity between source and destination points", generating "a multiplicity of imagined communities". Waldinger (2010, p. 22) argues, however, that "identifying the specifically transnational aspect of the phenomenon proves elusive" for scholars, whom he believes are often talking about already well-established features of international migration. Nonetheless, Waldinger (2013, p. 769) acknowledges that the transnational perspective has enabled migration studies to transcend "the largely unconscious, implicit nationalism of established approaches".

Transnationalism does, indeed, describe a phenomenon with a much longer history, but its validity as a field centres on the novel aspects of its contemporary form (Portes 2003). The growth and increasing complexity of transnational migration caused it to stand out, making it “necessary to speak of an emergent social field” (Portes, Guarnizo & Landolt 1999, p. 217). Communications technology and increased transportation since the 1990s have also helped bring transnationalism into plain sight (Portes 2003). Viewing transnationalism as something illuminated by, rather than the product of, an increase in border crossings and transnational communicative options is important. Roudometof (2005, p. 115) illustrates this well, arguing that reducing “transnationalism to a mere appendix of contemporary technological changes” is a very weak position, and that in fact, transnationalism has a much longer history.

Associated with transnationalism is the term “diaspora”, which refers to “the spread of migrant communities away from a real or imagined ‘homeland’” (Van Hear 2014, p. 176). Tabar (2019, p. 8), however, has attempted to differentiate between “diasporic” and “transnational” activities, arguing:

If a member of the diaspora engages in dialogue with a family member in the homeland about personal finances or private relationships, for example, he/she is engaging in transnational relations, but his/her actions are not diasporic, because they are not aimed at or related to the homeland itself despite taking place in the homeland.

Similarly, Tabar (2019) argues, private conversations between people of the same ethnicity or nation now living in separate countries are transnational rather than diasporic. This is unless by engaging in such discussions, those conversing are “actively seeking to impact the homeland” (Tabar 2019, p. 8). In this thesis, I adopt an approach that prioritises everyday transnational activities among families and households. Because this thesis is primarily focused on private conversations between family members, across multiple countries, and secondarily focused on how they publicly express a cultural identity, again to people in multiple countries, I refer mainly to “transnational” rather than “diasporic” activities.

Another debated aspect of transnationalism relates to how widespread transnational activities really are among migrant populations. The work of Basch, Glick Schiller and Blanc-Szanton, particularly their 1994 book *Nations Unbound*, was the catalyst for a “veritable explosion of both qualitative studies and speculative writings leading to the impression that all immigrants were involved in transnational activities” (Portes, Guarnizo & Landolt 2017, p. 1486). This, however, is not the case. Not all migrants are transnational in their practices, or in ways that stretch beyond communicating with family members in other countries (Vertovec 2009).

One perspective is that migrants who engage in a range of transnational activities – from sending remittances and communicating across borders, to consuming media and staying politically engaged in homeland affairs – are rare (Verdery et al. 2018). It has been argued, in fact, that “most migrants selectively engage in just one or two” of these activities (Verdery et al. 2018, p. 57). Such selective engagement is crucial to transnational families, who have come to be viewed in the early part of the 21st century as “primarily relational in nature” (Bryceson & Vuorela 2002, p. 7). Vertovec (2009, p. 61) argues that the “provenance of most everyday migrant transnationalism is within families”. This might also be considered in terms of *little transnationalism*, which describes transnationalism at a micro, household and family level (Gardner & Grillo 2002, p. 186).

Transnational family interactions – which are central to this thesis – can be said to take place in what Roudometof (2005) describes as a *transnational social space*. Roudometof (2005, p. 113) argues that such a space, created through interaction, is one of three main layers of transnational experiences. The second layer of which Roudometof writes concerns the *transitional social field*. In this setting, “structured and permanent interactions” are at the heart of struggles for power. The third layer is that of a *transnational community*, which consists of migrants and other groups of people in industrialised settings (Roudometof 2005, p. 127).

For transnational migrants, communication across national borders has become an “indispensable precondition for coping with everyday challenges in love, intimacy and the family” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2014, p. 169). Smartphones and social media offer new ways for humanitarian migrants to stay in touch with distant family members (Marlowe 2019a). In such a context, Vertovec (2009 p. 60) writes, migrants “are often at the cutting edge of technology adoption”. Technology, therefore, is central to my consideration of transnational activity across borders. This brings me to the third body of literature that underpins this thesis: that of digital media.

Advances in technology have had a significant impact on migrant transnationalism since the 1990s. As Vertovec (2009, p. 14) argues, “advances in the ‘technology of contact’ have powerfully affected the extent, intensity and speed at which” migrants can maintain bonds with family members in other parts of the world. Amid such changes, Diminescu (2008, p. 565) introduced the concept of the *connected* migrant to explain how the emergence of ICTs brought to light the ways migrants created and maintained “a culture of bonds”. Diminescu (2008, p. 568) writes:

Yesterday the motto was: immigrate and cut your roots; today it would be: circulate and keep in touch. This evolution seems to mark a new era in the history of migrations: the age of the connected migrant.

Telephone calls have been crucial to such connection. As Vertovec (2004, p. 219) argued in the early part of this century, cheap international phone calls became “a kind of social glue” for migrant networks. Improved infrastructure made calling easier, resulting in a boom in international calls in the 1990s and early 2000s. Cheap calls, Vertovec (2004, p. 222) wrote, were “transforming the everyday lives of innumerable migrants”. Marlowe (2019a, p. 2) argues that the social glue of which Vertovec spoke “has largely shifted to the

digital environment”. This thesis seeks to understand effects of such a shift on Karen humanitarian migrants in regional Australia.

Underpinning that shift are smartphones, social media and videotelephony, which have emerged as even more durable options for transnational communication. Such technology has allowed “migrants and stay-at-homes to communicate instantly and almost costlessly, with a spontaneity approaching the conditions of face-to-face contact” (Waldinger 2013, p. 764). A proliferation of digital communicative options has made the proximate face-to-face encounter just one of many ways of interacting. The emergence of video calls, however, especially in the second decade of this century (Chowdhry 2015), has reasserted the importance of synchronous, visual interaction, this time over long distances. This has implications for transnational migrants.

Although communicating with distant kin “is a fundamental aspect of life away from the former homeland” (Aguirre & Davies 2015, p. 4), experiences of such communication vary. For humanitarian migrants, resettlement in a country like Australia is rarely the end of their ordeal. Families “continue to worry about relatives still living in perilous circumstances in transit countries, conflict zones and refugee camps” (Robertson, Wilding & Gifford 2016, pp. 221-222). Being constantly connected “is now recognized as key for all migrants, including refugees” (Gifford & Wilding 2013, p. 561). Smartphones and social media are important parts of the picture for humanitarian migrants.

As social media in particular becomes more accessible, it is becoming “an increasingly powerful strand that has the potential to connect refugees to ‘here’ in a country of settlement and their transnational ‘there’” (Marlowe 2019c, p. 2). In adopting a transnational outlook, Marlowe (2019c) emphasises that the locations of “here” and “there” can, indeed, shift as relationships, circumstances and even locations change. Transnationalism in some way challenges the three “durable solutions” the UNHCR seeks to offer refugees: “integration in the country of first asylum, resettlement in a third country, or

return to the homeland” (Van Hear 2006, p. 9). Transnational activities unsettle stable categories such as “home” to the point that Van Hear (2006, p. 13) has proposed transnationalism as an alternative solution, albeit an “enduring” rather than a durable one. In recent years, smartphones and social media have become an important part of this picture.

Co-presence with family over long distances, however, remains far from a given in a transnational family; it must be “actively produced” (Wilding 2018, p. 120). In particular, refugees face significant barriers to owning a smartphone, some of which relate to displacement itself, lack of income and low literacy levels. The UNHCR (2016, p. 13) notes that:

Compared to the world as a whole, refugee households are approximately 50 per cent less likely to have an internet-enabled phone and approximately two and a half times more likely to be living without a phone.

Being able to communicate with family and friends is the most important aspect of connectivity for many refugees (UNHCR 2016). In fact, the UNHCR (2016, p. 16) argues “this need is greater for refugees than for the general population because displacement often separates refugees from their loved ones”. Yet, for those without literacy in English – or any literacy at all – using the internet can be difficult or even impossible (UNHCR 2016). The example of Eh Law Gay at the beginning of this thesis shows that keeping in touch with distant family and friends using smartphones and social media can be a significant challenge for humanitarian migrants.

A Karen context

This thesis offers a contribution to a growing field of literature about the role of social media and smartphones in a settlement context. At the centre of this study are ethnic Karen humanitarian migrants who have resettled in Bendigo, an Australian city some 150 kilometres northwest of Melbourne, after years in refugee camps in Thailand. Many younger

participants were born in these camps, while others like Eh Law Gay were born in parts of Burma³ (or Myanmar) they refer to as Karen state. Those participants fled to Thailand after being forcibly displaced. In this thesis, I refer to Karen participants mainly as “humanitarian migrants”. This acknowledges that they are experiencing a post-refugee, “settlement” phase of their lives.⁴

The Karen are a diverse ethnic group, found mainly near the border of southeast Burma and neighbouring Thailand (Green & Lockley 2012, p. 566). Karen communities also reside in the Irrawaddy Delta in the southwest of Burma (Lall & South 2014, p. 305), while individuals and families are scattered elsewhere in that country (Thawngmung 2008, p. 3). Many Karen have suffered persecution at the hands of the Burmese military, the consequences of a civil war that has engulfed Burma for decades. The number of Karen fleeing their villages in Karen state for refugee camps in Thailand swelled after 1984 when technological advancements allowed the Burmese military, previously thwarted by extreme weather in the wet season, to mount offensives in Karen territory all year round (Lee 2014). Families and individuals have set off through the jungle, crossing the border and making it to these camps, where they have lived off rations and waited years for resettlement in a third country. Western countries began resettling Karen from the Thai border camps in the first decade of this century (Spivey & Lewis 2015, p. 61). The resettlement programme from camps along the border involves 12 destination countries and is the biggest of its kind in the world (Harkins & Chantavanich 2014).⁵

In their study of three Karen brothers resettled in a rural part of Georgia in the United States, Gilhooly and Lee (2014, p. 395) demonstrate that the internet has helped Karen migrants in destination countries “cope with and thrive in their new communities”. By 2012,

³ “Burma” is still widely used among Karen people. Therefore, it is appropriate for me to use this name in a study that centres on Karen participants.

⁴ I discuss this more in Chapter Three.

⁵ I explore resettlement from the camps more in Chapter Four.

all three brothers, aged in their teens or early twenties, owned smartphones and engaged with various digital media. The online worlds the brothers constructed by using this technology became their “primary sites for socialization and information” (Gilhooly & Lee 2014, 389). The authors (2014, p. 391) observed that:

Soon after gaining Internet access, the brothers created Facebook accounts and actively sought out friends and family back in Thailand and those who resettled in the United States and other countries.

In a broader study of Karen resettled in several states in the US (Gilhooly & Lynn 2015), adolescents were found to be actively using social media. This meant relationships formed in refugee camps could be maintained after settlement. Gilhooly and Lynn (2015, p. 805) observed a difference between younger and older Karen participants, writing:

While many youth have maintained friendships via new technologies, many elderly Karen complained of language isolation. Everyone spoke of an elderly grandparent or acquaintance that had either returned to Thailand or expressed a desire to return.

Such an example is similar to the sentiments Eh Law Gay expressed in this chapter’s opening. Building on this existing research about Karen humanitarian migrants in third countries, I seek to identify the extent to which participants in Bendigo have adopted digital technology, and what differences are observable between the practices of younger people and older people. To do this, I have divided participants in this study into two groups based on age.⁶ This provides a starting point for exploring what potential barriers to transnational communication exist among Karen humanitarian migrants in a regional Australian city.

An Australian context

Australia is a multicultural society both in terms of its demographics and its governmental policies. Its population has grown increasingly diverse since large-scale

⁶ I detail this more in Chapter Three.

migration occurred in the post-war period and official multicultural policy was introduced in the 1970s (Moran 2011, p. 2156). During this “nation-building exercise”, in which the *Racial Discrimination Act (1975)* was adopted, Australia formally distanced itself from its White Australia policy, which had prioritised British and Irish migration, and committed itself to diversity (Moran 2011, p. 2159). This included accepting Vietnamese refugees fleeing by boat after the fall of Saigon in 1975 (McKay, Thomas & Kneebone 2011, p. 114).

During the 1980s and 1990s, an increase in migration from Asia and Africa continued to diversify Australia’s population (Hartley 1995, p. 12). The importance of multiculturalism as nation building, Moran (2011, p. 2162) argues, has been a feature of the policy’s success, both in terms of function and public approval. But public discourse about Asian, African and Muslim immigration, and the conservative Howard government’s retreat from multiculturalism in the early 2000s, has changed the debate about multiculturalism and cast it, to some, as an adversary of nationalism (Moran 2011, pp. 2164-65).

Set against this backdrop, Australia has run a humanitarian migration programme, accepting referrals from the UNHCR, as part of its commitment as a signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention (Glendenning 2015). Humanitarian migrants admitted through this programme have tended to settle in Australia’s larger cities, in particular Sydney and Melbourne (Fozdar & Hartley 2013). Since the early 2000s, however, government policies have sought to disperse more humanitarian migrants to regional areas (Curry, Smedley & Lenette 2018). As Schech (2014, p. 607) notes, “government-sponsored regional settlement started in 2005 with several pilot projects for which refugees were carefully selected”. Refugees settled in rural settings “tended to be from countries with no or limited history of migration to Australia, such as Burma” (Schech 2014, p. 607). This includes Karen people, even though small-scale Karen migration to Australia dates back more than 60 years (Worland 2015, p. 151).

A Bendigo context: settlement and digital inclusion

A large proportion of Karen who arrived in Australia between 2006–12 found homes in urban and regional Victoria (Robertson, Wilding and Gifford 2016, p. 224). The first Karen humanitarian migrants in Bendigo, in central Victoria, settled in 2007. The most recent Australian census recorded some 870 Karen speakers living in the Bendigo region, out of a total population of 153,092 (ABS 2016a). The actual population of Karen residents in the city is likely much greater than official records show. The Karen community in Bendigo itself estimates its membership is already up around 2000 people (Kernebone 2018), while the City of Greater Bendigo (2020) estimates that some 2500 Karen people live in the local government area.

The Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) measures digital inequality across the country. The index shows that regional Australians and those with low levels of income, employment and education are generally “less digitally included than their compatriots” (Wilson, Thomas & Barraket 2019, p. 117). In Bendigo, a sizeable regional city, the median weekly income for a person aged 15 and over was \$593 at the last national census, which was lower than the Australian median income of \$662 (ABS 2016a). The percentage of homes with internet connectivity in Bendigo was slightly lower than Australian dwellings on the whole. Whereas 83.2 per cent of Australian dwellings contained at least one person who used the internet from home, a connection was used in only 79.8 per cent of dwellings in Bendigo (ABS 2016a). In this context, humanitarian migrants who have settled in Bendigo – possibly without English literacy or even literacy in their first language – face significant challenges when it comes to study, work and internet access.

Part of the continued growth of the Karen community in Bendigo has been due to secondary migration. This has involved individuals and families first settling elsewhere in Australia then being enticed to Bendigo by family or friends already living there (Couch, Adonis & MacLaren 2010, p. 22). The community’s presence is slowly growing in academic

research (see Couch, Adonis & MacLaren 2010) and other types of research (such as AMES & Deloitte 2018). This thesis is an opportunity to contribute to the emerging literature about the Karen in Bendigo, the Karen in Australia and humanitarian migrant groups with little history in the nation prior to the 21st century.

Structure of the thesis

This thesis introduces the concept of digital brokering as an informal strategy for enhancing transnational relationships after resettlement. I develop this concept through exploration of the transnational communicative practices and experiences of Karen humanitarian migrants in a regional Australian context. Qualitative interviews with these participants explore their use of smartphones and communicative media, particularly video calls. I argue that the platform of video calling enables an increasingly important type of digitally mediated co-presence.

Chapter outlines

In Chapter Two, I detail my conceptual framework, which situates social interaction, especially Goffman's concept of co-presence, in a 21st century age of smartphones and associated apps. I argue that Goffman's social interaction paradigm is a useful starting point for understanding the role that smartphones and video calls play in helping transnational migrants experience intimacy over long distances. I explore in more detail Baldassar's (2016) concept of *real-time co-presence*, a contemporary extension of Goffman's theorising. I introduce the term *real-time visual co-presence*, which specifically refers to virtual co-presence achieved through video calls. I consider how the video call has helped reassert the importance of face-to-face interaction, especially in relation to transnational communication.

In Chapter Three, I outline my approach to research through a discussion about my positionality as a cross-cultural and cross-language researcher. Included in this chapter is a discussion about the practical and ethical challenges I have faced. I then outline my research,

including the research procedures I have used, before introducing the participants. I explain the data analysis process and my experiences of interviewing participants using a Karen-language interpreter, before engaging in discussion about the opportunities and possible limitations of my project.

Chapter Four is primarily a discussion about who the Karen people are – both in terms of the millions of people around the world who identify with the label, and those who make up the Karen community in Bendigo. I explore this in three primary ways – in terms of culture and identity, modern history and migration. This leads me to consider a fourth category relevant to experiences in a social media and smartphone age: Karen as transnational digital communicators in a settlement stage of their lives. I contend that all four categories are helpful in developing understanding of Karen people.

In what is one of three main data chapters, I demonstrate in Chapter Five the ways in which participants have become transnational in their communication, charting their journeys from their homeland or a refugee camp to Australia. This is explained in terms of *separation*, *settlement* and *connection*. I demonstrate how experiences of transnational communication can vary. I argue that construction of *real-time visual co-presence* can enhance and diversify experiences of communication and intimacy over long distances.

In Chapter Six, I consider how this real-time visual co-presence is constructed, noting the difference between the experiences of younger and older participants in such a process. I demonstrate that most participants require some assistance to access smartphones, social media and video calling apps, which are central to experiencing such co-presence. This help is provided in two main ways: when young people teach each other how to use smartphones and social media, and when young people teach their parents. This type of teaching occurs informally and is an example of digital brokering.

In Chapter Seven, I consider the importance of different types of virtual co-presence to humanitarian migrants. First, I consider participants' experiences of real-time visual co-presence through video calls. I discuss the ways in which real-time visual co-presence can emulate many features of the face-to-face interaction, allowing various practices of intimacy to be performed. I demonstrate this in relation to participants' positive experiences of video calling. Second, I consider Madianou's (2016) concept of *ambient co-presence* to demonstrate how participants' transitions to digital communication potentially allow them to know whether their distant family and friends are safe – even when voice or text-based conversations do not occur. I draw from the experiences of participants whose refugee journeys – in a pre-digital age – were characterised by separation from their families and periods of not knowing whether they were safe, or even still alive.

Chapter Eight provides both a discussion of my findings and a conclusion to the thesis. I use it to revisit the research questions from this introduction and to expand on the main findings of the thesis. I argue that young people in this study are often crucial in shaping the quality and frequency of their elders' interactions with distant kin in a way that resembles language brokering. I call this process *digital brokering*. I consider the ways in which this brokering plays out in the context of this study, before discussing its relevance in a broader sense. I also discuss the importance of what digital brokering often helps to achieve – real-time visual co-presence, where transnational practices of intimacy can be performed.

Conclusion

This thesis is a story – in fact, many stories – about displacement and resettlement. It is a thesis about reconnection after separation and how humanitarian migrants live in transnational ways long after they settle in a third country. I consider how, through communication that transcends nation-state borders, being transnational is something more than physical migration from country to country and becomes tied to virtual spaces. I explore

how the interactive potential of smartphones and social media – when realised – helps a migrant maintain important relationships as they shift from being proximate to distant.

This thesis documents the transnational communicative experiences of Karen humanitarian migrants who have settled in Australia since 2007. I consider the ways in which they use smartphones to maintain connection with family members in refugee camps in Thailand, their homeland of eastern Burma and elsewhere in the world. I argue that online video calls are becoming increasingly important to many transnational relationships. This thesis also considers the ways in which broader use of social media allows humanitarian migrants to express their cultural identities to their transnational communities.

Adapting to life in a new country requires many humanitarian migrants not just to forge a connection with their new surrounds, but also to develop a skillset that grants them access to a transnational online space where important relationships can be resumed and enhanced. For some migrant groups, achieving this is a harder task than it is for others, just as there are varying experiences within the same group. To overcome settlement challenges, humanitarian migrants often implement informal strategies at a household level. This study shows that one such strategy, related to transnational communication, is a reimagining of the child language broker. This *digital brokering* is a central focus of the chapters that follow.

Chapter 2: Together though apart: co-presence in transnational communication

Introduction

Social interaction is evolving in an age of smartphones and social media. Once firmly grounded in the everyday “face-to-face” worlds of 20th century theorists like Erving Goffman and Alfred Schutz, social interaction is being reimagined in a digital age. The boundaries of communication are expanding and the physical limitations of keeping in touch are being challenged. The face-to-face aspect of social interaction is being de-centred – indeed, speaking in person is now simply one option among many. Connected presence (Licoppe 2004), polymedia (Madianou & Miller 2012) and consociated contemporaries (Zhao 2004) are some of the examples of the conceptual fruits borne from academic engagement with changing communicative norms. This new era of interaction has significant implications, especially for those communicating with family and friends over long distances.

In this chapter, I review literature relevant to this evolution in social interaction. The purpose for doing this is to understand the virtual communicative options that are *potentially* available to humanitarian migrants. This literature provide the building blocks for a conceptual framework that allows me to relate *co-presence* (and its evolution into *digitally mediated co-presence*) to the transnational activities that humanitarian migrants might engage in after settlement in a third country. Such migrants’ potential to be *digitally co-present* with members of their transnational social networks is central to this thesis. This co-presence can be chosen and constructed in various ways. The argument that this leads to varying experiences of transnational communication underpins my data chapters.

This chapter is separated into three main sections. I begin with an analysis of Goffman’s work on social interaction, particularly co-presence. Emphasised is the centrality

of the face-to-face encounter in such interaction and how it frames social performances and rituals. In the second part of this chapter, I consider social interaction literature subsequent to Goffman, which brings his work into a mass media and digital age, significantly expanding the definition of co-presence. I then explore how different types of co-presence potentially facilitate more diverse types of intimacy in transnational communicative exchanges.

Social interaction and co-presence

In a thesis about humanitarian migrants and their use of smartphones and social media to communicate transnationally, it would be easy to get caught up in the media – that is, the social networking sites and the devices themselves. However, exploring online interaction through consideration only of smartphones and social media would be to miss something; it would place too much emphasis on the *vessel* in which communication is carried, rather than give due attention to the *act* of communication: social interaction. Such interaction underpins relationships – transnational or otherwise. This section considers the foundations of social interaction. Such a focus allows me to consider what remains true of it both before and after the advent of smartphones, social media and video calling. Although digital technology has provided an alternative *vessel* for communication transcendent of the face-to-face encounter, the *act* of communication remains reliant upon something at the foundations of social interaction: co-presence.

Goffman, face-to-face interaction and co-presence

Erving Goffman (1922-1982), a Canadian American theorist writing in a pre-digital age, provides a starting point for understanding social interaction. In particular, his assertion that co-presence unpins the face-to-face encounter is crucial to understanding what frames interaction. Familiarisation with co-presence in a pre-digital era is important to appreciating how it has been further conceptualised in an age of smartphones and social media. A sociologist, Goffman wrote a series of seminal texts on everyday social behaviour in the late

1950s and 1960s that continue to be hugely influential (see Goffman 1959; 1963; 1967). His major contribution to sociology was to legitimise the exploration of everyday interactions, through “the fundamentally ordinary sense of watching and listening to people” (West 1996, p. 365). In such works as *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Goffman brought a hidden “machinery of social interaction” (Manning 1992, p. 5) into plain view. His focus was very much “the minutiae of social life” (Manning 1992, p. 6).

Goffman’s observations centre on proximate, face-to-face interactions. Indeed, he “stressed the relevance of spatial distance and the participants’ orientation to their mutual positions” (Licoppe 2009, p. 1924). This is largely to be expected of writing from a pre-digital age, although it does show some bias towards such interaction. After all, tools such as the handwritten letter and the telephone were very much part of everyday life when Goffman’s work was emerging as significant. For face-to-face interaction to be achieved, Goffman (1963, p. 17) argues, actors involved must sense “they are close enough to be perceived in whatever they are doing”. They must be aware of their co-presence and involved in “focused interaction”. Goffman (1963, p. 89) writes:

Face engagements comprise all those instances of two or more participants in a situation joining each other openly in maintaining a single focus of cognitive and visual attention – what is sensed as a single *mutual activity*.

A clear theme of Goffman’s work on face-to-face interaction is co-presence. Even though Goffman does not dedicate entire books or even chapters to it, co-presence provides an important framework for his theorising. Indeed, his work is effectively a “theory of interaction among co-present individuals” (Jacobsen & Kristiansen 2014, p. 83). To Goffman (1967, pp. 1-2), co-presence is the figurative “space” in which face-to-face interactions occur. Demonstrating the significance of this, Goffman describes (1967, p. 1) face-to-face interaction as “that class of events which occurs during co-presence and by virtue of co-

presence”. Giddens (1988, p. 260) observed that Goffman’s focus on co-presence was something of a fixation, writing:

Goffman’s preoccupation with co-presence leads him to be constantly alert to the significance of time and space in relation to human activities. As Goffman defines it, social interaction is inherently circumscribed in time-space ... All encounters tend to have “markers” that establish their beginning and end. But all encounters are also limited by the character of the physical setting.

This passage demonstrates the importance of proximity for Goffman. It emphasises the extent to which he believed that social encounters involved participants being physically present and engaged with one another. Being face-to-face might be considered the *vessel* for communication, while talking to one another in a mutually understandable language might be the *act* of communication. But it is co-presence – that sense of engagement and of being there – that is the subtle underpinning.

Dramaturgy

Performance is central to Goffman’s dramaturgical perspective. It is through his work on self-presentation that he develops his metaphor of the theatre to describe what co-present individuals bring to face-to-face encounters (Goffman 1959). Individuals are effectively bound by their physical space, performing in synchronicity. They are actors on a stage. Through this dramaturgical perspective, Goffman introduces “six theatrical principles which can be used to interpret everyday behaviour” (Manning 1989, p. 341). They are *performances, teams, regions and region behaviour, discrepant roles, communication out of character* and the *arts of impression management* (Goffman 1959). These concepts have been unpacked extensively in academic literature, and continue to underpin research whose topics range widely, from hospital-based health care (Lewin & Reeves 2010), to the increase of tattoos in Western societies (Roberts 2016).

One aspect of the dramaturgical perspective particularly relevant to this thesis is impression management. This is described as “the attempt to control information in order to affect others’ opinions of us” (Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitizky 2010, p. 1289). Goffman (1959, p. 211) describes the “management of one’s face and voice” as a crucial part of “dramaturgical discipline”. Only so much of someone’s performance, however, can be managed. Goffman asserts that “in every instance of co-presence, individuals unavoidably communicate information, intentionally and unintentionally, by both linguistic means and ‘body idiom’” (Vargas Maseda 2017, p. 120). In this sense, Goffman is referring to “signs and expression that are ‘given’ and those ‘given off’” (Jacobsen & Kristiansen 2014, p. 69) during interaction. This emphasises the importance of both the aural and visual aspects of social interaction.

As a concept, impression management has “shown remarkable resiliency” (Raffel 2013, p. 163). Equally, it has come in for criticism from scholars including Alvin Gouldner, who argue that Goffman is depicting a superficial world of appearances over depth (Raffel 2013). Goffman (1959, p. 18) himself argued that in any social encounter, “the individual is likely to present himself in a light that is favourable to him”. This, doubtless, is the basis of concerns that the individual in Goffman’s work is represented as devoid of morality, self-interested and out to deceive. Manning (1989, p. 341), however, believes the *self*, as Goffman presents it, is more complex than the “manipulative confidence trickster” it appears to be. Rather, Manning (1989, p. 343) argues, the self is depicted at various points in Goffman’s work as more plural – a “composite of multiple selves”. Similarly, Vargas Maseda (2017, p. 115) believes “impression management has been generally misunderstood and consequently much undervalued”.

This debate over impression management reflects broader conversations about the dramaturgical perspective and what it says about self-presentation. Elliott (2014) deftly captures the ways in which Goffman’s work polarises readers. Elliott (2014, pp. 42-43)

explains that some sociologists see Goffman as presenting an amoral society where appearance is cynically manipulated, while others think the opposite – that Goffman depicts a moral conception of self. Such ambivalence about Goffman is perhaps not surprising. He did not, after all, “consider himself a theoretical sociologist or a theorist” (Psathas 1996, p. 383). Debate endures as to whether the epistemological foundations of Goffman’s work, with inspiration from Emile Durkheim, render him a structuralist, or whether they acquaint him more with symbolic interactionists such as Herbert Blumer (Vargas Maseda 2017). Other discussion has centred on Goffman’s possible credentials as a phenomenologist (Lanigan 1988). In any case, Goffman’s work eludes neat categorisation.

Ritual

Distinct themes can, however, be found in Goffman’s work. His book *Frame Analysis* (1974) was a moment in which “he took up a sustained theoretical exegesis of his evolving theoretical perspective” (Psathas 1996, p. 391). The seeds were sown much earlier than this. Goffman’s previous work also contributed to what Jacobsen and Kristiansen (2014, p. 67) argue is “the same overarching theme: the interaction order”. Rawls (1987, p. 136) supports this view, arguing, “the outlines for a theory of an interaction order *sui generis* may be found in his [Goffman’s] work”. An important link in the chain is another metaphor – *ritual*. Goffman often discussed this specifically in relation to face-to-face interaction, making it directly relevant to both dramaturgy and co-presence.

This is on display in Goffman’s *Interaction Ritual* (1967) in which he writes of individuals possessing *face*, which helps them to maintain a positive image during social encounters. According to Goffman (1967, p. 12), *face-work* refers to “the actions taken by a person to make whatever he is doing consistent with face”. Face-work, Goffman (1967, p. 12) argues, “serves to counteract ‘incidents’ – that is, events whose effective symbolic implications threaten face”. In this context, the individual possesses a certain type of sacredness – and face-work can be seen as a ritual that protects one from losing face.

Goffman (1967, p. 5) writes that in each social encounter in which a person finds themselves, they tend “to act out what is sometimes called a line – that is, a pattern of verbal and nonverbal acts by which he expresses his view of the situation and through this his evaluation of the participants, especially himself.” This is both ritual and dramaturgy. Such a focus from Goffman is something Schegloff (1988, p. 95) has suggested results in an “emphasis on individuals and their psychology” rather than the social interaction itself. On the other hand, Goffman has been described as overlooking the existence of intimacy in social interaction (Raffel 2013, p. 172) – which questions the extent to which he is concerned with the psychological realm.

It is Goffman’s (1967) focus in *Interaction Ritual* that indicates that his social interaction theory expands outward into the world rather than entrenches itself in the individual. Each person, Goffman (1967, p. 5) writes, “lives in a world of social encounters, involving [them] either in face-to-face or mediated contact with other participants”. This emphasis on “mediated contact” is indicative of emerging forms of social interaction and potentially opens up co-presence – and the dramaturgical and ritualistic facets of communication layered over it – to new possibilities. Such an expansion of Goffman’s work is necessary. Consider, for example Rettie’s (2009, p. 421) argument that mediated interaction has been largely overlooked, despite the fact the “telephone has been available for over 100 years”.

Expanding co-presence

The ambiguity of what Goffman’s work represents contributes to its enduring quality. It has both structural and symbolic interactionist elements to it. It speaks to society and the individual. It can be shaped to fit a range of research areas. Although Goffman was writing during a particular time and in a specific place – effectively describing and speaking to mid-20th century white America – his ideas have proven applicable to many settings. Giddens (1988, p. 279) argued that a “more embracing approach to social theory” might find new

ways of constructively applying Goffman's central ideas. Decades later, many possibilities remain. Co-presence, especially, is relevant to a wide range of situations, due to the ubiquity of the interaction that it underpins.

While debate continues over the extent to which dramaturgy and ritual reveals the quality and character of an individual (and what, indeed, that quality and character represent), co-presence more simply reveals the importance of mutual engagement. Goffman deftly shows that some level of mutual understanding must exist between two people for an interaction to work. To be visually attentive and engaged in mutual activity is a sign that each person has that understanding in the form of respect for the foundation of the interaction, (though not necessarily the other person themselves). The quality of the foundation is, therefore, central to interaction. As demonstrated in the next section, co-presence has only expanded in definition in a digital age, to the point that it can now be understood as transcending space.

Virtually being there

For most of human history, “the construction of a person's sense of identity has occurred more or less through face-to-face social interactions with co-present others” (Elliott 2018, pp. 126-127). This reality has been significantly challenged in recent decades with the emergence of digital technology. When the internet entered the mainstream in the 1990s (and people began chatting and emailing), Castells (1996) likened its emergence to that of the alphabet in Greece around 700 BCE. The internet, Castells (1996, p. 328) wrote, integrated “the written, oral, and audio-visual modalities of human communication”. In the years since, these aspects of interaction have been integrated into social media platforms such as Facebook.

At the same time, mobile phones have evolved significantly to become indispensable everyday items (Agar 2013). Early versions of the smartphone, an amalgam of the mobile

phone and the personal digital assistant, entered the market in the 2000s (Charlesworth 2009, p. 33). Interactions through smartphones and social media have changed people's "relationship to space", contributing to something of a "death of distance" (Miller 2011, p. 193). Faster internet speeds and Wi-Fi connections have brought further change. As digital communication has flourished, interpersonal communication has undergone significant change and expansion. Miller et al. (2016, p. 7) argue that the online, supposedly "virtual" world is now just as real as the offline world. Furthermore, Miller and Venkatraman (2018, p. 7) argue, "online interactivity is just as variegated" as sociality that occurs offline.

Co-presence has been reconceptualised in a digital age. At the forefront is a notion of mediated co-presence, and, more specifically, *digitally mediated co-presence* (Alinejad 2019) or *virtual co-presence* (Baldassar 2016). Although these conceptual developments might be considered as rendering Goffman's understanding of co-presence outdated, I argue that they instead extend it into the 21st century – allowing it to be updated for a digital age. Indeed, Goffman was focused on face-to-face interactions, but his concepts of dramaturgy and ritual, among others, demonstrate that *mediated* communication was actually central to his work. Miller and Sinanan (2014, p. 7) highlight this particularly well, writing that:

Goffman (1959) did more than anyone to refute the illusion of communication as natural and unmediated. He revealed the myriad ways in which our everyday appearance and everyday encounters are the products of the artifice.

Indeed, everyone comes to a conversation with tools of language, knowledge of history, social context and social roles they are expected to – or *expect* to – perform. Increasingly, people come to the conversation with – and through – a smartphone. In such a context, an evolution from mediated co-presence to digitally mediated co-presence takes place. I now explore how vessels of such digitally mediated communication have helped co-presence to transcend space. An important way of exploring this is to engage with work that has not only extended Goffman's thinking, but also work that has challenged it, or worked in parallel to it.

Challenging proximity

Challenges to the necessity of proximity in social interaction predate smartphones and social media. For example, Meyrowitz (1985) was critical of the absence of media in Goffman's theorising (Zhao 2006). Goffman, Meyrowitz (1985, p. 4) argues, "focuses only on the study of face-to-face interaction and ignores the ... effects of media on the variables he describes". Meyrowitz sought to consider how media, and mediated interactions, created new social situations in ways that necessitated the redefining of social interaction as less bound to face-to-face encounters. As Meyrowitz demonstrated, this type of intersection between "everyday" face-to-face encounters and media imaginaries was significant, even in a pre-internet age. Although the media of the late 20th century was not as interactive as the social media of the 21st century, it was significantly influential. Meyrowitz (1985, p. 36) observed that "it is not the physical setting itself that determines the nature of the interaction, but the patterns of information flow". This provides an important link between Goffman and a smartphone age.

Connected presence

The emergence of the internet and mobile phones diversified the media landscape, placing more emphasis on interpersonal communication. Even before the smartphone was a mainstream consumer item, these new tools of communication were challenging the physical aspect of co-presence. Licoppe's early 21st century concept of *connected presence* demonstrates this well. In observing communicative trends that the internet and mobile phones had spurred, Licoppe (2004) theorised the emergence of a continuous discussion between individuals over distance. Such a conversation – over email and by way of text message – would be one "in which the boundaries between absence and presence eventually get blurred" (Licoppe 2004, p. 136).

Rather than rely on handwritten letters or scheduled, highly structured long-distance telephone calls, two people could reside some distance away from each other – on the other side of the world even – yet enjoy “permanent accessibility” (Licoppe 2004, p. 152). Through multiple text messages, or emails, their one conversation could be stretched over hours and days, before eventually becoming permanent fixtures in an “anytime, anywhere” (Licoppe 2004, p. 150) approach to communication in everyday life. Individual acts of co-presence, both face-to-face and over distance, Licoppe (2004, p. 135) argued, would become “woven in a seamless web”. People separated by distance would have the potential to be constantly co-present with each other. In developing connected presence, Licoppe (2004, p. 137) speaks of the increasing forms of communication outside the realm of “physical co-presence”, writing:

we have interactions taking place, either in physical co-presence (a situation of time-place unity characterizing the different forms of face-to-face interaction) or without that copresence (a situation of unity of time but not of place, as in telephone or videophone interaction, or chat rooms and instant messaging on the Internet), where certain forms of mutual adjustment and attentiveness are expected during the interaction.

The above passage demonstrates how communicative media have decentred “place” in co-presence, necessitating a distinction between “physical co-presence” and co-presence that does not rely on participants being proximate. This distinction has become more pronounced in the years since. For example, Zhao and Elesh (2008, pp. 565-566) argue, “co-location, which is a spatial relationship among individuals, and co-presence, a social relationship” are very different things. Campos-Castillo and Hitlin (2013) have also approached co-presence as something that transcends physical proximity. Being physically present, they argue, is “neither necessary nor sufficient for co-presence” (Campos-Castillo & Hitlin 2013, p. 169). Instead, Campos-Castillo and Hitlin (2013, p. 169) prioritise “mutual entrainment” between two people, which is characterised by their “attention, emotion and behaviour” being in relative synchronisation. More recent definitions of co-presence emphasise physical

separation as something of a given. For example, Alinejad (2019, p. 2) defines co-presence as “an experience of emotional proximity with, or feeling close to, physically distant loved ones”.

Virtual co-presence

Advancements in technology, especially smartphones and social media, have been central to co-presence being further conceptualised. Indeed, the ability to “feel co-present has grown over time with new technologies that afford synchronicity becoming available” (Alinejad 2019, p. 2). What Alinejad (2019) calls *digitally mediated co-presence* is essentially what Baldassar (2016) calls *virtual co-presence*. Baldassar (2016, p. 145) describes co-presence as “the emotional support experienced as a sense of emotional closeness or ‘being there’ for each other”. This further emphasises the extent to which proximity has been decentred in discussions of co-presence. In her earlier work, Baldassar (2008) proposed four primary ways people could be co-present. She broke these down as: *virtually*, through ICTs and other communication technologies; *by proxy*, which occurs when objects or reminders of people (such as photos) facilitate a connection; *physically*, also known as being “bodily present”; and *through imagination*, which occurs mainly in someone’s mind (Baldassar 2008, p. 252).

Being “close enough” has long been more complicated than simply being in the same space as someone. Letters and voice telephone calls are modes of communication that pre-date the digital age. Indeed, “transnational emotional relationships have long been mediated” by such technology (Alinejad 2019, p. 2). While co-presence stretched beyond face-to-face interactions even when Goffman was writing about it, a digital age has made it even more diverse. In such a context, Baldassar (2016, p. 153) talks about *virtual co-presence*, explaining that it:

consists of the real-time shared communication of voice over the telephone, video, Skype or FaceTime, text over SMS mobile devices, and text and/or images on Facebook, Twitter or WhatsApp chat.

These types of virtual co-presence, “while different, are no less real than physical co-presence” (Baldassar 2016, p. 153). This is crucial in the context of Baldassar’s focus on transnational caregiving – in which she calls for society to “de-demonise distance” (Baldassar 2016), and thus acknowledge the amount of care family members provide each other from separate parts of the world. Through Baldassar’s (2008, p. 260) study of Italian migrants in Australia and their parents who lived back in the homeland, it was found that “physical co-presence is valued more highly than virtual co-presence”. But an increase in virtual, proxy and imaginative co-presence often contributed to more physical co-presence being sought. This demonstrates the extent to which “being there” is more multi-dimensional than it was in a pre-digital age.

Subramaniam, Nandhakumar and Baptista (2013, p. 476) have also used the term *virtual co-presence*, in their case in the context of enterprise systems in the telecommunications sector. The authors’ focus is “day-to-day work practices”. Inspired by Goffman, their work represents an innovative approach to enterprise systems, but their use of virtual co-presence, despite its similar origins, represents a different focus. Baldassar’s work, on the other hand, is among a wider literature field in which co-presence has been developed more in terms of how intimates engage with each other in a psychological sense (Bulu 2012). This somewhat aligns it with what Zhao and Elesh (2008, p. 571) call *online co-presence*, a “‘face-to-interface’ situation where people make themselves available for contact through a communication device”.

The rise of the smartphone

Virtual co-presence in the 21st century can be increasingly understood in the context of the smartphone. Indeed, smartphones are part of a technological revolution that has “transformed the social organization of space time” (Elliott 2018, p. 109). To consider the extent to which digital technology is becoming embedded into society and everyday life, Elliott (2018, p. 107) introduces the concept of the *digital imperative*. In doing so, he pushes back against pessimistic views of digital life as full of distraction, arguing technology is instead becoming “second nature” (Elliott 2018, p. 107). Similarly, Zhao (2006) argues that a dichotomous categorisation of interaction – face-to-face versus the rest – no longer represents the diversity of communication in a digital age. Interaction, in this context, is better understood as a rich tapestry of engagements.

Such changes impact on physical co-presence. Indeed, they bring smartphone and social media users into situations in which they might be physically and virtually co-present at the same time. In such a context, Didomenico and Boase (2013, p. 119) argue, society must “reconcile new forms of communication with Goffman’s chief domain of face-to-face interaction”. They draw on Goffman’s (1963) own concepts of primary and secondary involvements during interaction to demonstrate how a person’s focus can switch between face-to-face interactions and digitally mediated co-presence. The example they use is someone holding a smartphone while talking to another person with whom they are physically co-present. Didomenico and Boase’s (2013, p. 122) study identifies a tendency for people to “continuously oscillate between attending to the co-present interaction as their primary involvement and their mobiles as their secondary involvement”.

Similarly, instances of smartphone users being “physically present but psychologically distant” have caused concerns about virtual co-presence disrupting physical co-presence (Kadylak et al. 2018, p. 337). In a study in the US, older adults – in this case, participants aged between 59 and 88 – were concerned about other people (mostly but not

always younger than them) texting rather than engaging in face-to-face conversation in their presence. Such challenges to established social norms seem inevitable in a time of rapid technological advancement. Although the concerns of those participants are real, it is reasonable to think that interaction rules will evolve to accommodate an ever-increasing integration of communicative technology into everyday life.

The 'there and now'

Alfred Schutz (1967, p. 163), a contemporary of Goffman's, argued, "spatial and temporal immediacy is essential to the face-to-face situation". Building on some of Schutz's ideas in a digital age, however, Zhao (2004, p. 91) proposed the idea of *consociated contemporaries*. This recognises a realm in which "people interact face-to-device with each other in conditions of telecopresence" (Zhao 2004, p. 92). As Zhao (2004, p. 96) writes, "Dislocation of space ... from place ... allows people to share a community of time without sharing a community of physical place". Zhao also brings the work of Berger and Luckman (1966) into a digital age. Those authors – also Goffman's contemporaries – argued that everyday society is centred on "the here and now", effectively a "world of physical copresence" (Zhao 2006, p. 470). In the age of the internet, Zhao (2006, p. 458) argues, a "zone of the 'there and now'" has emerged.

Polymedia

In some ways, the internet has already created new, though unequal, communicative ecologies. Madianou and Miller's (2012) theory of *polymedia* is one way of understanding such changes. Similar to the way in which connected presence (Licoppe 2004) explained cumulative communications, polymedia was a response in the early 2010s to a "rapidly developing and proliferating media environment" (Madianou & Miller 2013, p. 11). A polymedia environment is one in which communicative devices and platforms transcend their status as single media items existing in isolation, thus becoming part of an "integrated

structure” of new media (Madianou 2014, p. 667). Within such a collective framework, “each individual medium or platform is defined in relational terms in the context of all other media” (Madianou 2014 p. 667). Polymedia has its genesis in Madianou and Miller’s transnational study of migrant mothers from the Philippines who had travelled abroad for employment and left their children behind with other family.

In their early work, Madianou and Miller (2012, p. 175) emphasised that a polymedia environment was an “aspiration and not the current state for much of the world”, due to various social disparities that restrict people from getting online. Indeed, it is the “potential” of polymedia that is crucial to understanding the barriers that have so far prevented it from becoming ubiquitous. The three preconditions for a polymedia environment are “access and availability, affordability, and media literacy” (Madianou and Miller 2012, p. 171). Once those preconditions are fulfilled, the issues surrounding them move “from foreground to background” (Madianou and Miller 2012, p. 171). Equally, concerns about the individual cost of an interaction – perhaps an overseas telephone call – subside. A person’s decision to then choose Facebook Messenger over Snapchat, to list just one combination in a potentially infinite number of choices in the polymedia environment, has more social and emotional (rather than economic and time-based) consequences (Madianou & Miller 2012).

Smartphones as media ecology

Madianou (2014) has explored her theory of polymedia further in the context of the smartphone, which she argues constitutes a polymedia environment of its own. With its position “at the forefront of technological convergence”, the smartphone is something of a “miniature media ecology” in that it combines the internet, communication and a potentially infinite number of applications (Madianou 2014, p. 667). While a polymedia environment initially requires a user to have “ready access to a wide range of at least half a dozen communication media” (Madianou & Miller 2012, p. 126), the smartphone now hosts competing and complementary apps that collectively constitute such variety. The result is that

smartphones as polymedia “heighten the awareness of significant others” (Madianou 2014, p. 678). Furthermore, they make the experience of polymedia more compact – and literally more mobile.

Online identities

A range of experiences – visual, text-based, voice-driven, in real-time or asynchronous – have come to characterise social interaction in a smartphone and social media age. Indeed, face-to-face interaction is “increasingly supplemented by digitally mediated interactions” (Elliott 2018, p. 127). Facebook and its video-calling application, Facebook Messenger, are significant to such changes. The popularity of these two platforms alone makes them worthy case studies in research about digital communication, especially that which occurs transnationally. Facebook was launched in 2004 (Hum et al. 2011), while worldwide video calling was integrated into the Messenger platform in 2015 (Chowdhry 2015).

In such a context, offline and online identities increasingly converge. For example, Facebook identities – often constructed around a user’s real name, images of their face and at least some people they have met in person – “are clearly real in the sense that they have real consequences for the lives of the individuals who construct them” (Zhao, Grasmuck & Martin 2008, p. 1832). Online worlds are partitioned into private and public domains (Zhao and Elesh 2008). Although Facebook, for instance, has privacy settings that enable levels of restricted access to someone’s profile, such a location is generally more public than a “private” conversation that takes place by way of Messenger or other video-calling platforms. Such divisions have an element of Goffman’s dramaturgy to them. Indeed, as Zhao, Grasmuck and Martin (2008, p. 1832) demonstrate, Facebook:

is a multi-audience identity production site. The control users have over the privacy settings of their accounts enables them to partition their Facebook pages into many 'back' and 'front' regions.

Self-presentation is itself “one of the major motives driving activity” on social media (Tifferet & Vilnai-Yavetz 2014, p. 388). In terms of activity in public or front regions, functions that enable users to post pictures have been viewed as central to construction of a “desired online self-presentation” (Shafie, Nayan & Osman 2010, p. 138). Uimonen (2013, p. 122), for example, explores how profile pictures on Facebook represent a performance of the digitally mediated self and, indeed, a “social construction of reality”. The ways in which social media users construct and deconstruct their audience by adding or deleting friends has also been identified as an important – though less direct – performance of the self (Davies 2012).

Communicative exchanges through Facebook and Facebook Messenger “can be synchronous or asynchronous” (Miguel 2016a, p. 63). A user can interact with content posted in the past, or engage in a “live” conversation. Making a distinction between “posts” on social media and real-time appearances is particularly important. Demonstrating this, Hogan (2010, p. 377) splits online self-presentation into two parts: “performances, which take place in synchronous ‘situations,’ and artifacts, which take place in asynchronous ‘exhibitions’”. This helps to explain the distinction between Messenger “live” video calls and Facebook status updates that may be viewed long after they have been posted.

Social media apps have been a significant part of the rise of “text-based social networking” (Davies 2012, p. 28). Text exchanges in the form of private chats provide a different experience to face-to-face or video-based interactions. In a study of English-as-a-second-language (ESL) learners, van der Zwaard and Bannink (2014, p. 145) demonstrated that those communicating by way of a text-based chat were not “confronted with the ambiguity of what Goffman called the ‘expressiveness of the individual’”. They were

subjected only to the communicative signals that someone expressed through their writing, not through facial expressions or other non-verbal cues. In another study, Rettie (2009) observed differences between people using voice calls, who felt like they were “there” with the other person, and text messages, which did not evoke the same sentiments.

Real-time co-presence

Some 2 billion people use Facebook, while Messenger is among the most popular video-calling platforms, along with the older Skype (in many ways its predecessor), FaceTime, Google Duo and WhatsApp (Whitney 2017). The quality of a connection contributes, of course, to the quality of a video call. More than a decade ago, Cetina (2009, p. 68) observed that videoconferences mostly offered up “blurred and somewhat ghastly upper-body images of a few others with whom we conduct surrogate face-to-face interactions against a nearly empty background”. Indeed, at the time of Cetina’s research, such appraisals of videoconferences were warranted. However, the subsequent advancement of technology, which includes much faster internet, has transformed the video call. In an age of smartphones and social media, clear communication – with aural and visual elements – is achievable in many parts of the world (Chowdhry 2015).

Video calls have the potential to replicate the face-to-interactions characteristic of physical co-presence. As Baldassar (2016) argues, video calls fall into a subcategory of virtual co-presence considered “live or real time”, “streaming” or “immediate”. Although engaging in a Facebook Messenger video call is no less “immediate” than speaking to someone through a mobile phone call, the word “immediate” itself does not capture the true difference between the two modes of communication. Because of its association with computing, the term “real-time” seems a suitable way of talking about a type of virtual co-presence that encompasses video calls but not telephone voice calls.

Telephones have facilitated the “virtual mobility of humans through interactive real-time voice communications” (Kellerman 2006, p. 73). They do not, however, offer the same experience as the video call in a smartphone and social media age. As Miller and Sinanan (2014, p. 56) demonstrate in their work on webcams and Skype, a video call is not simply “a telephone, with an additional component”. A video call made through Facebook Messenger (or other platforms) is mobile, immediate, aural *and* visual. The addition of this visual element is significant.

Real-time visual co-presence

Even the term *real-time co-presence*, however, does not make enough of a distinction between video calls and other synchronous forms of virtual co-presence such as a voice call. A more specific term – *real-time visual co-presence* – better captures the multi-faceted nature of the shared space created when two or more people communicate through video. I propose this term to emphasise the immediate (indeed, the *real-time*), aural and visual elements of a video call, and what is created and experienced when these elements combine. *Real-time visual co-presence* is the term I use henceforth throughout this thesis, especially in the later data chapters, to describe the type of virtual co-presence that is achieved through video calls.

Being intimate in real-time

Discussion of different types of virtual co-presence is important in the context of what a person might gain from such communication: opportunities to achieve intimacy with others. Intimacy describes “the quality of close connection between people and the process of building this quality” (Jamieson 2011, p. 1). Furthermore, intimacy is central “to one’s sense of well-being” (Golzard & Miguel 2016, p. 219). Intimacy itself is highly variable. As Jamieson (1998, p. 7) argues, “the ways and degrees of being intimate vary enormously within and between societies”. Intimacy is not simply bearing all to someone through a verbal conversation; rather, “it relates to a wider repertoire of practices” (Jamieson 2011, p. 3).

Many societies, in fact, “are not or have not been characterised by ‘disclosing intimacy’” (Jamieson 1998, p. 7). Jamieson, therefore, talks about dimensions of intimacy, evident in states of close association and trust, and through practices of loving, sharing and caring (Jamieson 1998, p. 7).

When it comes to intimacy practices, Jamieson (2013, p. 18) has questioned the extent to which other types of co-presence can act as substitutes for physical co-presence. For some people, she argues, physical co-presence is more important than “disclosing” intimacy, demonstrating that simply being together “can both express and enable intimacy”. Jamieson (2013, p. 18) writes:

The research literature reveals instances in which couples claim love, shared knowledge and deep mutual understanding, despite also noting that they have little need for talk and say very little to each other.

As Jamieson (2013, p. 29) argues, “intimacy based solely on verbal disclosure without any history of co-presence is likely to be experienced as ‘thin’ and one-dimensional”. This seems relatable to a voice call – but this one-dimensionality is something a video call might be able to overcome. Baldassar (2016, p. 149) has observed in her study of migrants in Australia communicating back to Italy that when cameras are left on over lunch, “Skype calls are long and meandering, facilitating a kind of passive co-presence”. Passivity, however, should not necessarily be considered a barrier to intimacy. Allowing someone into your home – which a video call in some way does – can be an intimate experience. Equally, a “meandering” approach might even lead to a less contrived performance of self and, consequently, more intimacy. Intimates, after all, have access to backstage areas and are less bound by role performances (Jamieson 2005). The possibilities of the video call, therefore, make it a promising co-presence space for humanitarian migrants and others separated by distance.

Choosing co-presence carefully

People choose to occupy different online spaces, depending on the type of relationship they have, and the type of intimacy they are trying to produce. Alinejad (2019) calls the process of choosing suitable online locations for intimate relationships *careful co-presence*. Through a study of second-generation Turkish-Dutch young adults, Alinejad (2019, p. 9) demonstrates how, in transnational familial communication, “the *particular mode of communicating* with family through social media is what produces experiences of intimacy”. In a demanding digital age, participants were found to often seek the privacy and intimacy of “apps oriented toward intensive direct messaging and voice and video calls” (Alinejad 2019, p. 9).

The visual aspect of the video call is something of a return to the richness of the face-to-face encounter. To relate this back to Goffman (1955), expressions and other non-verbal cues during an interaction may complement or contradict what is being said. This is especially relevant to the video call and distinguishes it from the voice call. This is also important in terms of intimacy, where emotions might be understated or intentionally concealed. Intimates, indeed, communicate differently to non-intimates. Raffel (2013, p. 171) writes that intimacy involves people making:

known our innermost by the form of communication called intimation. Intimates don't say but also don't hide. They intimate. And by this process, they can reveal their innermost to each other.

Additional visual features of a video call might also complement what is being said. These are not exclusive to intimate or private conversations, but are important, nonetheless. In some of Licoppe's more recent work (2017, p. 81), he explores an important emerging characteristic of video calls called *showing practices*, which involve callers displaying personal objects during conversations. Because objects in people's possession reveal aspects

of who they are (Miller 2008), “showing practices” might facilitate important expressions of intimacy between those communicating over long distances.

Intimacy and Goffman

A wider body of literature on intimacy as it relates to social media, especially in public spaces or front regions, is emerging. As Pittman and Reich (2016, p. 162) note, Facebook is a social media “hybrid” in the sense that it offers users text, images and video. Pittman and Reich (2016) argue that image-based social media networks might help combat loneliness through the intimacy they offer. Similarly, Miguel (2016b, p. 1) has analysed how photos have been used “to convey intimacy” on Facebook and a dating site. This study is interesting in that some participants considered intimacy to strictly relate only “to sexual or romantic relationships” (Miguel 2016b, p. 8). In a study of Tehrani women’s experiences of digital intimacy, Golzard and Miguel (2016) found that participants expressed emotions through Facebook, helping them find security and intimacy. For one participant, “the intimate relationships she developed through Facebook improved her self-confidence and, as a result, she claimed to feel happier” (Golzard & Miguel 2016, p. 226). This story and others were significant in the context of “conservative Iranian social principles and strict religious norms” (Golzard & Miguel 2016, p. 229).

Intimacy is not something Goffman explicitly writes about when discussing co-presence (Raffel 2013). A reinterpretation of Goffman, however, is something that Raffel argues can help make a distinction between the intimacy experienced by intimates, and the performances that are offered to non-intimates. A distinction might be considered in terms of what people present to wider audiences (made up of non-intimates but also intimates) on Facebook and what they communicate with close family and friends (intimates) by way of a Facebook Messenger video call – that is, in front and back regions. In this context, the video call and *real-time visual co-presence* can potentially provide the synchronicity of face and

voice in a “live” private setting. Video calling is a rich form of virtual co-presence with much potential for the performance of intimacy.

Real-time visual co-presence in a transnational setting

The first decades of the 21st century have been synonymous with increased migration (Castles 2009). Movement of people across national borders has become so frequent that the “transnational experience is now common and open to families almost everywhere in the world” (Reynolds & Zontini 2013, p. 232). This has had numerous effects, ranging from more multicultural societies, to an increase in cosmopolitanism (Beck 2006). The first part of the 21st century has also been characterised by a proliferation of digital technology (Madianou & Miller 2012). Polymedia, connected presence and social media more generally have helped decentre physical locations and the face-to-face aspect of interaction and co-presence. However, the video call has emerged as a space for intimate exchanges that reassert the importance of the face. For humanitarian migrants, *real-time visual co-presence* through video calls offers many possibilities for transnational communication.

Face-to-face interactions are in many ways replicable through video calls. This is, of course, not a perfect solution to all of the challenges of separation from family. Obvious aspects of bodily co-presence that cannot be replicated over long distances are the various forms of physical embrace. Video calling also cannot overcome barriers that insufficient communications infrastructure creates. Furthermore, humanitarian migrants must be able to engage with the technology in order to benefit from it. Friedman and Schultermandl (2016, p. 4) use the term “quick media” to describe a social media and instant messaging environment that allows connection “spontaneously and effortlessly” through mediated relationships. In the context of humanitarian migration, however, someone who has always communicated with their family solely in person might struggle with their networks becoming transnational after settlement. For such people, questions like, “What’s a smartphone?”, How do I turn it

on?”, “How do I get the app?”, “How do I sign in?” and “How do I make the call?” must be answered before “quick media” routines can be achieved. Relating this back to Goffman, actors must first access the stage before they can deliver their lines.

For those who can video call, *real-time visual co-presence* might provide an important enhancement to the transnational communicative experience. It is potentially a step towards more intimate communication – beyond the telephone. Video calls offer the same immediate, synchronous conditions of a proximate face-to-face interaction – just without the physical proximity. Real-time visual co-presence still has a time-space component, but the boundaries of space are much broader. So are the possibilities. Real-time visual co-presence has a potentially significant role to play in redefining long-distance communication for humanitarian migrant families. Intimacy is central to this. Gabb (2008, p. 1) argues that rather than consisting of grand, rigid structures, “families are made and remade through everyday family practices and intimate interactions”. This is important in a transnational family setting. Indeed, “intimacy across borders defines transnational family life” (Parreñas 2005, p. 319). For humanitarian migrants, therefore, it is the quality and form of the interaction that can influence how intimacy is exchanged. Real-time visual co-presence in the form of video calls is – potentially, at least – a rich form of virtually being there.

Conclusion

Digitally mediated co-presence is redefining how people communicate over long distances and has the potential to enhance the transnational migration experience. Central to Goffman’s work are proximate interactions – individuals being physically close to one another. When Goffman speaks of “co-presence”, he is talking mainly about interaction that involves literally being there. Goffman’s understanding of co-presence involves mutual engagement – two people paying attention to each other. In a smartphone and social media

age, that mutual engagement remains, but co-presence has stretched across distances; participants no longer need to literally be there with each other.

Video calls offer the potential for more diverse transnational communication in which physical proximity is not essential. This presents many opportunities for transnational migrants, including those from a refugee background. Construction of digitally mediated co-presence with distant kin requires immersion with relevant technologies. For the humanitarian migrant, smartphones and apps offer much potential for such immersion. For those with limited or no digital literacy, this presents a clear challenge – likely leading to varying experiences of transnational communication in a settlement context. My discussion in this chapter creates the foundation upon which I can explore how Karen humanitarian migrants who have settled in regional Australia communicate with family members and friends in other countries.

Chapter 3: Positioning the research – and the researcher:

developing methods for a cross-cultural study

Introduction

As a non-Karen researcher seeking to represent Karen participants in a doctoral thesis, I must confront a number of challenges and potential barriers to producing responsible research. Embarking on an academic project of this kind requires me to be intellectually honest about my positionality as a permanent “outsider” to Karen culture. Achieving such honesty, I argue, is possible through a process of reflexivity in which I locate and engage with my positionality in a way that limits its potential to harm participants – and the research itself. Crucial to this reflexivity exercise are considerations of the challenges and limitations of producing knowledge through cross-cultural and cross-language studies.

In this chapter, I set these considerations as the backdrop of my project, and outline my research procedures, from conceptualising my topic and conducting fieldwork, to analysing data and producing a thesis. I then seek to demonstrate the practical steps I have taken to overcome the concerns and limitations that I encountered during the cross-cultural research process. I do this by engaging with solutions that enabled me to turn challenges into opportunities to learn more about Karen participants and their culture. I argue that, despite being an “outsider”, this approach provides me with the opportunity to make a valuable contribution to emerging fields of literature about Karen humanitarian migrants in regional Australia and their experiences with smartphones, social media and video calling.

Towards positionality and reflexivity

Background to the study

When I embarked on doctoral research in sociology in early 2016, I was drawn to the Karen community in Bendigo, a city in regional Australia. I was interested not just in the ways Karen people were becoming more integrated into social life in a new country, but also in how they kept in touch with family members in Burma and others in refugee camps in Thailand. I was interested as much in how Karen migrants remapped their family networks after resettlement as I was in their culture and identity. Over the course of that year, I wrote a proposal seeking to explore how transnational Karen families might construct digitally mediated co-presence to connect or reconnect with distant kin.

I remembered previous conversations I had engaged in years earlier with Karen people to whom I had taught English as a volunteer tutor. I recalled snippets of stories about transnational connections, disconnections and longings. To try to understand these conversations more, I read as much academic literature as I could about Karen people's experiences of forced displacement and their eventual settlement in Western countries, searching for themes that supported my hypothesis that video calls, social media and smartphones were becoming increasingly important for humanitarian migrants seeking to maintain relationships over distance.

The reflexive outsider

As my knowledge developed, it served to reinforce my awareness of myself as an "outsider" to the Karen community I sought to understand. A simple fact was this: I was not Karen. I was a white person, undertaking research in the context of Western academia. Having been educated as a young person in that same system, I was undeniably a product of it. By positioning myself within that academic framework and seeking to research a community that defined itself in many ways by its ethnicity and cultural identity – being

Karen – I was further entrenching myself as an outsider. As a researcher, this was both daunting and exciting.

This sense of being an outsider only grew as I familiarised myself with more literature about the Karen and the process of doctoral research. I became more aware of my positionality in the context of the academic contribution I was trying to make. Coghlan and Brydon-Miller (2014, p. 628) describe positionality as “the stance or positioning of the researcher in relation to the social and political context of the study – the community, the organization or the participant group”. In relation to the Karen community in Bendigo, I was positioned – definitively – at one end of a researcher’s positionality continuum (Herr & Anderson 2005). Although this specific continuum framework was developed in the context of “action research” (often involving teachers and their practices), it effectively demonstrates how far removed outsiders are from insiders. At the other end of what Herr and Anderson suggest is a six-point continuum is space that an “insider” – a researcher who represents themselves or their group – can occupy. In between are four positions at which researchers engaging in various degrees of collaborative research might stand. This continuum serves to emphasise that in the context of a doctoral project I was embarking upon alone, I was, unequivocally, an outsider looking in.

I was soon grappling with existential and epistemological questions about what right I had to research a cultural group other than my own. Underlying these concerns, I realised, was a fear of misrepresenting the group in question. Even with a determination to produce sensitive, fair and useful research, misinterpretation looms as a very real risk for the “outsider”. In the context of a university-based study in which the research participants themselves are transposed as outsiders – and somewhat removed from the knowledge production – such misinterpretation might go unnoticed and unchecked. I, concluded, therefore, that I had a responsibility to learn what responsible representation was. I could not

overcome my status as an outsider – but the outsider’s barriers to sound cross-cultural research were mine to overcome.

Such a thought process demonstrates reflexivity in its early stages. Reflexivity is the process of “turning back on oneself” (Davies 1998, p. 4). For me, it meant a process of understanding who I was and how that affected the type of research I could produce. Realising that I was engaging in this process – rather than having an existential crisis – allowed me to see the challenges and opportunities of my positionality in the context of my research. This process was not just an essential one but also a beneficial one – and it was going to continue right to the end. Attia and Edge (2017, p. 33) argue, after all, that reflexivity “involves a process of on-going mutual shaping between researcher and research”. I learned that it went beyond that. Fook (1999, p. 19) argues that it is not enough for the reflexive researcher just to tell their story – they must also position themselves in the context of power structures and social forces. Noh (2017, p. 334) suggests researchers should also concentrate their focus on understanding both their environment and themselves. Such realisations confirmed to me that a lens that incorporated positionality and reflexivity was an essential tool in constructing a clearer gaze of myself as a researcher – and producing better research. Before detailing how such a lens helped overcome concerns and limitations, I turn to detailing my research project.

The study

Qualitative research

Soon after beginning my research in 2016, I had the opportunity to undertake some research interviews with Karen residents in Bendigo for a separate academic project. That research, part of the ARC Discovery Project: Ageing and New Media (see Baldassar & Wilding 2019 and Millard, Baldassar & Wilding 2018), engaged participants in semi-structured in-depth interviews, giving them the space to talk about their personal experiences

of new media. My role was to work with a Karen-language interpreter to find participants aged over 50, visit their homes and interview them. Schedules were provided. Conducting those interviews made me realise the importance of foregrounding participants' voices in a way that captured the richness of their experiences.

This was a format I hoped to emulate in my own research. My aim was to capture participants' experiences of reconnecting with family after displacement and resettlement – and I was conscious that my lack of knowledge about such matters had the potential to be a barrier to rich discussion. Open-ended questions that framed discussion rather than dictated its direction emerged as the best way of allowing the participants' voices to be strong. A quantitative, survey-based approach did not seem sufficient. I did not want to provide participants with polar or multiple-choice questions, lest it led to rigid answers that were essentially of my own construction. This led me to implement a qualitative approach based on the interview design of the Ageing and New Media project.

Qualitative research is used widely in the social sciences. At its core, it is “meaning making, a process that does not usually require statistics or large-scale data” (Walter 2013, p. 20). Within this framework, the perspectives of participants are prioritised. Mason (2002, p. 1) argues that qualitative methods “celebrate richness, depth, nuance, context, multi-dimensionality and complexity rather than being embarrassed or inconvenienced by them”. Interviews are an ideal way of implementing this qualitative approach – as they are “concerned with people's views, perceptions, and understandings of particular issues” (White 2013, p. 302). Semi-structured, in-depth interviews, “founded on the notion that delving into the subject's ‘deeper self’ produces more authentic data” (Marvasti 2004, p. 27), were consistent with the aims of my project. Committing to such an approach allowed me to devise questions that broadly addressed my research focus while giving participants the opportunity to speak at length about aspects of their lives they believed were relevant.

This approach to interaction with participants demonstrated my epistemological outlook. Constructionist and interpretivist perspectives guided my approach to information gathering and knowledge production. Instead of approaching interviews in terms of the truth being “out there” to discover, I believed, instead, that “people construct knowledge through daily interactions in the course of social life” (Emery & Fielding-Wells 2018, p. 184). This included interactions in an interview setting. In that sense, a participant discloses their experiences and their understandings of those experiences in ways that vary depending on how they are interviewed, who they are interviewed by and how they feel about the person asking them the questions. The researcher’s ability to interpret that knowledge is also contingent on a number of factors, including what they prioritise as important. This made me realise that neither I as a researcher nor language itself could be considered neutral or objective (Hennink 2008).

Fieldwork

The data for my study is drawn from interviews with 30 ethnic Karen humanitarian migrants with transnational family connections. I also interviewed two other participants, whose responses I ultimately did not include in the data chapters of this thesis. This was primarily because those two people lived in close proximity to all of their important family and friends. One of them did not have any kin or friends outside of Australia. The other had extended family in Burma. Due to negative dealings with them early in her life, however, these were people she had no interest in communicating with ever again. While these two interviewees provided important insights into Karen experiences of settlement, they did not reflect on the themes that emerged as central to this thesis.

All 30 participants were members of a Karen community that has emerged in Bendigo since 2007 (Couch, Adonis & MacLaren 2010). Older members of this community carry with them memories of persecution at the hands of the Burmese military in a long-lasting civil war. On the other hand, many younger Karen who have settled in Australia were born in

refugee camps after their parents fled their villages in Karen state, then crossed the border into Thailand.

Humanitarian migrants

All participants were settled in Australia as part of its refugee and humanitarian migration programme, which is open to applicants either outside or already in Australia (Department of Home Affairs 2019). Those considered “refugees” in a legal context in Australia are generally “persons overseas who are outside their countries of origin and who would suffer persecution if returned” (Crock & Berg 2011, pp. 330-331). The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016a), which compiles census and other data, considers a refugee as:

a person who is subject to persecution in their home country and who is in need of resettlement. The majority of applicants who are considered under this category are identified by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and referred by UNHCR to Australia.

“Refugee” and “humanitarian migrant” are two distinct terms yet are often both talked about under the umbrella of the Australian government’s humanitarian migration programme. For example, the ABS (2016b) describes the programme as “designed for refugees and others in special humanitarian need”. “Refugee” is “a socially constructed label with complex legal, ethical, and political connotations” (Vigil & Abidi 2018, p. 54). Understandings of the term “refugee” vary over time and place (Cole 2017). The term took on global meaning after World War II (Malkki 1995, p. 498). Its precise meaning has, with the rise of globalisation, “become much more blurred than in the past” (Zetter 2007, p. 188). Reasons exist to embrace the term and to cast it off. For example, it might result in better support for an individual or, on the other hand, prove to be a burden to carry, even to the point of victimisation (Ludwig 2013). Cole (2017, p. 16) speaks of the need to go beyond the label, because being a refugee means “so much more than a legal status alone can count for”. Furthermore, Ludwig (2013,

p. 15) emphasises that the term is often a temporary one and, in any case, “not a fixed identity”.

I acknowledge the technicalities and varying public perceptions of the label “refugee”. I am also faced with describing displacement and resettlement experiences that are seemingly inseparable from a “refugee” context. However, in a settlement context it would be inaccurate to continue to refer to someone as a “refugee”, since they are no longer in need of resettlement, having already been granted permanent residence in a third country. Therefore, I primarily use the term “humanitarian migrants” in this thesis to refer to people experiencing settlement. When describing anyone I have interviewed for this specific project, I refer to them individually using a pseudonym or as “a participant” and collectively as “participants”.

The settlement of humanitarian migrants in Bendigo is part of a broader demographic shift in the city. The influx of a single ethnic group like the Karen has been “an unusual demographic characteristic not seen in Bendigo since the Chinese arrived during the gold rushes” of the 19th century, which the city is widely known for (AMES & Deloitte 2018, p. 9). Since it began, Karen migration to Bendigo has been constant (AMES & Deloitte 2018). The number of Karen in Bendigo is likely to only increase further as more humanitarian migrants are granted visas and reunite with their families, and even more relocate from elsewhere around the country. Indeed, the migration of Karen to Bendigo – and the further growth of families after resettlement – is an important part of the city’s status as “one of the fastest-growing regional centres in Victoria” (AMES & Deloitte 2018, p. 8).

Interviews

I interviewed participants between June 2017 and January 2018. All but one interview was conducted in the participants’ homes, in various suburbs across Bendigo. The other took place at a university campus. Each interview was completed in a single session. These varied in length between 30 minutes and two hours, with almost all interviews lasting at least 45

minutes. All but three were conducted with the help of a Karen interpreter. Participants spoke Sgaw Karen, English, or a combination of both. The participants were generous with their time and welcoming of both the interpreter and me into their homes. To establish a foundation upon which I could talk purposely about smartphones, social media and video calling, I asked each participant about their early life, their migration to Australia, their family and their daily routine. Interviews then progressed to discussion about social media, video calls and digital devices, particularly smartphones. Through another set of questions, I sought to identify points at which these topics intersected, specifically asking, for example, whether participants assisted anyone else to use internet devices or social media, or whether anyone helped them. More questions focused on the consequences – personally, socially and culturally – of such support being given or received.

Field notes

I maintained a journal of field notes throughout the interview process. In it, I recorded the details of each participant, the locations in which we met, the length of the interviews and other relevant or striking information. I wrote a passage after each interview in which I described how it went, whether it related to any previous interviews, how noteworthy it was in relation to a specific topic or topics and, importantly, whether anything had occurred that might require me to rethink my interview approach. Early journal entries demonstrate the extent to which I was conceptualising my project as I went, compiling information that challenged or supported my initial research ideas. This extract from an interview with a younger participant conveys some of my early thoughts about generational differences in relation to smartphone and social media use:

At times, the participant was quite conceptual in his thinking and able to ponder what isolation older people without younger family here might experience without the skills to use social media. His answers tended to support my hypothesis about the importance of younger people in helping their older relatives stay in touch.

This interview and others like it were useful in allowing me to develop my thinking about digital brokering, which I was considering as the process of one person facilitating the smartphone use of another so that they could communicate transnationally with family members. I used the same schedule for each interview early on in my fieldwork, allowing me to ask participants the same broad questions before following the interviewees into territory most relevant to their experiences. Initial interviews, however, inspired me to introduce an element of grounded theory into my fieldwork. This “involves simultaneously collecting data and analyzing it, which allows researchers to shape their interviews to advance theoretical propositions that emerge from data analysis” (Froyum 2018, p. 470). In that sense, I was reviewing the interviews while I went, looking for themes that could potentially be pursued more directly in later interviews. This was a limited application of the approach, however, as I was mostly note-taking after the interviews, based on what I had heard, and did not transcribe them until they had all been conducted.

Transcription

This transcription was a time-consuming and thorough process. I transcribed most of the interviews in a three-month period over the summer of 2017-18. My previous experience transcribing interviews as a journalist in Cambodia meant that while I knew the process could be laborious, I also knew it was effective in bringing me back into close contact with the data – ahead of undergoing critical analysis of it. Indeed, the transcribing process opened up my mind to new ways of interpreting interviewees’ responses, first because I was hearing things I had not heard when conducting the interviews, and second because I was hearing things in different ways to which I had heard them initially. I had conducted more interviews and research in the interim, meaning I was approaching the data with a more sophisticated understanding of the topics.

Thematic analysis and coding

I analysed the interviews using a thematic analysis approach, in which the researcher locates, groups, interprets and represents the themes of a data set (Nowell et al. 2017, p. 2). Although a popular and reliable research method, no clear blueprint exists for its application. It has, therefore, been considered a largely flexible option for researchers conducting qualitative research – one that, consequently, can produce either sophisticated or incoherent results. With that in mind, I sought to broadly adopt Nowell et al.’s (2017, p. 4) approach to ensuring the validity of thematic analysis. Their “Step-by-Step Approach for Conducting a Trustworthy Thematic Analysis” comes in six phases. The clarity of their model – which I outline below – is such that the phases named are self-explanatory. Therefore, I simply list below the authors’ six phases as subheadings and relate them to my own project:

Familiarising yourself with your data: Upon completion of my fieldwork, I archived all the audio recordings, finalised the transcripts, imported those transcripts into computer-based NVivo software and reviewed my field notes. I also revisited my initial research questions and aims of the project. I compared these with additional observations and aims that had developed throughout the course of interviewing participants and transcribing interviews. From an early stage of the interview process, younger participants spoke of helping their parents both to use technology and to understand documents and conversations in English. This made me consider whether language brokering had a digital equivalent.

Generating initial codes: Once I was more familiar with the data, I began to code based on recurring sentiments and stories that had emerged in the interviews (see Table 1). Some of these, such as “voice calls vs. video calls”, were expected and a clear outcome of my questions. Others related to refugee journeys and how participants maintain Karen culture.

Searching for themes: I then began to identify themes that were emerging in the data. These primarily centred on internet use, Karen culture and relationships. I grouped the codes

I was using into four main themes: Karen culture; family; digital media and smartphones; and, drawing on my earlier observation and the question it prompted, brokering habits. It was during this process that I began to make connections between smartphones, video calls and transnational communication. The way that participants spoke about their journey to using communication technologies allowed me to think further about a digital brokering process between young people and their parents.

Reviewing themes: While reviewing the main themes of the data, I began to reorganise the coding hierarchy in ways specific to my research questions – which were also being developed and shaped as I went. The themes and conceptual framework I was building were “live” and took shape gradually as I became more familiar with the data, my arguments and broader research related to my topics. I introduced a “general” category as a fifth theme. This helped me to separate some of the data I was not intending to explore in great depth from my main themes. For example, “refugee experiences” is relevant to multiple categories. I made the decision to include it under the “general” theme category, however, in order to recognise that not all of the data in this category was relevant to my main discussion of digital brokering. As an example, I collected a lot of data about participants’ opinions on the “refugee” label, which related less to other categories than something like their actual refugee journey did. Additionally, I did not end up exploring these opinions in detail.

Defining and naming themes: During this phase, I wrote more detailed analyses of the importance of each theme. These small “reports” were based on the themes and codes outlined in Table 1. By this stage, five themes had emerged as prominent and codes could be filed under each one. This allowed me to begin designing chapters in terms of sections and subsections that related to themes and the codes I was working with. As per the name of this phase, I also finalised themes to ensure relevance and clarity.

Table 1: Thematic coding: five themes and associated codes

General	Karen culture	Family	Digital media and smartphones	Brokering habits
Learning English	Maintaining culture	Early life	Internet and social media experiences	Helping parents
Adult education	Community	Notions of “home”	Phone and smartphone experiences	Sharing Facebook accounts
Refugee experiences	Festivals	Transnational relationships	Voice calls vs. video calls	Sharing devices
Settlement experiences	Karen identity	Not knowing where family are	Effects of video calling	Learning and teaching Facebook

Producing the report: Once the other phases were complete, I used the themes to guide the writing of the data chapters. “Brokering habits” forms the basis of Chapter Six, where I explain how younger participants help their parents to video call. “Karen culture” is something with which I engage in some detail in Chapter Four, especially in terms of how participants maintain culture in Australia and take part in Karen community events. “Digital media and smartphones” is a theme that underpins Chapter Seven, in which I talk about the experiences of video calls in terms of real-time visual co-presence. “Family” informs much of Chapter Five’s discussion, especially in terms of participants’ separation, settlement and connection experiences. As I had hoped, my “general” category includes topics that run through all of these chapters. Thus, these codes collectively constitute a “general theme”.

Undertaking cross-cultural and cross-language research: concerns and responses

Issues for conducting ethical research

In this section, I seek to understand specific ethical limitations of cross-cultural and cross-language research in the context of my fieldwork. I had several concerns about the

nature of my research. Although I did not consider any of them as terminal threats to my project, they were nonetheless important to address and to detail here. Some of these concerns came to me in the process of fieldwork and I found I could see examples of researchers engaging with them in the literature. At other times, the reverse was true: I encountered “problems” being discussed in research that I thought should be understood in terms of my fieldwork and addressed in this thesis. I now seek to respond to valid concerns posed by cross-cultural and cross-language research.

Embracing cross-cultural interaction

First, I consider what cross-cultural research is and why it is something that should neither be treated as a novel type of human interaction nor assumed to be altogether unproblematic. In an increasingly globalised and connected world, “intercultural communication manifests itself in every sphere of human activity” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2014, p. 169). Culture itself is complex and multi-faceted – indeed, dozens of definitions of culture exist (Maude 2011). The design of my project, in which participants identify specifically as Karen, invariably makes it cross-cultural – because I am not Karen; I am an “outsider”. Denying this – even as a way of moving beyond such differences in an attempt to treat all people as equal or simply as human – risks coercing a minority group into conforming to a dominant narrative that denies their own culture. The cultural difference between a non-Karen researcher and a Karen participant, therefore, is important.

A challenge, however, is to avoid treating difference as novel or unusual. As an “outsider” to Karen culture, I should not be impressed with myself simply for conducting research with Karen participants. This point is also relevant to a study involving humanitarian migrants, who do not live in cultural cocoons. Although often marginalised or isolated in a new society, humanitarian migrants have various cross-cultural experiences. They interact with “outsiders” when they engage with government agencies, go to work, shop, take public transport and attend schools and colleges. Even if little research about a particular group has

been undertaken before, a researcher should not seek to brand themselves a cross-cultural trailblazer. Instead, they should be aware that cross-cultural research requires them to be mindful of concerns about the limitations of the “outsider” carrying out such work. I now address such concerns.

Avoiding harm

A good starting point is Liamputtong’s (2008, p. 4) assertion that as a basic principle, cross-cultural research must not harm groups being studied. This does not preclude critical approaches in cross-cultural settings – but ideally sets the researcher on a path towards constructive rather than destructive research. A challenge for an outsider, however, is to be able to know when harm is occurring. A fundamental way in which “avoiding harm” is relevant to this project is in the context of the possible trauma participants may have experienced prior to or during their migration journey. It was reasonable to presume that anyone I interviewed had potentially experienced trauma as a result of persecution, displacement, statelessness and resettlement in a new country. The extent of this trauma among participants, of course, was unknown to me. I was, therefore, mindful of constructing interview schedules that were non-threatening in terms of the approach and content.

Even though I was not asking questions specifically about experiences of trauma, I realised that any discussion about the details of forced migration and separation from family might induce painful memories. I addressed this concern in my ethics application in the following way, which was sufficient for approval and proved helpful when conducting interviews:

In all instances, Worrell will take a non-threatening approach to his interviews.

Participants will be told they are invited only to talk about things they are comfortable

with. Questions will not demand detailed histories of individuals and will be non-

political in nature. Anonymity will be assured. Breaks, rescheduling or cancellation will

be offered to anyone distressed. Advice on counselling services will be offered to anyone showing distress or who requests it.

The aims of my research were not politically focused, so I did not expect participants' responses to stir controversy among other Karen people, or with Burmese authorities back in their home country. It was, however, still important to provide confidentiality to participants. I was naming the city in which they lived, so I appreciated that confidentiality would allow participants the freedom to speak about issues that for cultural or family reasons might be sensitive. All participants in this thesis, therefore, are referred to using pseudonyms. This is an important part of avoiding harm. Examples like this specifically demonstrate how I have sought to address concerns about the damage a researcher might cause. But "avoiding harm", goes further. I argue that it underpins all concerns outlined in this section.

Seeking "to know" participants

Another concern of mine throughout the research process was the extent to which I could claim to "know" the participants I sought to depict. Researchers are challenged with the task – and responsibility – of representing participants in fair and honest ways. This surely requires researchers to seek to "know" interviewees on some level. Because such "knowing" becomes the knowledge on which a qualitative study is built, it is important to consider its importance and limitations in more depth. Miri (1984, p. 3) argues that any claim of one person to know another depends on "accuracy" and "justice" – that is, anyone's representation of someone else must be "justifiable" and do them "justice". This is an excellent starting point for a researcher, especially in the context of qualitative research that centres on the personal stories of interviewees. An approach that prioritises professionalism, respect and cultural sensitivity seems a likely path towards such accuracy and justice.

This approach, however, can only go so far in helping a researcher transcend the confines of their research design. Through the concept of "second-person epistemology",

Talbert (2014, p. 190) argues that claims of knowing another person are validated through “repeated interactions”. A number of factors, from timeframe for completion and funding concerns, to participant interest and interpreter availability, can present barriers to researchers engaging in repeated interactions with interviewees. A helpful way of my challenging such limitations was accepting that it was not possible to “know” participants in an absolute way. Instead, it was more realistic to focus on the ability of almost any researcher to be able to develop *some* understanding of a person – to the point that it might contribute to constructive research. This refocus of my gaze on “aspects” of the participants and their experiences, I realised, could help me transcend an all-or-nothing game of knowing or not knowing participants. Instead, I could better position myself as someone able to gain knowledge of participants in ways that were small – but potentially profound.

A way of practically applying this approach was to rethink what “repeated interactions” might mean. At first, I assumed it to refer only to repeated meetings with a person, conducted over multiple days, bookended each time by travel between my location and theirs. I later realised it did not have to be this way. “Repeated interactions” did not necessarily have to be defined by the number of interviews conducted with each participant but might instead be thought of as exchanges that take place within a single interview. This reinforced my faith in the semi-structured format of the in-depth interview, which allowed for a free flow of information, and conversation, with some parameters – but plenty of movement and, indeed, repeated interactions. Back-and-forth engagement in an interview setting was already familiar to me, due to my background as a journalist. The ability to conduct purposeful interviews quickly to produce news content had helped me develop the art of allowing interviewees space, while maintaining focus on information – that is, “quotes” – relevant to the story that would follow. The research interviews for this project, I soon realised, could be longer, and wider ranging in content. My challenge was to give the

participants enough room in which to express who they were, in order for me to – in some small way – “know them”.

From limited objectivity to plurality

That background as a journalist also positioned me as something of a storyteller, one who usually stayed out of the narrative. This professional identity presented challenges for me in this project as I began adopting a lens that incorporated positionality and reflexivity. As I sought to turn my gaze back onto myself, I began feeling self-indulgent. I identified this as the product of the underlying epistemological foundations of my previous career, in which “objectivity” is considered paramount to the journalist’s approach (Maras 2013). It is – supposedly at least – the tool used when reportage is at its most credible; a “serious” journalist’s work is supposedly flawed and disreputable without it. In a world of objective journalism, my stories, not my positionality, were the important things. The more I developed this research project, however, the more I came to appreciate that reflexivity was not an exercise in making the storyteller part of the narrative, but instead served to challenge the personal biases they brought to the storytelling process. Davies (1998, p. 4) argues that “even the most objective of social research methods is clearly reflexive” – and this is something I began to see. But I also realised that it went beyond that: the impact of that reflexivity, especially in terms of the researcher’s positionality, challenged the notion of “objective” qualitative research altogether.

Although new to me, this assertion has a much longer history. Oakley’s (1981) classic work about interviewing women challenged notions of the fieldwork process at a time when data-collection was seen as a neutral, objective tool used to scoop up the “truth” that was supposedly out there in the field. Such a notion of the research interview, Oakley argued, was a product of a heavily masculinised approach pervasive in sociology at the time. While textbooks spoke of the unequivocal need for the interviewer to develop rapport with participants, Oakley learned that such connections were not always cultivated in the same

textbook way. Women that Oakley interviewed, for example, were especially comfortable talking freely with another woman (Oakley 2016). The identity of the interviewer mattered – and this affected the data that was collected. The objective nature of the interview, therefore, was undermined.

This is also demonstrated in ways that transcend gender. In an American context, scepticism of claims of objective research is evident in critiques of “white sociology”. Brunsma and Wyse (2018, p. 3) argue that “white sociology”:

is a paradigmatic approach that holds as central (1) that sociological knowledge creation is an objective process, embedded with objectivity; (2) the practice of a “value-free” approach to doing sociology; and (3) the privileging of the positivist methodological approach to doing sociology.

That approach, the authors argue, denies its Eurocentric and ethnocentric foundations, and ultimately serves to “other” non-white groups. The result, they contend, is a “racial elitism” that sociologists must challenge. Such concerns also exist in postcolonial contexts. Bishop (1998, p. 208), for example, calls out “neo-colonial domination” in research centred on Maori people in New Zealand, arguing qualitative research often gives a researcher shelter “under a veil of neutrality or of objectivity”. Furthermore, Smith (1999a, p. 1) argues that from the point of view of people who have been colonised, “the term ‘research’ is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism”.

Race-based methodologies further challenge the idea of neutrality in research, arguing the design of a project ultimately shapes the results it produces (Pillow 2003). Such methodologies have sought to shift epistemological focus so that the subjects of research – historically constructed as “others” – are, instead, empowered as “knowers”, which allows insiders to guide research about their own group. That approach is notable for its repositioning of Western theory as limited and only part of the broader picture. In an

Australian context, Indigenous researchers have outlined a number of important values that should underpin research about Indigenous groups and cultures. Central is the notion that outsiders collaborating with Indigenous researchers should seek to engage in a decolonisation process that integrates Indigenous peoples, their voices and their worldviews into the research (Russell-Mundine 2012, pp. 86-87). The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies has specific guidelines for ethical research into Australian Indigenous studies. These guidelines emphasise Indigenous peoples' "inherent rights, including the right to self-determination" (AIATSIS 2012, p. 3).

Decentring the Western gaze is doubtless part of a plural approach. Another way of seeking to be more plural might be to – paradoxically – seek to extend the Western gaze. In the case of this study, that might mean using Goffman's work, although grounded in mid-20th century white middle-class America, in research about Karen people. This would be an alternative to excluding them from the conversation or dispensing of Goffman's work altogether. Discussions about how far theories might stretch into new terrain, I argue, can be seen as opportunities to position Western thought in a plural environment. Research that applies Goffman's ideas to Karen participants' experiences, for example, might be part of a public discussion in which Goffman's work can be openly challenged. This seems a more reasonable approach than one that excludes race, ethnicity and culture altogether from discussions about Goffman's work. That would effectively be "postracial" and fail to create a forum in which all voices had the potential to be heard. It would resemble what Goldberg (2013, p. 26) describes as a problem of the postracial ideal more broadly: that it is a "refusal to acknowledge the structures of race ordering the social".

A shift towards an approach that favoured plurality rather than objectivity reinforced in my mind the importance of semi-structured in-depth interviews. This format recognises the importance of the individual experience – and my own role in giving space for such experiences to be expressed. Both aspects of this knowledge production process are crucial. It

is reasonable to assert that “all sound social knowledge is empirical” (Halfpenny 1982, p. 116). But empirical evidence does not appear out of nowhere. It is formed through the exchange of dialogue. It is such interaction that “helps to create social reality” (Marvasti 2004, p. 12). This again emphasises the importance of being aware of a researcher’s positionality, even in the context of a doctoral research project already subjected to a rigorous ethics process.

Allowing space for culture to be expressed without ‘othering’ Karen

I now seek to explain the purpose of designing a study that specifically sought participants who identify as Karen. This was not something I did without considering the implications of foregrounding ethnicity. Rather, my decision to focus on the “Karen” aspect of participants’ identity was made in relation to what participants themselves emphasise as important to them. Every participant I interviewed was approached to take part in a study about Karen community members. Each one of them subsequently emphasised in interviews the importance of their Karen identity, expressing that it was central to who they are. Participants were also active in “being” Karen. Examples of this included attending Karen ceremonies and festivals, wearing traditional clothing, eating “Karen” food and communicating with Karen relatives in other countries. Hall (1992, p. 274) describes cultural identities as “arising from our ‘belonging’ to distinctive ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious and, above all, national cultures”. In relation to this study, many participants were also involved in activities with fellow Karen people that centred on religion. In that sense, they lived a Karen cultural identity that incorporated, but also in ways transcended, their ethnicity.

Although their “Karen” identity was something participants foregrounded, I was still active in making it central to the study. This was, in part, because it was a straightforward way of researching a community. As an outsider to the Karen community, this had the potential to “other” participants. Mills, Durepos and Wiebe (2010, p. 635) describes othering as “an undesirable objectification of another person or group”, in a way that essentialises

them and presents them as inferior to oneself and one's own group. An obvious way of avoiding such othering in the case of research into Karen people in Bendigo might be to create the conditions for an insider to conduct the research. That was beyond my capabilities as a graduate researcher working towards an individually earned degree. I also weighed this up in relation to broader efforts to avoid harm and to research with respect and a sense of responsibility. Simply abandoning a project because I was an "outsider" to a group would be to waste an opportunity to contribute to a growing field of literature that might one day be developed in more substantive ways, in this case, possibly by Karen researchers themselves.

In a more general sense, the risk in trying to maintain too much distance between an outside researcher and a particular cultural group is that it might still result in that group being othered. If ignorance is the basis of the othering process, then ignoring a group risks stereotyping them, and reinforcing their isolation. In the case of a humanitarian migrant group settling in a third country, this might mean members of the dominant culture expecting them only to be "ethnic" at certain times of the year, and in certain locations. It might also mean expecting people to forever remain refugees – vulnerable, victimised and uncritically grateful to be in a host country. By instead engaging with the Karen community, I sought to avoid the othering process. In doing so, I also created the conditions to consider more diverse subcategories of identity *within* the Karen context that could help develop understanding of how settlement experiences vary within a group of people who outsiders might consider as homogenous.

Treating identities as complex and multi-faceted

Considering people as either "insiders" or "outsiders" does not necessarily have to neatly equate with binary, "us and them" categorisations. Positionality, in fact, is multi-faceted, and invariably characterised by various identity categories, from age and gender, to culture and class (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller 2014, p. 629). Indeed, people have changeable and complex identities. For example, a researcher might be an "outsider" in the context of a

group of Karen humanitarian migrants simply because the researcher is neither Karen nor a humanitarian migrant. On the other hand, they might be an “insider” when in the company of the same people in a study that considers religious, age and employment categories, while decentring ethnicity. Such differences might also be evident among Karen people themselves. This demonstrates how rich identity is, and partly influenced my decision to divide participants into two groups, based on their age or “generation”. Doing so gave me the potential to consider generational experiences that – like the cultural identities of participants themselves – might incorporate or transcend the ethnic “Karen” category.

Sample design

The first group consisted of 16 men and women aged 18 to 30 years old at the time of the interviews (that is, born in 1987 or later). The 14 members of the second group were at least 40 years old – they were born in 1977 or before. This division was designed to consider what generational differences could be seen in how smartphones, social media and video calls were used. It also allowed me to engage in discussion about age-specific “digital divides” (Akçayır, Dündar, & Akçayır 2016, p. 435). Another aim was to consider differences in digital engagement and usage experiences that transcended age categories.

Factors such as “age, gender, social class, and culture have an enormous impact on issues of access” to new media (Baldassar 2016, pp. 146-147). Other factors, including refugee journeys, resettlement in a third country and proximate support networks, are also relevant to humanitarian migrants. Much discussion around unequal access to the internet centres on the notion of “digital divides”. Discussion of such divides cite a range of social factors, including “income, education, gender and age” (Friemel 2016, p. 314), as contributing to online exclusion and inclusion. In its most superficial form, however, a digital divide is commonly theorised in terms of an age binary; either someone is a “digital native” by being born on or after 1980 or they are older – and therefore likely on the wrong side of

the internet revolution (see Akçayır, Dündar & Akçayır 2016, p. 435). Such a model has it that digital experiences are largely positive or negative according to age group.

Interesting demographic patterns in the sample group soon began to emerge. Fourteen out of 16 participants in the younger group were 23 or younger, and many of them were 19. The oldest in the younger group believed herself to be 31 but was not entirely sure of her birthdate. I justified including her in the study because she was drawing on experience mostly gained as an adult under 30 and because she was still significantly younger than anyone in the older group. More of a spread of ages was evident among the older participants, with both male and female participants ranging in age from their early forties to late fifties.

Eleven of the 30 participants were born in Thailand (see Table 2). Ten of these were in the younger group, demonstrating a trend of Karen people giving birth and raising children in the refugee camps. The only older participant born in Thailand was Ler Soe Bler, who was born in a Karen-majority village close to the border in the early 1970s. His family had previously fled Karen state and it was not until he was in his early twenties that he sought refuge in a camp, about 10 kilometres from where he had spent his childhood. Some of the younger participants had experienced displacement as very young children when their parents had made the decision to flee their village towards the border. For participants with such a history, memories of living in Burma were vague or had faded altogether. Participants had spent years – and even decades – in refugee camps near the border of Thailand and Burma. All had travelled by plane to Australia, where they entered the country under the government's humanitarian migration programme. Some were the first in their family to arrive, while others followed family members who had already resettled in Bendigo.

Table 2: Participant details

Name	Age	Gender	Country of birth	Time in Australia	Date of interview
Tha Ku Htoo Bler	21	Male	Thailand	Less than one year	June 2017
Lell Lell	22	Male	Thailand	Less than one year	June 2017

Soe Nay Thu	18	Male	Burma	Two years	June 2017
Ner Moo Htoo Soe	25	Male	Burma	Eight years	August 2017
Kaw Thu Wah	19	Female	Thailand	Three years	June 2017
Ta Bler Aye	20	Female	Thailand	Less than one year	June 2017
Len Wah Htoo	19	Female	Thailand	Two years	June 2017
Soe Kell Soe	19	Female	Thailand	Four years	June 2017
Saw Law Tha	19	Female	Thailand	Four years	June 2017
Ku Ku Soe Paw	23	Female	Burma	Two years	July 2017
Ki Thu Htoo	31	Female	Thailand	Nine years	July 2017
Lee Lee Wah	19	Female	Thailand	Six years	July 2017
Tha Koh	23	Female	Burma	Two years	July 2017
Taw Boe	22	Female	Burma	Three years	July 2017
Hser Pyo Way	20	Female	Thailand	Two years	July 2017
Naw Wee Wah	22	Female	Burma	Three years	July 2017
Ngway Ngwar	40s	Male	Burma	Four years	June 2017
Koe Kit	44	Male	Burma	Less than one year	July 2017
Wah Wah	47	Male	Burma	Three years	August 2017
Thar Ler Saw	59	Male	Burma	Three years	August 2017
Ner Too Soe	41	Male	Burma	Four years	August 2017
Ler Soe Bler	42	Male	Thailand	Three years	August 2017
Par Thu Kot	52	Male	Burma	Three years	September 2017
Law Say	58	Male	Burma	Three years	October 2017
Boe Loe Thar	50s	Female	Burma	Nine years	August 2017
Eh Law Gay	57	Female	Burma	Five years	September 2017
Say Thu Soe	48	Female	Burma	Nine years	October 2017
Twel Twel Taw Law	45	Female	Burma	Four years	October 2017
Larr Larr Kwee	42	Female	Burma	Three years	November 2017
Kwal Wah Kee	44	Female	Burma	Two years	January 2018

Of the 30 participants, 18 were women and 12 men. This gender imbalance was not ideal in terms of identifying gender-based differences relevant to my topic, but the disparity was a result of my pragmatic approach to recruiting participants. As an outsider, I was willing to interview any member of the Karen community who fell into either age category. So, when recruitment began to snowball early in the process, I allowed the sample group to develop organically. I did not group interviewees based on other characteristics – such as religious beliefs, education level or employment status – though interesting data pertaining to each of these characteristics became evident during the interview and analysis stages, and subsequently feature in my data chapters. Overall, this process helped me explore the richness of experience and identity beyond the Karen label.

Considering an insider approach to research

When Naw Violet Cho was undertaking honours research into Burmese diaspora communities and their new media identities in New Zealand, she was faced with the challenge of finding a suitable research methodology to employ. That, of course, is not unusual for a researcher – but Cho’s own identity as a Karen-Burmese woman made her decision more complex. Furthermore, the histories of her people presented challenges to her as a researcher in terms of how to represent them in a Western academic context. Cho (2009, p. 23) writes:

As a Karen, we have no universities and no current practice for translating our culture into a Western academic form. We have no academic journals or books in Karen language. Our language comes from an oral tradition but it has been heavily influenced by British colonisation. As a Burmese, knowledge production inside my country is extremely restricted, universities are under-funded, subject to strict censorship and plagiarism is widespread. People in Burma have little experience with academic research.

Cho’s considerations illustrate the challenges a researcher faces when seeking to represent cultural groups whose production of knowledge is not grounded in a Western academic context. This example is especially pertinent because of the challenges Cho faced despite belonging to two of the cultural groups she was seeking to represent. On the one hand, she could claim to be an “insider” to Karen and Burmese culture. On the other hand, she was interacting with participants from these cultures from her position as an insider to the Western academic context. To make matters even more complex, Cho, a researcher affiliated with the Auckland University of Technology at the time, felt something of an “outsider” in this academic world. She described how she had to separate herself from her “Karenness” when thinking and writing in English in order to fulfil the requirements of her honours project. Cho navigated this situation by using an indigenous Karen research methodological

approach called *tapotaethakot*, a Karen word that “literally means informal conversation with people who are close” (Cho 2009, p. 24). Such a methodology applied principles to fieldwork that respected and were compatible with Karen culture and were, in fact, “culturally appropriate to all people in Burma” (Cho 2009, p. 24).

Cho’s selection of her research methodology was a skilful response to her own positionality – but it also opens up possibilities for indigenous methodologies to redefine how Western academics study groups like the Karen. As a non-Karen researcher, I can learn a lot from Cho’s approach. My positionality as an outsider, however, dictates that simply emulating Cho’s approach would be impossible. I cannot bring a lived Karen perspective to the research. I am a white, Australian-born male of mostly European descent, researching Karen people in my own language – indeed, in the one language in which I can, due to being fluent only in English. My positionality dictates that I adopt an etic approach (the outsider’s so-called scientific view of another) rather than an emic approach – an insider’s own view of themselves (Maude 2011). In any context in which Karen ethnicity or cultural identity is foregrounded, I will always be an “outsider”.

I do not highlight these distinctions as a way of proclaiming my research challenges as greater than, or even equivalent to, Cho’s – far from it. Instead, I use it to emphasise that researchers have a range of considerations related to their individual positionality, but all have a duty to produce responsible research. So, while I cannot bring a lived Karen experience to this research, nothing prevents me from trying to develop an appreciation of the principles of respect and cultural understanding that underpin the methodology that Cho employs. What are these principles then? *Tapotaethakot* as an indigenous Karen methodology emphasises the importance of having respect for Karen people and their culture during the research process. It relies on the researcher respecting participants like family; meeting informally with participants and sharing information; being open about the purpose of the research; becoming involved in the wider Karen community; recognising knowledge

produced external to the academic setting; recognising Karen oral traditions; and recruiting participants informally (Cho 2009, p. 24-25). Cho has adopted this approach in other research (see Cho 2011), while other studies of Karen resettlement in the US, particularly Gilhooly and Lee (2017), have also engaged with *tapotaethakot*. For example, Gilhooly and Lee (2017, p. 40) made their “interactions with Karen as informal as possible due to cultural preferences for informality”.

As a non-Karen person, I was able to consider the principles of *tapotaethakot* and develop an informal “outsider” approach that emphasised respect, openness and snowball sampling. This was not a substitute for indigenous methodology, but an attempt to engage with it – from the outside. Ruben (1976, cited in Maude 2011, p. 74) argues that a cross-cultural communicator can be deemed competent if they respect people from other cultures, interact with them without judging them, take turns to converse with them and show empathy. I was able to draw from previous experiences with Karen people and what I had learned about respectful behaviour in their presence. I had learned this both in the homes of people I knew and at Karen cultural events I had attended. I was straightforward with participants about the reasons for the study and the proposed research outputs. Further to this information being provided in written form, I was able to convey this message in spoken language, through a Karen interpreter. This interpreter also helped recruit participants, by contacting people she knew, then seeking to draw from their local networks to find more. In this sense, the interpreter was pivotal to the project.

Although my approach to interviews was respectful and encouraged openness, my status as an outsider meant limitations in my data were inevitable. This is demonstrated in terms of how participants told their stories, and potentially what they did not reveal. Participants were always respectful and polite towards me. Many of their stories told in some way the trauma of refugee journeys. Accounts of life in Australia, however, were often presented in positive and hopeful ways. I appreciated the optimism of these stories, but also

recognised that they were perhaps not fully representative of the challenges that participants were facing and the complexities of settling in a third country. Nonetheless, I respected that these were the stories that the participants were choosing to prioritise. This study honours that storytelling – and its optimism – while recognising that it has its limitations. Indeed, the data I have collected offers one narrative of the settlement experience for these participants. Like any research, it cannot definitively address what has been left unsaid.

Accepting the limitations and ambiguity of language

In the final two parts of this section, I engage with the challenges and concerns that come with a cross-language study. Engaging directly with the limitations of such research is a constructive way of establishing what it is and is not capable of achieving. Before addressing challenges of cross-language research, it is important to recognise that communication, in any language, is complex. Any communicative interaction – even by two people speaking the same language – can potentially be unclear. This is because language itself is ambiguous and carries with it no inherent meaning. Rather, Scollon and Scollon (1995, p. 6) argue that meaning is “jointly constructed by the participants” during the act of communication. Fishman (1972, p. 4) contends that language is not only a way of communicating with others, or a vessel in which content is delivered. Instead:

Language itself *is* content, a referent for loyalties and animosities, an indicator of social statuses and personal relationships, a marker of situations and topics as well as of the societal goals and the large-scale value-laden areas of interaction that typify every speech community.

Speech communities comprise several “language varieties”, Fishman argues, which are often rooted in sociological categories such as class, national identity and education, all of which carry degrees of symbolic value that are variable over time and place. In the sense that anyone engaging in communication enters a conversation with a multi-faceted identity and as

a member of various social groups, it becomes apparent that cross-cultural interaction is not characterised by only ethnic, racial or first-language differences. Positionality becomes important in this context, because it affects not just what each individual says, but also informs how they interpret what other people say.

Positionality is even more important to consider in research involving participants whose first language is different to the one in which the study is conducted. As Chiumento et al. (2018, p. 619) point out, producing a cross-language study in English is hegemonic. So-called international culture “is strongly associated with the rise of English” (Maude 2011, p. 19). In fact, in a digital age, it might even have become synonymous with it. So much communication relies on people knowing some level of English. A limited approach to my research would have been to expect participants to simply engage with me in English. But that would not have been a satisfactory outcome. My own language – through the literature review and writing components of this thesis – was dominant enough. My challenge, as an “outsider” to Karen languages, was to allow interviewees to express their thoughts in their preferred language, which gave me the opportunity to work with an interpreter.

Appreciating the importance of interpreters

Interpreting is a complex task due to cultural differences, assumptions that pervade everyday language and because some words are not translatable from one language to another (Kapborg & Bertero 2002, p. 52). Language can be miscommunicated and misinterpreted. In the context of using an interpreter, this is not necessarily due to a mistake being made – but varying “communicative norms” (Maude 2011, p. 59). All parties involved in cross-language communication, therefore, are challenged with seeking to construct a “shared interface of knowledge” in order for ideas to be conveyed (Rudvin & Tomassini 2011, p. 18). The role of an interpreter is not only to interpret language expressed during an interview, but also to help establish a framework in which a researcher and a participant can interact in the first place.

This demonstrates the constructed nature of cross-language interpretation and how it “can never be an exact equivalent of the original” (Rudvin & Tomassini 2011, p. 18).

To limit barriers to obtaining valid, useable data, Kapborg and Bertero (2002, p. 56) suggest researchers familiarise themselves with the “culture and people” they are studying, and select an interpreter who has adequate skills in both languages, is knowledgeable in the relevant academic discipline and is part of the “culture arena” that underpins the research. Credentialed interpreters bring with them not just qualifications but also the expertise developed through the process of gaining such credentials. A challenge, however, might be that their professional language obstructs rather than facilitates clear discussion with participants (Chiumento et al. 2018, p. 218). On the other hand, a lay interpreter might not have a complete grasp of academic language, but their services might come free of the “practical, financial and logistical challenges of hiring professional interpreters” (Chiumento et al. 2018).

In the case of this study, I was already somewhat familiar with the Karen community in Bendigo, due to the tutoring I provided some years earlier. Importantly, I had worked closely with a Karen interpreter during the previous research project. The interpreter in that case was a Karen-language speaker from inside the community who brought a lived experience of being both Karen and a humanitarian migrant. She was neither a student nor a graduate of sociology but was certainly an expert on Karen culture. Furthermore, she worked efficiently and conscientiously in the field. On numerous occasions in that first project, for example, she had served as a guide to me on various etiquette issues. The interpreter was studying towards a formal interpreting qualification. She occupied ideal middle ground between a fully credentialed interpreter who came from outside the community, and an insider who spoke the language but who had no experience interpreting. I was able to hire the interpreter for this study with a research grant provided by the university.

An interpreter's contribution to the cross-cultural research process is crucial, if often invisible (Hennink 2008, p. 25). As Chiumento et al. (2018, p. 620) argue, "failure to consider the pivotal role of interpreters in interview encounters will legitimately lead to concerns regarding research reliability". Rather than being invisible conduits in the research process, interpreters bring with them the subjective experiences and understandings relevant to their own positionality. Hennink (2008) suggests researchers should consider extending "reflexivity" to interpreters and treat them, to some extent, as collaborators in the project. I sought to involve the interpreter as much as possible in this project. During our previous work, the interpreter and I had developed a way of operating together. This usually involved an evaluation immediately after an interview. We would discuss themes, any exceptional stories that participants had told and challenges we had experienced. This type of interaction was often followed by telephone or instant-message conversations between interviews if further clarification or discussion was needed. This structure informed our approach to this project. We met before our interviews to discuss the research topic at length. This fulfilled a need for the interpreter to "fully understand the research questions and the process of research prior to undertaking any data collection" (Liamputtong 2008, p. 9). We were able to draw from our experience from the previous project to talk about how we could better work together. I believe this improved our data collection.

Even with a growing understanding of Karen culture, by way of first-person interaction and research, many of my expectations of the rules of social interaction were subconsciously underpinned by my own cultural understandings. Left unchallenged, I realised, my ontological assumptions would be carried into interviews and employed in a way that could prove imperialist. This insight made me consider further the need to be aware of my positionality as a researcher and to challenge what assumptions I carried about being able to conduct my inquiry in neutral or objective ways. This inspired many discussions with the interpreter. Her responses, which taught me more about Karen culture, made me remember to

continue to focus on my positionality and its limitations. Our discussions before and after interviews only increased throughout the fieldwork.

Prior to this project (and during it, as a way of earning an income), I worked for more than a decade as a journalist in Australia and Asia. My time as a journalist at a bilingual newspaper in Cambodia often involved working with Khmer-speaking colleagues, who would interpret interviews with sources for me as we spoke with them. Although these interviews were often undertaken at short notice and in ways that were briefer and more haphazard than the data collection process employed for this project, this previous experience influenced how I approached and transcribed the interviews in Bendigo. Even without fluency in Khmer (in the case of Cambodia) and Karen (in the case of this research), I was able to follow closely the rhythm of an interview as a way of knowing roughly how it was progressing. Length of answers, emotional reactions and body language were often prompts for me to seek more information through follow-up questions, retreat slightly or pursue different questions.

An important part of appreciating the thoughts and experiences expressed within the interviews for this project was for me to use my knowledge of the context in which they were expressed to minimise misinterpretation in the transcription process. For that reason, I transcribed all interviews myself. This involved listening back to the interviews and typing the interpreter's real-time English interpretations of what the participants had said. This helped me familiarise myself more with the data. I transcribed each interview verbatim, with some important exceptions. In cases when the interpreter communicated something in grammatically incorrect language – which sometimes happened during a fast-paced interview – I would change the tense or sentence structure to something that more closely resembled conversational English. I did this out of respect for the interviewees. It could safely be presumed that any interviewee's response in their first language would follow conversational conventions and, therefore, not appear to be “broken” or grammatically incorrect. Therefore,

they had a right to be represented in a sophisticated light. I did not believe this was essential if they were speaking in English – which a few were – because any expression of imperfect English on their part would not cause them to appear unsophisticated but instead just reveal that they were speaking in a second or other language.

All of these approaches contributed to an efficient and productive interview process. Participants expressed many emotions and revealed a range of experiences. I realised that no infallible approach to avoiding miscommunication exists even when people share a language. The challenge for me in this project, therefore, was to take steps towards minimising miscommunication in a cross-language setting. This was another example of attempting to avoid harm.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined my research methods and engaged in discussion about my positionality and role as a researcher. I have challenged myself to be reflexive in ways that help to acknowledge the challenges, limitations and general complexities of cross-cultural research. I have engaged with challenges and concerns relevant to my project – and framed them as opportunities to produce high-quality, responsible research. Much of that has centred on the need to avoid harm – but has also included seeking to know participants, challenging notions of assumed objectivity and considering insider perspectives. This has been an important discussion, even in a thesis in which transnational communicative practices rather than culture and identity are the main focus. I have argued that, as a non-Karen person, certain steps should be taken to produce responsible research and avoid causing harm. This chapter has demonstrated how I have taken those steps to ensure an ethical project is carried out.

Chapter 4: Constructing Karen identity: from ethnic origins to settlement experiences

Introduction

Transnational communicative practices, specifically those carried out using smartphones and social media, are the focus of this thesis. I am exploring these practices in the context of their occurrence among Karen humanitarian migrants who have settled in regional Australia. A detailed consideration of Karen history and culture, therefore, is warranted for two main reasons: first, to be able to use this increased knowledge about Karen people to better interpret data arising from this project's fieldwork; and second, to appreciate the positionality of the participants, in order to avoid cross-cultural research concerns raised in the previous chapter.

Three broad themes in academic literature appear particularly helpful to the development of understanding about Karen people: culture and identity; modern history; and migration (specifically in terms of forced displacement and refugee journeys). These categories, the focus of this chapter, to some extent, all overlap. They are complementary but also contrasting. None of them in isolation wholly represents the diversity of Karen people and their experiences, nor do all need to be fully understood for someone to appreciate what it means to be Karen. Nonetheless, they provide a useful starting point for research about Karen people. I engage with these categories in the next three sections of this chapter, before considering how Karen identity might be diversifying further in a settlement context.

Culture and identity: the diversity of Karen people

A cursory glance through newspapers and news websites in Bendigo often results in the reader encountering stories about Karen residents. These stories are many and varied,

frequently focusing on annual cultural events (see Romensky 2016) or detailing settlement successes (Jennings-Edquist 2019). They sometimes outline Karen Buddhists' plans to build a monastery (Holmes 2014) or explain what a boon to the economy Karen humanitarian migrants have been (Croxon 2018). A message of unity among Karen people usually pervades these stories, evident both in the words of the Karen residents profiled and the media narratives that package up their experiences for wider audiences. The Karen people are routinely referred to as one; indeed, they are described as belonging to the "Karen community". The message is that "being Karen" is at the forefront of who these people are; it is something that binds them together. By being Karen, they are united.

Such media representations are often effective in demonstrating the sense of community that many Karen, indeed, do experience, especially in a settlement context. A conclusion from a reader that such unity equates with cultural homogeneity among Karen people, however, would be to misunderstand the diversity of Karen culture. Conclusions of this nature, however, have long been prevalent among people seeking to understand – or themselves define and shape – what is to be Karen. Indeed, South (2007, p. 72) writes that:

Since before [Burma's] independence [from Britain], various actors have attempted to impose a homogenous idea of "Karen-ness", and a monolithic political unity, upon this diverse society.

Karen people are, in fact, very diverse. The term "Karen", for example, encompasses some 20 groups of people who speak a Karennic language (Thawngmung 2008, p. 3). These groups are characterised by "considerable differences of language, region, religion, culture, political ideology and socio-economic status" (South 2008, p. 15). The two main subgroups of Karen people, Sgaw Karen and Pwo Karen, account for some 85 per cent of all Karen people (Thawngmung 2008, p. 3). Other Karen groups "include the Kayah, Paulung and Taungthu" (Platz 2003, p. 473). The Sgaw Karen and Pwo Karen languages – which share a name with the people who speak them – are the two main Karen dialects (Thawngmung

2008, p. 3). Language, however, is one of the many features that make Karen society “highly plural” (South 2007, p. 56). Many linguists consider Karen languages as Tibeto-Burman in their origins (Hayami 1996, p. 336). Other academics, however, believe their genesis is less certain (Renard 2003, p. 7).

Many Karen people live in the east of Burma, in Karen (or, officially, Kayin) state, a region that lines the border with Thailand. Many others see Thailand as their traditional home. After annexing Burma in the 19th century, the British demarcated the border that now separates Burma from Thailand, resulting in the Karen being divided across two countries (Brees 2008, p. 382). They became minority groups in both countries, often branded as “outsiders” and “non-state people” (Gravers 2012, p. 343). Estimates of the number of Karen in Burma range from two million to seven million, while more than 400,000 Karen live in Thailand (Kuroiwa & Verkuyten 2008, p. 393). Although Karen are found in both urban and rural areas, many are “poor rice farmers and day-to-day survival is the prime consideration” (South 2007, p. 56).

Religious diversity is also a feature of Karen culture. As many as 70 per cent of Karen are estimated to be Buddhist, while Christians make up 15 to 20 per cent of the Karen population and animists 5 to 10 per cent (Thawngmung 2008, p. 3). Theravada Buddhism is the dominant religion in Burma and a defining aspect of Burmese identity (Cho 2009, p. 14). Christianity among Karen people grew in 19th century colonial Burma, where “American Baptist missionaries achieved remarkable success” in converting people (Hayami 1996, p. 336). In Karen culture, ethnic identity and religious identity remain separate, allowing for Christianity and Buddhism to co-exist within communities (Cheesman 2002, p. 203). But violence between Karen Christians and Buddhists has been frequent enough in modern times to conclude that religious differences constitute the “most important division between Karen groups” (MacLachlan 2012, p. 465).

Early history

The Karen tradition of oral literature – with morality, culture and agrarian teachings often at its heart – has been more prominent than any tradition of Karen oral history (Renard 2003, p. 5). This has presented a significant challenge to historians “attempting to fill the gap between the distant past when the ‘Karen’ originated and the nineteenth century” (Renard 2003, p. 5). Details about the origin of Karen people often vary – and sometimes contradict each other. A useful approach to appreciating origin stories about Karen people, therefore, is to consider what stories remain as influential rather than seeking certainty as to their precise historical veracity.

Some Karen people adhere to narratives that trace their ancestors back to the ancient kingdom of Babylon (Cheesman 2002). In some contexts, Karen migration to Burma is said to have taken place in three main waves, along three different routes, with the first migration occurring in 1125 BCE (Rajah 2008, p. 308). Many Karen myths and legends describe Karen people as migrating from Mongolia. It is generally accepted that Karen-speaking people, along with other linguistically diverse groups, among them the Mon and Burman, gradually settled what is now Burma (Cho 2009, p. 12). The details – especially pertaining to the order of arrival of people – vary. In some narratives, the Karen are said to be the “first people to arrive in what is now Burma” (Pedersen 2011, p. 15). A Buddhist Karen community in Bendigo subscribes to the idea that the “Mon and the Karen were the first groups to settle in Burma more than 2000 years ago” (see Moonieinda 2011, p. 10). Other accounts suggest that the Karen arrived earlier than the Shan people, who forced the Karen further south, some two hundred years before “the Mon and the Burmese came over from India” (Rajah 2008, p. 308).

Colonial-era sources of Karen history offer their own interesting – and sometimes, differing – accounts. Marshall (1922, p. 14) concludes that “the Karen migrated into Burma, coming from the ancient home of the early tribes inhabiting the country of China, with whom they are related by tribal, linguistic, and possibly religious ties, the full significance of which

are yet to be determined”. A product of Burma’s colonial-missionary period is Saw Aung Hla’s *The Karen History*, published in 1932. This text, written by a Karen “missionary-educated inspector of schools under the colonial state” (Cheesman 2002, p. 205), was highly influential. With persecution of the Karen as a recurring theme, it documents their “series of migrations from Babylon, across Central Asia” (Cheesman 2002, p. 205). According to the text, the Karen arrived in Mongolia in the year 2167 BCE, before later moving to China and onto Burma.

Ethnic identity and Karen solidarity

Observers have long been interested in the strongly asserted ethnic identity that groups who call themselves “Karen” clearly share (Platz 2003, p. 473). The above examples already demonstrate the challenges of seeking to pinpoint “Karen” commonalities among such diverse groups of people. In his research about Karen identity and assimilation in Burma, Cheesman (2002, p. 200) captures the essence of this challenge, asking:

How does a researcher infer that a Sgaw Karen highland animist swidden farmer who speaks only her own language and a Western Pwo Karen delta Christian civil servant whose first language is Burmese share a common identity?

A relevant starting point for engagement with this question is to consider the origins of the word “Karen”. MacLachlan (2012, p. 464) notes that it came from outside the Karen people and is a “transliteration of the Burmese word *kayin*, a term applied indiscriminately to disparate hill-dwelling groups who speak different languages and have no unique ‘cultural features’ in common”. The earliest recording of “Karen” appeared in a letter penned in English in 1759 by “Captain George Baker of the East India Company” (Renard 2003, p. 1). It remained an outsider’s word for a significant time after this first documented use. Rather than being something that “insiders” used to describe themselves, many groups “in the early nineteenth century would have disavowed such a name” (Renard 2003, p. 5). In a modern

age, the term has come to represent the identities of millions of people who self-identity as “Karen”.

Karen ethnicity and nation

Contemporary Burma is richly diverse. The ethnic Burman, or Bamar, people make up almost 70 per cent of a population of some 55 million people (Fike & Androff 2016, p. 129). The rest of the population consists of ethnic minority groups (Lall & South 2014, p. 300). Although the state recognises different ethnicities, it has “constructed a ‘traditional’ public life that places Burman culture at the core and links other cultures together around the periphery” (Cheesman 2002, p. 217). The distinction between “Burmese” and “Burman” is important here. The former refers to someone with citizenship of Burma, regardless of ethnicity, while the latter specifically describes the country’s dominant ethnic group. But as Cho (2009, p. 17) explains, in Burmese, the country’s dominant language:

‘Burman’ and ‘Burmese’ is the same word. National identity is therefore ethnicised because of the underlying ethnic meaning of the term. This in turn strengthens ethno-nationalism and separatism. Karen nationalism serves as a pertinent example.

Karen identities have been shaped and constructed in modern times, including with reference to modern categories, such as ethnicity and nation. Ethnicity has only a short history as a prominent term in sociology, emerging in the second half of the 20th century (Conversi 2002, p. 23). Among classical sociologists, Weber was perhaps most interested in ethnicity, though he himself initially dismissed the concept as “complex and vague” to the point that it might be worth disregarding altogether (Fozdar, Wilding & Hawkins 2008, p. 27). He later came to appreciate its importance to group understandings of identity, arguing, “what is important in ethnicity is the belief in, and not the fact of, common descent” (Jackson 1982, p. 6). This understanding of ethnicity has helped shape contemporary understandings.

Ethnicity has come to be seen as a “perception of commonality and belonging supported by a myth of common ancestry” (Conversi 2002, p. 23).

Fozdar, Wilding and Hawkins (2008, p. 26) write that “ethnic”, a word often associated historically with outsiders:

derives from the Greek work *ethnos*, meaning nation. Nation does not here refer to a political grouping, as in a nation-state, but rather to a people united by common descent.

Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (2016) is a useful tool with which to consider this further. Nations, Anderson argues, are “imagined” – not fictitious but constructed in the collective minds of their people. Nobody, he argues, can know everyone in their nation on a personal level, “yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson 2016, p. 14). Furthermore, Anderson argues, the biography of a nation – from its genesis to its terminus – is elusive. Such ambiguity, however, does not detract from the importance of that nation to its members. As South (2007, p. 57) argues, groups identifying as Karen are “an imagined – not an *imaginary* – community”. Even though part of the imagined Karen identity “may be constructed from disparate (including non-indigenous) elements, it is nonetheless authentic for that” (South 2008, p. 15). Rajah (2008, p. 309) argues that the Karen, despite the diversity of its people, in fact have all the characteristics of their own nation – including language, traditions and (informally at least) land.

Modern history: from colonialism to civil war

Under the influence of British colonialists, who ruled Burma from 1824, and American Baptist missionaries, what it meant to be “Karen” began to be more clearly defined (Platz 2003, p. 478). The emergence of the umbrella term “pan-Karen” – a catchall for peoples considered Karen – is something Cheesman (2002, p. 203) attributes “primarily to a specific historical process: the combined colonial missionary enterprise”. Anderson (2016, p. 46) argues that the rise of modern nations as a distinct type of “imagined community” can be

attributed largely to the “convergence of capitalism and print technology”. In the Karen context, missionaries were integral in developing a “Karen script using the Burmese alphabet” where one had not existed before (Platz 2003, p. 478). Schools were opened, and with written language becoming more common, a publishing industry soon emerged. The spread of pan-Karen sentiments were then made possible through “missionary-sponsored Karen schools and churches and vernacular newspapers” (Thawngmung 2008, p. 4). Out of this dissemination of the written language came Saw Aung Hla’s aforementioned *The Karen History*, published in Sgaw Karen in 1932 (Cheesman 2002, p. 205).

The development of Karen written language and information sharing contributed to Christian missionaries and Christian Karen leaders constructing “Karen identity as an entity deeply opposed to Buddhist-Burman identity” (Horstmann 2014, p. 50). This period coincided with the British introducing a “policy of divide and rule which separated the Burman from other ethnic groups” (Lee 2012, p. 269). In pre-colonial times, “ethnic consciousness was not salient in Burma” (Lee 2012, p. 269). Although tensions between Karen people and Burmans pre-dated colonialism, they flared in British Burma. Christian Karen leaders were also promoting the virtues of all Karen people, Buddhist or Christian, being united (MacLachlan 2012, p. 465). Colonial forces treated Karen “favourably” (Lee 2012, p. 269). They also used them to fight Burmans as they annexed the country in the 19th century (Thawngmung 2008, p. 4).

Around the time of the final annexation, in the 1880s, efforts to promote solidarity among Karen groups increased. The formation of the Karen National Association (KNA) in 1881 amounted to the “first institutionalized form of Karen ethno-nationalism that attempted to overcome the internal differences in language, culture, religion, and locality” (Kuroiwa & Verkuyten 2008, p. 394). Achieving this proved difficult. Membership of the KNA was open to all Karen people, but as Kuroiwa and Verkuyten (2008 p. 394) note, the association soon

came to be “dominated by Sgaw Baptists and received less support from the majority Karen Buddhists”.

Struggle for independence

By supporting and fighting on the side of colonial rulers, the Karen became increasingly strong adversaries of the Burmans. Tensions continued into World War II, a period when “thousands of Karen were killed, injured or arrested for collaborating with the British by the Burman who joined the Japanese side in the beginning of the War” (Lee 2012, p. 269). For their loyalty to the British, the Karen “suffered grievously” (Smith 1999b, p. 62). According to Lee (2012, p. 269), this “left an indelible legacy of bitterness among the Karen”. They had been given “vague promises of independence” in their homeland if Britain were to win the war and withdraw from the country (South 2008, p. 22).

In this climate, the Karen National Union (KNU), an amalgamation of several Karen groups, was formed. The KNU soon demanded its own state in the southeast of the country, leading to a political deadlock, in part because of the sheer size of its land claim and because it was home to many non-Karen people (Kuroiwa & Verkuyten 2008, p. 395). Burma gained independence in June 1948 as part of the first phase of Britain’s global process of decolonisation (Self 2010, p. 49). But Karen hopes of achieving independence stalled. With the government failing to adhere to its demands, the KNU proclaimed the existence of a Karen free state in June 1949.

Karen ethnonationalism

The KNU’s push for independence in Burma has had identity at the forefront and autonomy as its goal. In this context, Karen people might be considered to have engaged in ethnic nationalism, or ethnonationalism. Smith (2009, p. 181) outlines three main theories of ethnic nationalism: *primordialist*, which has ethnicity and shared culture at its heart; *situationalist*, defined by a need for a group to protect itself from discrimination and other

threats; and *constructivist*, in which nationalism is “wielded by political elites to legitimize their demands for power”. Ethnonationalism is “both the loyalty to a nation deprived of its own state and the loyalty to an ethnic group embodied in a specific state, particularly where the latter is conceived as a ‘nation-state’” (Conversi 2002, p. 22).

Not all Karen people are necessarily ethnonationalist or even political. As Rajah (2002, p. 520) argues, both ethnonationalism and nationalism in the Karen context are “creations of the modern educated-elites”. Traditionally, the village has been Karen peoples’ “largest political unit” (Hayami 1996, p. 339). Furthermore, Rajah (2002, p. 533) observes, many Karen are farmers who are less focused on independence than they are on living peacefully in their village, “free from predation by the Burmese armed forces”.

In any case, ethnonationalism is not unusual in modern politics. Ethnic identities are often wrapped up in national identities – and nationalism itself is a modern phenomenon (Hearn 2006). Calhoun (1997), however, questions the assumption that nationalism is a natural and necessary successor to a pre-modern ethnic identity. Ethnic traditions, he argues, are reproduced, not “simply inherited from pre-modern life” (Calhoun 1997, p. 49). They are, therefore, liable to change in meaning. In that sense, Karen identity might be considered a product of such reproduction; it is something that has its genesis in a pre-modern world but has been recreated in modernity and continues to be shaped.

The KNU and the Burman ‘other’

Through its military arm, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), the KNU seized control of large swathes of the country in the early years of its resistance, before being “pushed back to the predominantly Karen-populated hills to the east” (Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny 2011, p. 220). A coup in 1962 – carried out by General Ne Win and the military – resulted in Burma being isolated from the international community. Under military rule that would last decades, “the resource-rich and once-wealthy country plummeted into economic

and humanitarian crisis” (Watkins, Razee & Richters 2012, p. 128). In a move aimed at thwarting insurgent groups such as the Karen, Ne Win’s “Four Cuts” policy, introduced in the early 1970s, sought to officially stop the passage of “food, supplies, recruits and intelligence” to rebels (Cho 2009, p. 13).

Burma has endured “the longest-running civil war in the world” (Williams 2012, p. 123). It is estimated that “hundreds of thousands of Karen have been killed, maimed, and displaced as a direct and indirect result of the armed conflict between the KNU and successive Burmese governments” (Thawngnhmung 2008, p. ix). Consequently, life in Burma for the Karen (and other minority groups) has been “harrowing”, if “imperceptible, out of the view of the world” (Tangseefa 2006, p. 405). Amid this, the Karen “ran a quasi-sovereign state system until the 1980s” (Lee 2014, p. 462). The Burmese military government began wresting back large swathes of territory from the 1980s onwards – and huge numbers of Karen fled across the border into Thailand as refugees (Lee 2014, p. 462). The government’s most significant offensive, in 1995, resulted in the seizure of Manerplaw, near the Thai border, which had been the KNU’s headquarters (Kuroiwa & Verkuyten 2008, p. 395). Since the fall of Manerplaw, “KNU territorial control has been reduced to a few areas of remote forests and mountains in Karen State, plus a few enclaves along the Thailand border” (Lall & South 2014, p. 306). Through necessity, the KNU has focused increasingly on guerrilla warfare (Lee 2012, p. 270). Decades later, it is still “often referred to as the Karen government in exile” (Couch, Adonis & MacLaren 2010, p. 5). The KNU and the government agreed in 2012 to a ceasefire (Davis et al. 2015, p. 2). Demands for greater autonomy in Karen state, however, were still being made in 2019 (Wang 2019).

Despite easing its demands for absolute independence in the 1980s (South 2008), the KNU has “ceaselessly demanded political autonomy from the Burmese government” (Kuroiwa & Verkuyten, 2008, p. 392). In the 21st century, it has continued to “demand a sovereign Karen state ‘Kawthoolei’, within a democratic Burmese federation” (Couch,

Adonis & MacLaren 2010, p. 6). Throughout its struggle, the KNU has positioned itself as a political and military power for all Karen people (Kuroiwa & Verkuyten, 2008, p. 395). Much of the KNU's identity has been "constructed in opposition to an oppressive Burman 'Other'" (Rajah 2002, p. 522). The notion that Burma's military government represents a "primordial enemy" is highly compatible with a central part of pan-Karen identity that suggests its people are continually oppressed (Cheesman 2012). For its part, the military government claimed to support "equality for all 'national races'" (Cheesman 2002, p. 220). This, however, is in contrast with its structuring society in a way that conflates being Burman with being Burmese – to the detriment of groups such as the Karen (Cho 2009).

The KNU has at times struggled with its own "internal diversity" (Kuroiwa & Verkuyten, 2008, p. 409). For placing its emphasis on what Karen people are not – Burman – the KNU has come in for criticism for not representing the "multiplicity of Karen identities" that exist within Burma (MacLachlan 2012, p. 465). Rajah (2002, p. 522) argues that the KNU's revolution was "founded on an ethno-nationalism containing assumptions of cultural commonality and uniqueness, essentialized attributes, and the reification of questionable history and ethnology". One particular reproach of the KNU is based on the suggestion that "a small group of Sgaw Christians" has come to dominate the organisation (Kuroiwa & Verkuyten 2008, p. 395). South (2007, p. 72) notes how this has presented challenges to unity:

Historically, Christian elites within the ethno-nationalist insurgency have presented themselves as the sole legitimate representatives of the Karen, often suppressing dissenting or alternative voices. This approach is fundamentally undemocratic, and has actually served to further fragment the community – as well as alienating Karen military-political leaders from the very constituencies they seek to represent.

Furthermore, religious differences have flared at inconvenient times for the KNU. Prior to the fall of Manerplaw in 1995, a group of soldiers from the KNLA defected to the government,

blaming “anti-Buddhist sentiments and discrimination inside the KNU” (Kuroiwa & Verkuyten 2008, p. 395).

Karen civilians targeted

Karen people have “deployed a wide range of strategies to resist domination” during civil war (Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny 2011, p. 22). At the height of the KNU’s powers, from the 1950s to the 1980s, many Karen regularly crossed the border between Burma and Thailand to flee attacks from the Burmese military (Lall & South 2014, p. 306). Once the Karen rebellion was largely reduced to guerrilla warfare following KNU defeats in the 1990s, the military government “pursued a gradual but aggressive ethnic cleansing of Karen State” (Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny 2011, p. 220). The army ceaselessly targeted civilians, driving them out of their villages, destroying their crops, raping them and enslaving them as porters (Williams 2012, p. 127). They garrisoned areas in order to isolate Karen civilians from KNU/KNLA protection (Horstmann 2014, p. 49). Many Karen soon found themselves stuck in the middle, forced to pay taxes to and appease both Burmese and Karen soldiers (Hortsmann 2014; Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny 2011).

This conflict “resulted in high prevalence of human rights violations” (Davis et al. 2015, p. 1). Other consequences have included “poor transportation infrastructure, poor supply chains for clinics, and increased risk for healthcare providers” (Davis et al 2015, p. 2). Central to this have been Karen civilians whose villages were “forcibly relocated, burned or totally destroyed” (Horstmann 2014, p. 52). The result has been “one of the worst refugee problems in the world” (Williams 2012, p. 127). Many Karen civilians have been internally displaced in the east of Burma near the Thai border. This group of people mainly consist of those from or near to the border regions – perhaps already familiar with crossing the Moei River, which forms the Thai-Burma border – and others who have travelled long distances “through mountains and rainforests to avoid Burmese military patrols” (Horstmann 2014, p. 49).

Separation of families has been common during transit (Lee 2012, p. 273). In some cases, those fleeing have paid smugglers to get them across the border, while others have had to “hide in the Karen villages across the border” before seeking work in the community or entering a camp (Horstmann 2014, p. 49). Refugees are almost always “the unfortunate victims” of the violence playing out around them (Salehyan & Gleditsch 2006, p. 339). The Karen are no different. Those who have fled have been faced with stark choices (in the sense that they are choices at all): “stay and risk harm, or flee to safety, leaving behind one’s property, homeland, and friends and family” (Salehyan & Gleditsch 2006, p. 342).

Migration: forced displacement and refugee journeys

Migration is a recurring theme in stories and histories about Karen people. Precariousness – central to early migration stories – is also a feature of folk stories in which Karen people are “orphans” who, in the absence of their own divine ruler, rise to hero status through “triumph against the deceit and hostility of non-Karen princes or officials” (Hayami 1996, p. 339). Similarly, Karen myths and legends often reinforce that, as orphans, Karen people await their own royalty. According to Gravers (2012, p. 343), the “Karen often say that they are a people without a nation-state searching for a ‘sacred’ land – morally enchanted space under an enchanted leader”. In recent decades, forced displacement as a result of civil war has been the tragic latest development in the Karen statelessness story. As violence has driven many Karen out of their territory, they have lost their homes and homeland.

Changing climate

Up until the early 1980s, Karen people in conflict areas in the east of Burma crossed into Thailand to escape military offensives only at certain times of the year. They could return to their homes during the rainy season – from May to early November – when extreme weather often thwarted the Burmese military’s efforts to mount offensives into the “jungles occupied by the Karen” (Lee 2014, p. 467). New military technology radically changed the

game in 1984. Rather than retreat when the rains came, the Burmese military “was able to continue to station soldiers in the jungle” (Lee 2014, p. 467). Refugee camps were soon set up along the border to cope with a flood of Karen migrants (Thawngmung 2008, p. 21). Initially some 10,000 Karen remained in Thailand, a figure that exceeded 80,000 within a decade (Lee 2014, p. 467).

Heavy Karen losses inside Burma in the mid-1990s caused the number of people flowing into Thailand to soar. This also coincided with the Burmese military crossing the border to launch attacks on the camps (Lee 2012, p. 274). These offensives left “many experiencing insecurity in the same camps that were meant to be a refuge from war” (Bartholomew, Gundel & Kantamneni 2015, p. 1125). This prompted a rethink from the Thai government, whose officials eventually reduced the number of camps from 30 to 12 in 1998. Mae La – the biggest camp along the border – swelled from some 5,000 in the mid-1990s to about 30,000 people (Lee 2014, p. 469) as people from other camps poured in. To protect those in the camps, the government increased security – and in doing so, effectively imprisoned them. Lee (2014, p. 469) writes:

The Thai government strengthened guard forces to impose strict control over the refugee camps. Barricades were set up at the camp entrances, barbed wire fences were built around the camps, and all vehicles and persons entering and leaving the camps had to be checked ... Inevitably living conditions in the camps deteriorated. Their former agricultural fields were now transformed into residential areas, leading to a nutrition problem.

People continued to flow into the camps – often on a daily basis – over the next two decades (Brees 2008, p. 382). The camps swelled in size to more than 134,000 people by 2007 (Thawngmung 2008, p. 21). According to recent research (Smith 2018, p. 2; Bird 2018, p. 3), about 100,000 refugees from Burma remain in the camps, a decline that reflects third-country resettlement efforts since the mid-2000s.

At home in Mae La

Situated some 60 kilometres from the major border town of Mae Sot is the biggest refugee camp, Mae La, a name that means “cotton field” (Horstmann 2014, p. 53). From the late 1990s, when its numbers began rising, to the mid-2000s, Mae La offered refugees the basics on which to survive, but little more. Refugees were protected from “most immediate security concerns”, and given “food rations, medical care, basic shelter and clothing” (Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny 2011, p. 222). Inside Mae La, Karen people forged new lives for themselves, unsure of how long they would remain there. After initially not having access to water and electricity, the Karen “transformed the camp into a liveable place with pathways, trees and beautiful gardens” (Horstmann 2014, p. 53). Like in other camps where Karen made up the majority of refugees, Mae La has had an education system “administered by the Karen Education Department (KED), the ministry of education of the exiled government, and the Karen National Union” (Oh & Stouwe 2008, p. 590). Religion, particularly by way of the Baptist church and its affiliated schools, became a significant feature of life in Mae La. Although Christians are a minority of the Karen in Burma, “Baptist Karen exercise a hegemonic position in the refugee camps in which the Buddhist community plays only a subaltern role” (Bird 2018, p. 50).

Ethnic solidarity in the camps

It has been argued that postmodern society has transported individuals beyond “any fixed or essentialist conception of identity” (Hall 1992, p. 275). The foregrounding of ethnicity and nationalism, however, continues to serve important functions for various groups. Mercer (1990, p. 43) has argued that “identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt”. Displacement is a significant form of doubt and challenge to identity. For Karen people who have found themselves driven out of their homes – far from their

villages and across the border into Thai refugee camps – the need to reassert their ethnic and national identity has become essential. Tangseefa (2006, p. 407) writes:

For many illiterate, forcibly displaced Karens, a Karen dialect is their only language, their only enunciative vehicle. After days, months, or years of running for their lives, it is crucial for these civilians who have taken flight to be able to trust that they belong to a “community” somewhere, a community that they believe can help them.

Karen groups have been concerned that many refugees seeking safety in Thailand might lose their Karen identities (Cheesman 2002, p. 208). This has helped galvanise ethnic identity in camps such as Mae La. Through education and other social interaction, Karen people have been free to “construct their identities in opposition to an imagined Burmese ‘enemy’ who burns and rapes, kills and destroys” (Horstmann 2014, p. 52). This type of solidarity has also been important in a military sense. For the KNU, “after more than half a century of fighting in the name of Karen nationhood, it is crucial to be able to trust that the ‘community’ is not nameless” (Tangseefa 2006, p. 407). Those Karen in the camp who have remained active in the resistance have been involved in constructing “corridors” at the border to “re-enter the place of origin in the conflict zone of Karen state and to organize the Karen population there” (Horstmann 2014, p. 47).

Connected Karen

Connections to those outside the camp – and even back in Burma – are not limited to those who have physically left the confines of Mae La and other camps. The influence of outside Christian groups, such as Korean Pentecostal Presbyterian missionaries, has provided those in the camps with internet access (Horstmann 2014, p. 53). Mobile phones and internet became more available in camps and towns (such as Mae Sot) in the early 2010s, when some Karen people were beginning to communicate with “overseas Karen resettled in Western countries through social networking services such as Facebook” (Lee 2012, p. 274). In that

sense, “refugee camps are not completely isolated places and refugees are not totally left behind by modern technologies” (Lee 2012, p. 277).

Those trying to communicate with family back in Burma, however, have faced significant obstacles. For many years, Burma’s military government “did not allow the commercial development of the telecommunication sector” (Ling 2019, p. 421). With some 44 per cent of the population under the age of 25 and fewer than 35 per cent of the population residing in urban areas, Burma is a young and mainly rural society (Fike & Androff 2016, p. 128). Even so, adequate coverage and the availability of mobile handsets – a practical avenue to the internet in rural areas – have emerged in daily life only recently (Ling et al. 2019, p. 421). This transformation, however, is proving to be rapid: between the end of military dictatorship in 2011 and 2016, “the country has gone from having approximately one [mobile phone] subscription per 100 to 90 per 100” (Ling et al. 2019, p. 421).

Supported resettlement

Successive Thai governments have avoided language that legitimises refugee claims – choosing to call people in the camps “temporarily displaced persons fleeing fighting” (Brees 2008, p. 384). They have taken a similar approach with the camps themselves, referring to them as “temporary shelters” (Harkins 2012, p. 188). Such language is indicative of the fact that Thailand is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention (Brees 2008, p. 384). This document provides the legal foundations for the UNHCR operations (UNHCR 2019a). In 2005, the UNHCR began helping many Karen in the refugee camps to relocate to third countries (Spivey & Lewis 2015, p. 61; Fike & Androff 2016, p. 131). This resulted in more than 73,000 refugees from Burma leaving the camps from 2006-11 (Lee 2012, p. 277-78). Karen have usually chosen “between the United Kingdom, the United States or Australia” as their destination (Couch, Adonis & MacLaren 2010, p. 9). A third of refugees resettled in the US in 2011 were from Burma (Spivey & Lewis 2015, p. 61). Australia has been the destination for more than 10 per cent of those resettled from the Thai-Burma borderlands

(Fike & Androff 2016, p. 131). With more than 1100 humanitarian migrants from the region granted entry to Australia in 2015, Burma “remains a country of priority for Australian resettlement” (Bird 2018, p. 3).

Karen settlement experiences: online and offline challenges

In multicultural societies, refugee resettlement is often talked about in terms of how “successful” it is, despite “success” being an ambiguous and subjective term (Curry, Smedley & Lenette 2018). As Fozdar and Hartley (2013, p. 24) observe, “successful settlement is defined as integration”. Integration has become significant in a policy sense and in terms of its presence in public discourse (Ager & Strang 2008, p. 166). Migrants, especially those from a refugee background, are therefore challenged to balance their existing cultural practices with a raft of new ones that might help them integrate into a previously unfamiliar culture (Costigan & Dokis 2006, p. 1252). In a digital age, integration must also be considered in the context of offline *and* online experiences – which is where a transnational perspective becomes relevant.

Humanitarian migrant settlement in Western countries has “increased the transnational connections of the Karen people” (Lee 2012, p. 277-278). Many Karen families are now dispersed across multiple locations – most typically, Burma, the refugee camps of Thailand and a destination country such as the United States. This means many Karen people settled in Australia have significant family ties in other countries and, therefore, much to gain from using the internet to maintain them. I now seek to consider how Karen identity might be diversifying further in a Western settlement context. In doing so, I draw on a fast-growing body of literature that considers both the online and offline experiences of Karen humanitarian migrants who have settled in “third countries”. This discussion sets the scene for my ensuing data chapters.

In their new surrounds, Karen humanitarian migrants are using the internet and associated technology to maintain transnational relationships in various ways. Younger people seem less affected by barriers to such communication. For example, in Sheffield, England, Karen aged from their teens to their thirties were using social media to communicate with distant family in a way that suggested they were actively “maintaining the Karen sense of ‘village’” (Green & Lockley 2012, p. 572). This “collectivist nature” of Karen communities has also been crucial in helping newly settled families access services and overcome challenges in their new, offline surrounds (Mitschke et al. 2011, p. 498). Even so, “at least initially, many [Karen] find themselves becoming even more dependent on welfare and social services due to language barriers and other sociocultural impediments to self-sufficiency” (Harkins 2012, p. 194).

Age is a factor in offline settlement experiences. Harkins’ (2012, p. 194) research shows that young Karen in the US have immersed themselves quickly in American culture, soon embracing it “as their own”, whereas “older Karen appear to struggle with acceptance of American culture, speaking English, and the psychological transition to embracing the United States as their home”. Cho (2009, p. 37) observed similar patterns in her study of a Burmese diaspora community in Auckland, New Zealand, including that younger people “are exposed to New Zealand culture through school and often develop friendships with non-Burmese people”. Mitschke et al.’s (2011, p. 497) study noted that all Karen interviewed “indicated that their inability to communicate in English was a significant barrier to thriving in the United States”. Language challenges have been similar for Karen humanitarian migrants in Australian contexts. One study of Karen refugee women in Sydney showed that they “unanimously described difficulty with English language proficiency and communication as the ‘number one’ problem affecting their wellbeing” (Watkins, Razee & Richters 2012, p. 126).

A Bendigo context

The emergence of a Karen community in Bendigo is a product of changing government policies in the early 2000s that sought to settle more humanitarian migrants in regional areas (Schech 2014). In some of these areas, longer-term residents have both resisted refugees and sought to help them settle (Radford 2016). Couch, Adonis and MacLaren's (2010) study provides valuable insight into the first few years of Karen settlement in Bendigo. At the time of that research, forty-two families from refugee camps in Thailand had settled in Bendigo having come to Australia on either a "Refugee Visa (Subclass 200)" or a "Global Special Humanitarian Visa (Subclass 202)", the second of which requires the applicant to be backed by a sponsor (Couch, Adonis & MacLaren 2010, p. 9).

The study highlighted that Karen people often waited three years or more to gain a visa to enter Australia and that resettlement often resulted in separation from family members. Reunions have occurred as family members have followed Karen migrants to Bendigo, either from a refugee camp or from elsewhere in Australia. Boese, Moran and Mallman (2018, p. 10) argue that settlement should be understood more in the context of movement across a country after the initial arrival due to the instances of "multiple or even numerous residential moves". This is relevant to the Bendigo Karen community. In its case, "unplanned secondary migration of Karen" from other parts of Australia to the city have placed strain on government-provided resources and support services (AMES & Deloitte 2018, p. 31). This type of additional migration resembles Boese, Moran and Mallman's (2018, p. 3) idea of "multi-local settlement mobilities".

Karen migrants have generally found themselves welcome in Bendigo as they have immersed themselves in church, work, sport and community gardening (AMES & Deloitte 2018, p. 33). Within families, power inversions have been observed, as young people tend to learn the language and social norms of their new society faster than their elders and subsequently assume the role of "cultural interpreter for their own families" (Couch, Adonis

& MacLaren 2010, p. 18). These dynamics have been explored less in the context of online identities and digital literacy.

Local festivals with transnational audiences

This thesis is concerned with the real-time visual co-presence of video calls and their importance to what might be called the *little transnationalism* of the family (Gardner & Grillo 2002). Before turning to data relevant to that in the next three chapters, I use this section to outline other findings from my fieldwork. I introduce data relevant to cultural activities in Bendigo that participants attend and document on social media. This provides important context about participants' local and transnational networks.



Figure 1: A Karen wrist-tying event in Bendigo in 2017

(Worrell 2017)

Many participants spoke of gathering for various Karen cultural events in Bendigo throughout the year. These included a wrist-tying ceremony (see Kearney 2016); Karen New Year celebrations (Romensky 2016); and the Kathina (Kerbone 2018), Yargu (Holmes 2016) and Water festivals (Croxon 2017). Community members often promote events through media outlets as open to all Karen people (Romensky 2016). A strong sense of unity

among Karen people and the wider community is talked about, including by local politicians (Kearney 2016) and businesspeople (Worrell 2016) invited to speak. Karen festivals are often held at community centres, schools or at a small Buddhist monastery. I have attended several events (see Figure 1), which are rich with singing, dancing, traditional clothing and food.

Karen communities in other parts of the world stage similar events. Each August, Karen people practice *lakhao knaing dju*, known as the “eight-month wrist-tying” (Rangkla 2014, p. 77). This event has become particularly significant “for the displaced Karen on the [Thai] border” (Rangkla 2014, p. 77), but is also celebrated elsewhere, including in the US (MacLachlan 2012). Wrist-tying events are traditionally focused on the individual, but as Rangkla (2014, p. 80) argues, “the Karen nationalist movement has indeed appropriated *lakhao knaing dju* in the interests of their nation-making project”. MacLachlan (2014, p. 59) has observed that two distinct types of dance, the *bamboo* and the *don*, “function to instil a sense of Karen identity in young people, who are usually the performers of both dances”. These dances are “vehicles for Karen identity formation” (MacLachlan 2014, p. 78). In Australia, Hughes (2019) demonstrates how refugees from Myanmar – Karen people among them – use food as part of a place-making process in their new community in Coffs Harbour, another regional city.

Facebook timelines and time-honoured traditions

Karen events in Bendigo are grounded in offline settings. Beyond this engagement with physical surrounds and a wider Australian “community”, however, is the transnational significance of these events. A number of younger participants said they took photos and videos at Karen events, using their smartphones, and shared them with their transnational networks on Facebook. In this sense, smartphones and social media can be pivotal in allowing a Karen festival, with all its colour and sound, to transcend its status as a local event. Miller and Sinanan’s (2017) monograph about social media, *Visualizing Facebook*, considers images that people post on the social networking site. The authors argue that

camera phones and sites such as Facebook have contributed to “a new visual language” and a “vast ocean of visual images” (Miller & Sinanan, 2017, p. 207). Participants were active in sharing images of Karen cultural events and, therefore, were communicating in a visual language.

Some of the younger participants demonstrated the extent to which they were thinking about their transnational networks when they attended and documented local festivals. Hser Pyo Way, a 20-year-old woman, said posting pictures was an important part of her community maintaining its culture. “If we wear Karen clothes – cultural outfits – and we post a picture on Facebook, all people around the world who see this will know that we are Karen,” she said. For Taw Boe, 22, such posts were assertions about the portability of Karen culture. “I just want to show that our Karen culture can be celebrated in Australia,” she said. “If you keep posting something about Karen culture, it will show other people ... how important and good your Karen community is.”

Facebook and Karen identity

To participant Soe Nay Thu, at 18 the youngest person I interviewed, maintaining Karen culture through community events and social media was a responsibility of all Karen people; it was something he believed transcended borders. His declaration that maintaining culture was “the most important thing for Karen people in the world” was made directly in response to a question about social media use. Soe Nay Thu considered himself as having a role to play in promoting cultural events to transnational audiences. That included taking photos and later uploading two or three of the best ones to Facebook. Karen events in Bendigo, he said, were an opportunity to “show off our culture and to celebrate it prominently”.

The connections that humanitarian migrants cultivate online are important on an individual and community level. In a study of young Karen people who have resettled in Melbourne, Gifford and Wilding (2013, p. 572) argue that gaining digital literacy and learning how to produce and share digital content “should be recognized as an essential component of settlement policies and services, particularly in relation to young people”. Exclusion from such activities, the authors argue, is tantamount to “social exclusion, not only in the host community but also across transnational communities and the globe” (Gifford & Wilding 2013, p. 572).

An increase in Facebook use among Karen humanitarian migrants in Western countries has led to what Wilding (2012) calls “Karen transnationalism”, whereby users share photos of themselves in traditional Karen dress. The importance of such communication in transnational digital spaces has been central to young Karen people’s resettlement experiences. Similar experiences can be seen in this study. Participants interviewed for this thesis demonstrate the importance of continuing to assert an ethnocultural identity. This might be considered in the context of the Karen people’s historical struggle for – and denial of – nationhood.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have considered the complex culture, modern history and migration journeys of the Karen and how each aspect has served to define what it is to be Karen. Ethnic identity and nationalism for Karen people are diverse, modern constructions. They have been shaped in pre-modern times, through colonialism, civil war and – for many who have been displaced from their homeland – in the refugee camps of Thailand. Furthermore, experiences of Karen settlement in Western countries are emerging as multi-faceted in their combination of both online and offline worlds.

The digital transnational activities of Karen humanitarian migrants in a third-country settlement context are the focus of this thesis. The aim of this chapter, therefore, has been to learn more about Karen people, so that this knowledge might contribute to better interpretation of data from the fieldwork. This chapter has also demonstrated the diversity of Karen people and their experiences. It has served as a reminder of the challenges that humanitarian migrants face settling in third countries. This is invaluable background knowledge as I seek to explore transnational digital practices in the next three chapters.

Chapter 5: Resettling and reconnecting: Karen migrants' journeys to transnational communication

Introduction

After resettlement, many migrants from a refugee background seek to maintain connections with family and friends from whom they have been separated. This is the case for the Karen humanitarian migrants in this study. In this chapter, I detail the participants' journeys from their homeland or a refugee camp to Australia. I explore their transnational communicative practices as informed by three processes or phases in that journey: *separation*, *settlement* and *connection*. I demonstrate that all but one of the 30 participants interviewed has been able to achieve digitally mediated co-presence with family overseas. The remaining participant does not use the internet and relies entirely on voice calls for his transnational communication. I also demonstrate that although levels of video calling are high across both the younger and older groups, younger participants have more quickly developed what might be called a *smartphone habitus*.

Becoming transnational: separation, settlement and connection

Separation

The refugee journey is often violent, traumatic and precarious as people flee oppressors, cross borders and await their fate in makeshift refugee camps in transit countries. A common feature of refugee experiences is the lack of agency that befalls the persecuted along the way. Forced separation and even a “destruction of the family unit” can come to define transnational refugee life (Robertson, Wilding & Gifford 2016, p. 221). What is lost during migration – “culture, habits, and place”, for example – can compound psychological strain for refugees (Johansen & Varvin 2019, p. 222).

Humanitarian migrant families' transnational experiences are "generated out of forced separation" (Robertson, Wilding & Gifford 2016, p. 220). For the Karen participants in this study, *separation* was a multidimensional feature of their migration. Participants born in Burma were first separated from their homelands and their daily lives – which encompassed social, cultural, religious, agricultural and other practices – when they fled to refugee camps in Thailand. They then faced a second separation when they were resettled in a third country. Those born in refugee camps in Thailand first experienced separation from their daily lives and practices when they resettled in Australia. They also lived with an understanding that, as Karen, they had spent their whole lives separated from their parents' cultural homeland.

In addition to this separation from place, participants were often separated from family and friends. Boe Loe Thar, a woman aged in her fifties, experienced her first separation from kin while in her village in Karen state. In the 1990s, her husband fled their home, leaving Boe Loe Thar and their young son not knowing whether he was safe – and still facing danger themselves. Boe Loe Thar had no way of contacting her husband; she had no phone and, in any case, no reception that would have enabled a call. "I was really worried about my husband," she said. "Was he still alive? What was he doing? We had no contact, so I was really worried. I missed him." It was a year before she heard anything. One day, a traveller arrived in her village with some news from a refugee camp in Thailand. Boe Loe Thar's husband, the messenger informed her, had found sanctuary there. Empowered by hope, she immediately set off on foot with her son. "The fighting was still happening in my village," Boe Loe Thar said. "So, I just left straight away, looking for him." Boe Loe Thar found her husband and an emotional reunion – between wife and husband, son and father – followed.

Older participants like Boe Loe Thar grew up in Burma in the shadows of civil war. They generally spoke of being raised in farming communities in rural villages of Karen state. For many, educational opportunities had been limited. A number of older participants could

not read or write in their own language. Twel Twel Taw Law, a 45-year-old woman, demonstrated the challenges of trying to get an education amid the uncertainty of conflict. “I never went to school when I was young. I didn’t get the chance,” she said. “Actually, I got the chance once and went to school for one day. But the fighting happened in the village the next day and we had to flee.” Agricultural duties had also demanded some participants’ time as children. Indeed, they were important contributors to their families’ livelihoods. Many of the older participants spoke of having numerous siblings, some of them more than 10. “I was one of 12 siblings. I was the youngest,” said Say Thu Soe, a 48-year-old woman. Her parents passing away when she was a small child made for a difficult life. “I was raised by siblings,” she said. “I didn’t get a chance to go to school. I had to work on the farm.”

“Forced” displacement does not simply mean “ordered to leave”. People experiencing conflict “make strategic choices about whether and when to flee their homes” (Schon 2015, p. 439). But these are doubtless fraught decisions, made to escape persecution and coming with “substantial costs and risks” (Schon 2015, p. 440). Furthermore, displacement often occurs multiple times (Schon 2015, p. 459). Older participants recalled fleeing their villages alone, while others had departed in groups. Some were already away from their homes when they met others who advised them not to go back. One younger participant recalled fleeing through the jungle with her uncle after being separated from her parents. A couple of other younger participants were aware they had left their villages with family but did not clearly remember the details.

Ner Too Soe, a 41-year-old man, recalled fleeing his village with his wife when she was six months’ pregnant, leaving behind extended family, who sought to protect their homes and property. “There were about 40 people fleeing the country at this time,” he said. “We had to rush, because we were always trying to hide from the Burmese soldiers.” It was four solid days of trekking to the Thai border, and the relative safety of a refugee camp that lay beyond. After having seen his first child pass away, aged just one, Ner Too Soe watched his wife give

birth to their daughter in a camp. But he remained separated from his mother and father, who remained in their village. “We didn’t have any phone or connection,” Ner Too Soe said. It was a few months before Ner Too Soe himself made the journey back across the border to his village to tell his parents the news of their new grandchild and accompany them back to the camp.

In a pre-digital age, participants often could not contact family members from whom they had been separated. “I had no telephone – that’s why I couldn’t make any calls,” said Larr Larr Kwee, a 42-year-old woman. “After I left my village, I really missed my cousins and [other] relatives left behind.” Larr Larr Kwee had left her home because she feared the Burmese army. Her journey through mountainous jungle areas towards Thailand took weeks. With her husband and two children, she slept in the forest as part of a group of more than 20 Karen people. After crossing into Thailand, UNHCR staff found them, offered them food and mosquito nets and helped them enter a refugee camp.

For some participants in this study, separation from family and friends occurred in more than one phase. Like in Boe Lar Thar’s case, this often meant watching loved ones leave their village before they did. After later fleeing themselves, some were reunited with their family members in a refugee camp in Thailand, where they lived for years. A second phase of separation then occurred when either they or their family members took the opportunity to be settled in another country, such as the United States or Australia.

Passage to Australia sometimes came with the realisation that a physical, permanent reunion with a family member in another Western country was now unlikely. This type of separation occurred when someone followed a spouse and in-laws to one country rather than parents, siblings or children to another. At other times, someone might have preferred one country over another or made a choice based on the shortest processing time, while their family waited to go somewhere else. Wah Wah, a 47-year-old who spent 13 years in a camp

after leaving Burma, spoke of how resettlement took him, his wife and their two teenage daughters further away from their adult son and brother, respectively:

When I lived in the refugee camp, my son applied for US resettlement. We [my wife and I] didn't do anything at the time. After my son had gone to America, my aunt in Australia sponsored my family. I wanted to live here permanently. I preferred it. So, we came here ... I feel a little bit sad, because I really miss my son. It's too far away – a long distance.

Some participants watched their family and friends leave for Australia – and hoped they might soon follow. However, leaving a refugee camp was an experience that brought with it a range of emotions. Not only did resettling in a third country potentially mean leaving people behind, the refugee camp had also become home. One of the older participants had lived in a refugee camp for 30 years before arriving in Australia. Kwal Wah Kee, a 44-year-old who spent 25 years in a refugee camp, captured some of the difficulties of embarking on another migration after such a long time. “I didn't think I would come and resettle in Australia. I heard that if you go to another country, this and that will happen, you will be hurt. So, a lot of people frightened me with their stories.” Visitors returning to the camp after settling in Australia changed Kwal Wah Kee's perceptions, convincing her to embark on a journey – and a new life. “I realised those [earlier] stories weren't true. After, that I decided to come to Australia.”

Although a sense of Karen community was strong in the refugee camps for many of the participants, some spoke of feeling confined. Especially, they felt trapped and excluded from being able to earn a livelihood. Ner Moo Htoo Soe, a 25-year-old who spent 12 years of his childhood in a camp, likened conditions to a prison:

It was lockdown ... You can't go out. You can't go anywhere ... They had a school for the refugee kids. It's not really fun, you know, it's not like in Australia.

Some participants spoke of family members choosing to leave the camps to seek work on the borders of Thailand and Burma. Taw Boe, a 22-year-old woman, told how her sister had married a man who was not seeking third-country settlement. Her decision to follow him to a village outside the camp meant an eventual separation from Taw Boe and the rest of their family when they left for Australia. Taw Boe explained:

Her name is still in the refugee camp but mostly she lives in Burma. It just takes one hour to get into [her husband's] village from the camp. She was born in the camp and grew up in the camp. But she has gone back to Burma to live with her husband.

Settlement

All of the participants in this study had left the refugee camps to settle in Australia. Many had migrated with members of their family and continued waiting for kin in refugee camps to follow them to Australia. Many lived with, or close to, important immediate and extended family members in Bendigo. For example, Wah Wah, a 47-year-old man, lived with eight other people, including his wife, three children, nephews and his mother-in-law. He was continuing to experience significant separation from a son who resettled in the US, and in-laws in Burma whom he had no way of contacting and often worried about.

Some participants already had family in Bendigo when they arrived. Tha Ku Htoo Bler, a 21-year-old male, came to Australia to live with his brother, who acted as his sponsor. For Tha Ku Htoo Bler, this meant leaving his parents behind – and he often wondered whether he would see them again. “My parents are still in the refugee camp,” he said. “I think they won’t come here. They are getting old and are so scared of boarding a plane.” Taw Boe was drawn to the city through her family’s relationship with a Buddhist monk who had lived there for some years. She said:

He told us, ‘Come to Bendigo, because there are a few Karen people, and we can help each other’ ... He gave us his address and told us to come straight here.

Taw Boe had spoken to him by mobile phone from the refugee camp. While she was convinced that resettlement in Australia seemed like a positive move, her mother, a widow, had needed convincing. “At first, she refused to come to Australia. I had an argument with her, because she had wanted to go back to Burma to work on a farm and raise us,” she said. Taw Boe eventually convinced her mother that resettling in Australia meant a better life for her children. “I said, ‘If you go back to Burma, you probably can’t afford to send your children to school, because your husband has already passed away.’”

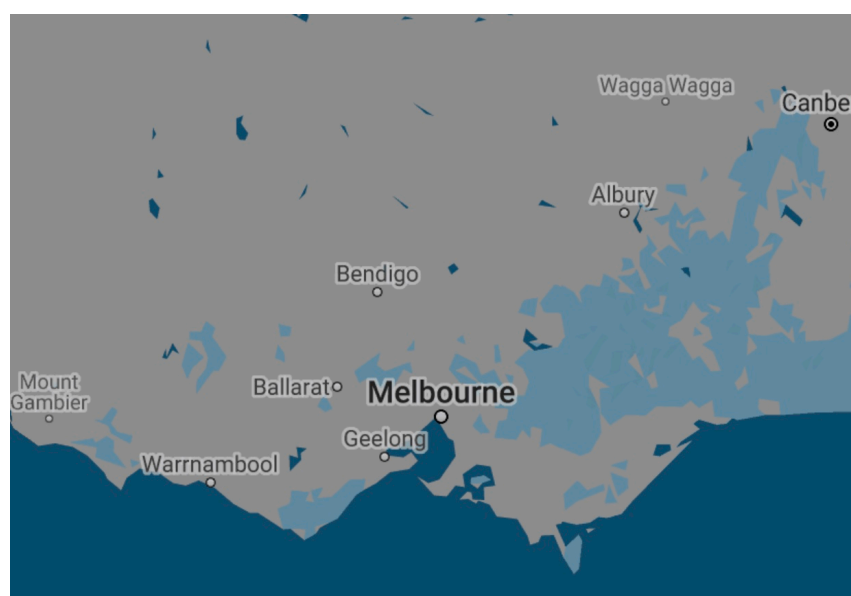


Figure 2: Bendigo's position in relation to Melbourne, in the state of Victoria

(Google Maps 2020a)

Additional migration occurred within Australia after participants arrived. Humanitarian migrants who had settled in other parts of Australia had heard about a thriving Karen community in Bendigo and were relocating. For example, Kwal Wah Kee, a 44-year-old woman, lived in Canberra before moving in search of more Karen people to interact with. Before moving to Bendigo, a couple of others had lived in Melbourne – the closest city with an international airport (see Figure 2). This is part of what Boese, Moran and Mallman (2018, p. 3) refer to as *multi-local settlement mobilities*. Hser Pyo Way, a 20-year-old adult woman, was another example of this. She had been in Australia less than two years when she

relocated from Sydney to Bendigo, with the intention of finding her parents and two siblings a house to live in. At the time of being interviewed, her search continued – and her immediate family waited in Sydney. She was staying with extended family, hoping for another family reunion in the near future.

Most participants had settled in family homes or smaller units in suburbs to the north or west of Bendigo's city centre (see Figure 3). They lived with immediate and extended family and in close proximity to other relatives and friends. Many lived in archetypal Australian suburban homes, usually detached and consisting of three or four bedrooms, developed with the so-called “nuclear family” in mind. It was not uncommon for six or more people to be present at the homes in which interviews were conducted. At one house, some 20 people were gathered in the backyard for a party while I interviewed a participant inside. This gave me insight into how strong community ties were.

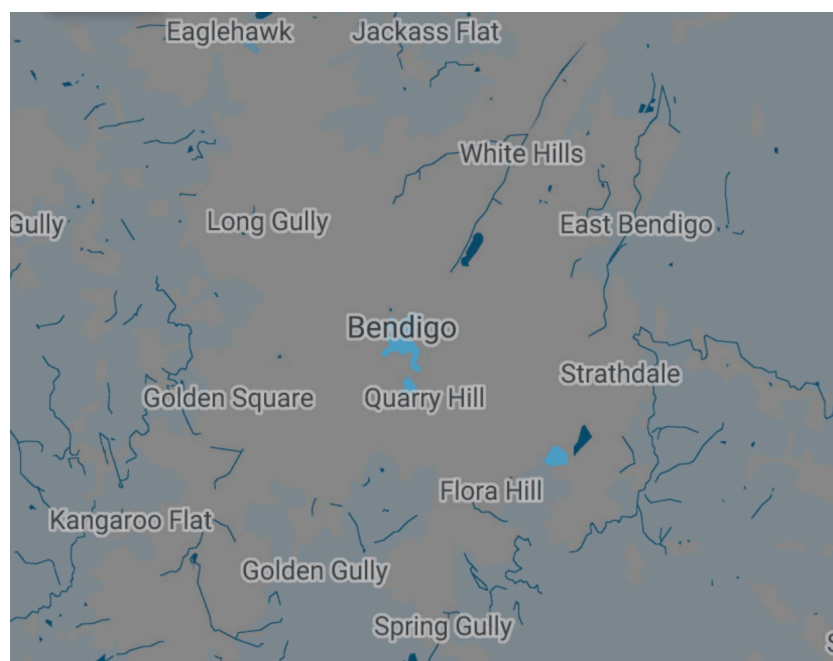


Figure 3: Map showing Bendigo and its surrounding suburbs

(Google Maps 2020b)

Despite some significant reservations about life in Australia, many participants were growing increasingly comfortable the longer they stayed. A number of them, across both

groups, identified Australia as their “home”. Hser Pyo Way said freedoms such as being able to go out and buy food contributed to her feeling welcome in Australia. “It’s good to live here, because it is easy to travel from one place to another,” she said. “Not like in the camp, where they didn’t allow you to go anywhere you wanted to go.” She felt at home in Australia, though not entirely. “Sometimes I consider Thailand and Burma my homes, because my grandparents are still there,” she said. Hser Pyo Way also thought about Burma and wondered whether she would return to live there one day. But as long as “the situation is still not stable” there, she concluded, Burma was not a realistic option for her.

After displacement and long periods in refugee camps, participants were beginning to feel part of a wider community in Australia. This related to their opportunities to express their religious identities, gain citizenship and participate in daily life, particularly through education and employment. Prominent among participants was a desire to maintain Karen culture in Australia. “Because Karen culture is inherited from our ancestors, we are responsible for maintaining it,” said Tha Koh, a 23-year-old female participant. “My parents have always told me about culture in this way. I want to maintain it – and show it off.”

Some participants stressed the importance of Karen culture over religion, pointing to the fact that their culture predated their religion. “Our ancestors were not Buddhist or Christian,” said Thar Ler Saw, a 59-year-old man. Religion was not a specific focus of the interviews, but those who spoke about it identified as either Buddhist or Christian. Participants said Karen people could practise different religions without this undermining their ethnic unity. Ki Thu Htoo, the oldest of the younger group, suggested that the unity of her people was not just a matter of culture, but also of nationhood:

The Karen people are like one big nation. But yes, some people who do not think far enough or in a wise way might think themselves as a different religion, ethnicity – but again, it comes down to the umbrella of the Karen people.

A number of participants felt an affinity with a transnational Karen community. Hser Pyo Way said that “even though we are in different places, we are one and we are Karen”. To another younger participant, Taw Boe, a 22-year-old woman, Australia’s status as a multicultural country underscored the importance of her community continuing to express its ethnic culture. She said:

It is more important in Australia because it is a multicultural country and they have their own culture. So, it is important for us to be united and to have unity.

It is well established in the research literature that home is something more plural than a choice between “a physical place or a symbolic space” (Andits 2015, p. 313). As Ballantyne and Burke (2017, p. 11) argue, “the meanings associated with home may be both symbolic and mobile, and grounded in physical and practical sites of lived experience”. This section demonstrates that settlement for some humanitarian migrant is more than just finding a physical location in which to live. It is also about being able to express identities, which are bound up in social networks and ethnicity.

Connection

In a study of Karen settled in the US states of Georgia, Iowa and Wisconsin, Gilhooly and Lynn (2015, p. 805) found that “strong ethnic networks”, made up of local and transnational connections, were helping Karen deal with trauma they had experienced and contributing to their feelings of “satisfaction with their current lives”. *Connection* is also a significant feature of Bendigo participants’ migration journeys and settlement. For many, an important part of feeling “at home” meant being able to connect with family members.

All 30 participants in Bendigo had proximate family members with whom they kept in touch. They also expressed a desire to remain connected with family members in other countries (see Table 3). These networks were rich. They consisted of people in Thai refugee camps; in villages in Karen state, Burma; and in countries such as the United States, Canada

and Norway. Many of these connections were people participants had previously resided with, face to face, in their villages in Burma and the refugee camps of Thailand.

Table 3: Locations of transnational family members and friends

Name	Age	Gender	Transnational connections
Tha Ku Htoo Bler	21	Male	Burma, Thailand, United States (US)
Lell Lell	22	Male	Burma, Thailand, US
Soe Nay Thu	18	Male	Thailand, Canada, Norway, US
Ner Moo Htoo Soe	25	Male	Burma, Thailand, US
Kaw Thu Wah	19	Female	Thailand, US
Ta Bler Aye	20	Female	Burma, Thailand, US, Japan
Len Wah Htoo	19	Female	Burma, Thailand, US, Canada, Norway
Soe Kell Soe	19	Female	Burma, Thailand, US, Norway
Saw Law Tha	19	Female	Burma, Thailand, US
Ku Ku Soe Paw	23	Female	Thailand, US
Ki Thu Htoo	31	Female	Burma, Thailand, Europe
Lee Lee Wah	19	Female	Thailand
Tha Koh	23	Female	US
Taw Boe	22	Female	Burma, Thailand
Hser Pyo Way	20	Female	Burma, Thailand
Naw Wee Wah	22	Female	Thailand
Ngway Ngwar	40s	Male	Burma, Thailand, Norway
Koe Kit	44	Male	Burma
Wah Wah	47	Male	Burma, US
Thar Ler Saw	59	Male	Thailand
Ner Too Soe	41	Male	Thailand, US
Ler Soe Bler	42	Male	Thailand, US
Par Thu Kot	52	Male	Thailand
Law Say	58	Male	US
Boe Loe Thar	50s	Female	Burma, Thailand
Eh Law Gay	57	Female	US
Say Thu Soe	48	Female	Burma, Thailand
Twel Twel Taw Law	45	Female	Burma, US, Canada
Larr Larr Kwee	42	Female	Thailand
Kwal Wah Kee	44	Female	Thailand

Younger participants, in particular, emphasised the importance of their friendship networks, which included former classmates from their refugee camp schools who were often either still in Thailand or had settled in third countries. The desire the participants expressed to “keep in touch” was central to their communicative habits – but it did not necessarily mean that such communication followed in a straightforward way. After settling in Australia, many

participants were suddenly away from people they had talked to regularly or even daily. To maintain communication with them, these participants needed to initiate conversations through devices and media they might never before have used. For some, this meant starting out on a mobile phone, making voice calls. For others, who had experimented with the internet in a refugee camp, this meant using email or video calls. Desires to connect were strong, but digital literacy levels varied. Therefore, so too did engagement with smartphones, social media and video calling.

Participants, especially those who had been in Australia longer, spoke of having limited or no access to the internet while in refugee camps. Access to technology was challenging, expensive and, for some, impossible. Those who did have internet access in the camps often relied on others to mediate it for them – including shopkeepers in internet cafes. Long-distance telephone calls cost money but were adequate for contacting people who had resettled in other countries. The precariousness and uncertainty of refugee journeys had fragmented some social networks to the point that adequately communicating with everyone was challenging or even impossible. Although some participants had been able to rebuild their family networks online, there were others for whom reconnection was difficult due to infrastructure issues in Burma.

By the time of being interviewed, almost all participants had access to a smartphone or tablet (see Table 4). This did not always mean active, digital engagement with the device. Some older participants were handed their children's devices so that they could talk to a relative overseas but did not use any apps beyond that. Some had waited years after settling in Australia for a smartphone and the chance to use video calls. Even then, not all older participants owned the devices they used. Sometimes younger family members they lived with, or close to, took their smartphone with them when they left an older person's house, leaving them unable to video call.

Table 4: Participant social media and smartphone use

Name	Age	Gender	Platforms for transnational communication identified as using	Access to video calls
Tha Ku Htoo Bler	21	Male	Facebook, video calls (Messenger)	Smartphone
Lell Lell	22	Male	Facebook, video calls (Messenger)	Smartphone
Soe Nay Thu	18	Male	Facebook, video calls (Messenger)	Smartphone
Ner Moo Htoo Soe	25	Male	Facebook, video calls (Messenger)	Smartphone
Kaw Thu Wah	19	Female	Facebook, video calls (Messenger), Instagram, Snapchat	Smartphone
Ta Bler Aye	20	Female	Facebook, video calls (Messenger)	Smartphone
Len Wah Htoo	19	Female	Facebook, video calls (Messenger), Snapchat	Smartphone
Soe Kell Soe	19	Female	Facebook, video calls (Messenger)	Smartphone
Saw Law Tha	19	Female	Facebook, video calls (Messenger)	Smartphone
Ku Ku Soe Paw	23	Female	Facebook, video calls (Messenger)	Smartphone
Ki Thu Htoo	31	Female	Facebook, video calls (Messenger, Skype, WhatsApp)	Smartphone
Lee Lee Wah	19	Female	Facebook, video calls (Messenger, Skype), Instagram	Smartphone
Tha Koh	23	Female	Facebook, video calls (Messenger)	Smartphone
Taw Boe	22	Female	Facebook, video calls (Messenger)	Smartphone
Hser Pyo Way	20	Female	Facebook, video calls (Messenger)	Smartphone
Naw Wee Wah	22	Female	Facebook, video calls (Messenger), Snapchat	Smartphone
Ngway Ngwar	40s	Male	Video calls (Messenger)	Tablet
Koe Kit	44	Male	None	No
Wah Wah	47	Male	Facebook, video calls (Messenger)	Smartphone
Thar Ler Saw	59	Male	Facebook, video calls (Messenger)	Smartphone
Ner Too Soe	41	Male	Facebook, video calls (Messenger)	Smartphone
Ler Soe Bler	42	Male	Facebook, video calls (Messenger, Skype), oVoo	Smartphone
Par Thu Kot	52	Male	Video calls (Messenger)	Smartphone
Law Say	58	Male	Facebook, video calls (Messenger)	Smartphone
Boe Loe Thar	50s	Female	Video calls (Messenger)	Smartphone
Eh Law Gay	57	Female	Video calls (Messenger)	Smartphone
Say Thu Soe	48	Female	Video calls (Messenger)	Smartphone
Twel Twel Taw Law	45	Female	Video calls (Messenger)	Smartphone
Larr Larr Kwee	42	Female	Facebook, video calls (Messenger)	Tablet
Kwal Wah Kee	44	Female	Video calls (Messenger)	Smartphone

Almost all participants had Wi-Fi networks in their homes. Smartphones and tablets were the main internet devices connected to these networks. The Wi-Fi signal emanated from a modem connected to an ADSL line into the home, offering the potential for everyone from a grandparent, to children visiting as guests after school to be connected. But this technology was not something accessible to all, sometimes not even to those paying the monthly internet

bill. For example, a few participants – in the older group – had older handsets without Wi-Fi capability. They spoke of topping up prepaid balances when they needed to make calls. All 30 participants were, however, able to “keep in touch” with family overseas. But experiences of being virtually co-present varied depending on their ability to connect to the internet.

Constructing digitally mediated co-presence

Soe Nay Thu’s story: settled and connected to 1000 friends

When Soe Nay Thu arrived in Australia as a teenager, he had never used the internet, let alone social media. Almost immediately upon his arrival, however, his cousin set up a Facebook account in Soe Nay Thu’s name and talked him through its functions. Soe Nay Thu, who had spent his early life in a refugee camp in Thailand, soon learned he could reconnect with people in other parts of the world, provided they, too, could access and use the internet. Three months of experimenting with social media on a smartphone followed before Soe Nay Thu began to feel comfortable navigating Facebook. He was soon interacting with friends, reconnecting and building relationships in a way that made him feel part of a transnational community.

Within two years, Soe Nay Thu had more than 1000 Facebook “friends”, whose feeds he could effortlessly scroll through. Many of these virtual connections remained in refugee camps in Thailand or other countries that had welcomed Karen. Soe Nay Thu had also become adept at using Facebook’s associated Messenger app, whose video calls he reserved for his closest family and friends. “Face-to-face” interaction, albeit mediated over great distances by Messenger, had become central to his most important relationships – and vital to his own wellbeing in a new host country. “I don’t think I would feel happy [without video calls],” he said. “We wouldn’t be able to see each other and talk face to face.”

Even as Soe Nay Thu had faced the challenge of adjusting to life in Australia, learning English and myriad new social and cultural norms, his social network had remained

largely intact. His migration had separated him from some family and friends. But social media and smartphone technology had ensured he maintained connections with them after he moved to Australia. Technology had bridged a gap – somewhat – that in past generations might have been characterised more by feelings of frustration, disconnection and loss.

Soe Nay Thu's experience demonstrates that construction of real-time visual co-presence and other types of digitally mediated co-presences is diversifying transnational social interaction among Karen humanitarian migrants. It also supports the suggestion that the "social glue" for migrants (Vertovec 2004) "has largely shifted to the digital environment" (Marlowe 2019a, p. 2). Soe Nay Thu's story represents a step beyond cheap phone calls; it involves specific engagement with smartphones as computers, using their associated apps to communicate. The result of such engagement is more diverse transnational communication, including, I argue, different experiences of intimacy through video calling. To explore this further, I consider how other participants engaged with smartphones, social media and messaging apps.

By the time of being interviewed, participants had lived in Australia for periods of time ranging from less than a year to about 10 years. All 30 participants were able to maintain transnational relationships. Of those 30, 29 were able to communicate with friends and family in other countries using social media and video calls. The only one who could not was Koe Kit, a 44-year-old man in the older group who had been in Australia less than one year. This demonstrates that participants in both groups were *connected migrants* (Diminescu 2008), interacting across borders. It also shows that engagement with smartphones and digital media is widespread among participants.

The emergence of video

Transnational communication in both Australia and refugee camps has changed markedly since Ki Thu Htoo arrived in Bendigo in 2007. The oldest participant in the

younger group, Ki Thu Htoo observed that the emergence of smartphones and video calls had transformed transnational communication. When she came to Australia, she knew nothing about Facebook, launched in 2004, and was relying mainly on voice calls to communicate back to a refugee camp. “We knew about phones – but they were in a shop,” she said. It was not until years later – perhaps 2015, she thought – that Facebook and smartphones became more widely used in her community.

This is a notable date: 2015 was the year in which Messenger introduced worldwide video calling (Chowdhry 2015). Other platforms, such as Skype, were available before this (Miller & Sinanan 2014), but the emergence of Messenger is important in the context of this study. Participants mainly spoke of using Facebook for their social media interactions and Facebook Messenger for video telephony on smartphones (though a couple also mentioned Skype). Distinct differences exist between social media, video telephony and instant messaging platforms, but many apps include features of all three. For example, Facebook is a type of social media, whereas Facebook Messenger is an instant messaging platform that also incorporates video telephony (Chowdhry 2015). The two platforms can be used independent of each other, but a Facebook account allows someone to also use Facebook Messenger. The platforms crossover and complement each other.

It is significant that participants’ digital practices centred on Facebook and Messenger. Any number of devices, social media, video telephony and instant messaging applications, used in various combinations, might produce conditions conducive to what Madianou and Miller (2012) describe as a polymedia environment. In such an environment, “each individual medium or platform is defined in relational terms in the context of all other media” (Miller 2014 p. 667). The media landscape in which the participants in this study were interacting, however, did not have the richness and variety of this original theorisation of polymedia. Madianou’s (2014, p. 667) subsequent work about the smartphone as a “miniature media ecology” better resembles how the participants interacted. In that sense,

smartphones amount to their own polymedia environment by combining the internet, communication and a potentially infinite number of applications. One device can host a range of communicative types. In the case of this study, however, participants were mainly using the same platforms: Facebook and Messenger, while sometimes also engaging with others.

Participants were drawn to Facebook and Messenger because they thought their family and friends were likely to be active there. Some participants also used Instagram, oVoo and SnapChat, but Soe Kell Soe, a 19-year-old woman, captured the appeal of Facebook to many in her community when she identified it as a more transnational platform. Most of her Instagram friends lived in Bendigo, she said, while her Facebook friends were spread across multiple countries. In this sense, participants in this study might be becoming more “digital”, but still not fully immersed in polymedia. Just as participants might be involved in *little transnationalism* through their family communicative practices, they might also be viewed as being in a *little polymedia* environment by engaging with only a couple of apps through their smartphone.

Participants did not speak of using FaceTime. This might be explained in part by the types of devices they owned. FaceTime is a feature of Apple devices. It seems particularly conducive to straightforward video calling for someone without extensive smartphone and digital skills, due to integration with the Apple iOS operating system (Nield 2019). Many participants, however, simply did not have Apple devices. Although some did have iPhones and iPads, others used OPPO, Samsung, Huawei and Nokia devices. Occasionally, participants spoke of using “cheap smartphones” that were popular among people they knew. This perhaps demonstrates some of the digital inequalities highlighted in Chapter One. Participants did not mention their income when talking about their decision to buy a cheaper smartphone, but many were in full-time study or caring for family members in a regional city where incomes are already lower than the national median. In any case, there is no guarantee

that someone with an Apple device will use FaceTime for video calls. Some participants also had access to laptop or desktop computers at home.

Ki Thu Htoo's story: the power of a video call

I return now to Ki Thu Htoo, who noticed smartphones and video calls emerge around 2015. Although her early years in Australia were challenging in terms of communicating with family back in Thailand, Ki Thu Htoo's experience of technology had transformed in the years leading up to our interview. More Karen people were arriving in her community – and so was a wave of smartphone technology. Social media and video calling were changing the game. Transnational interactions were now common – and free. They were instant and they were *visual*. The distance between Karen in Bendigo and their families in other parts of the world was immense, but Ki Thu Htoo recognised the importance of the video call to “virtually being there”. She spoke of this in terms of conversations with very young relatives, saying:

You can see their face, how happy they are, how smart they are, how big they are, how tall they are, if they are adorable – it makes it easier that way. Also, we can show them in the picture [on the screen], “This is where we live. This is our bed. This is the kitchen and the toilet.”

Ki Thu Htoo believed video calls that facilitated such interactions made relationships stronger. They allowed separated family members to better understand each other's situations, despite the distance. “You see them in their picture and they're there. It's not just their voice,” she said. “You feel much closer, knowing that not every time, but most of the time, you can contact them easily and see them – you know that they're safe.”

In a pre-21st century world, “international migration often involved a radical detachment from a person's community of origin” (Dekker & Engbersen 2014, p. 401). In a digital age, humanitarian migrants have the potential to cultivate and sustain their

transnational connections more readily and more frequently. A migration journey, therefore, now expands the world of the person who embarks upon it, rather than a new world simply replacing an old one. This is increasingly the case in an age of smartphones. The real-time visual co-presence of video calls is an important part of the picture. As I began to argue in Chapter Two, the video call represents a rich type of virtual “face-to-face” interaction.

Ki Thu Htoo’s examples demonstrate the important role that smartphones play for humanitarian migrants. The ability to see the face of a person on the other side of the world in real-time changes and expands the transnational conversation. A tour of a house and its surroundings is now possible, while a child with limited language skills can be drawn into a transnational interaction and be co-present when they otherwise might not have been. This transition to digital technology, however, is not yet complete. Not all Karen participants in a settlement context have the same access to smartphones and video call technology. I now consider why.

Lee Lee Wah and Kit Koe’s story: the always online and the never connected

Twenty-nine of the 30 participants used smart devices and video calls. Journeys to that engagement with technology, however, varied significantly. I highlight differences in these transitions to smartphones and video calls by considering the experiences of two participants, the younger Lee Lee Wah – a frequent internet user – and the older Koe Kit, the only participant with no way of using the internet to keep in touch with distant family members.

Lee Lee Wah, a 19-year-old woman, was born in a refugee camp and came to Australia aged 13. During our interview, she answered my question about the extent of her internet use with a clear sense of humour. “I normally start at 8am and go to midnight,” she said, smiling. “When I eat, I stop.” When I asked if she thought she spent too much time online, she replied with similar light-heartedness: “No, my friend starts at 7 or 8am and goes

until 2am.” Although it is tempting to picture Lee Lee Wah glued to a screen all day, seldom taking her eyes off it during her waking hours, her response spoke more of how embedded into her everyday life this technology was. Smartphones and the internet were always there, ready for use at any moment. They had become an extension of herself.

Away from the screen, Lee Lee Wah was actually very busy and active. She had completed secondary school in the six years since arriving in Australia, moved onto further study at an adult education college, known as a technical and further education (TAFE) institute, and regularly attended Karen cultural and religious events across Bendigo. She also enjoyed watching movies online, using what she described as a “cheap” smartphone. This was the main device on which she communicated with her friends. She primarily used Facebook and Facebook Messenger to talk with friends and was increasingly using Instagram to post selfies, which she also considered a form of communication with people important to her.

Like many other younger participants, Lee Lee Wah began a process of engaging with social media soon after touching down in Australia, aged 13, with her parents and siblings. Almost immediately, a 14-year-old Karen girl who had “been here a long time” took Lee Lee Wah aside and showed her Facebook. The friend set up an account for her and told her they could message each other through a computer. The young mentor also introduced Lee Lee Wah to Facebook’s transnational potential, telling her “when you have friends, you can add them, and communicate with them”. This was a moment of great discovery. She had just said goodbye to her cousin, whom she had grown up with in Thailand. To Lee Lee Wah, her cousin was “the best person. I can call her ‘best friend’”, so she began thinking about how she might use Facebook to stay in touch with her.

Initially, Lee Lee Wah used Facebook and then Skype to contact her cousin. Facebook Messenger video calls through a smartphone, once available, then became their main way of communicating. Being able to see her cousin as she talked warmed Lee Lee

Wah's heart. It was better than a phone call, she said, "because we can see each other's face and ... show what we're doing when we're talking". For Lee Lee Wah, this meant walking around her house and showing each room to her cousin. Such "showing practices" (Licoppe 2017) played out while Lee Lee Wah's cousin waited for a visa that would allow her to move to Australia – and settle in Bendigo. Until a physical reunion could happen, a video call gave Lee Lee Wah the next best thing: it made her feel like she was "sitting with" her cousin.

A couple of suburbs away lived Koe Kit, a 44-year-old man who had been in Australia for less than a year. He sensed the potential for transnational communication that video calling might unlock for him – if only he had someone to help get him connected. Koe Kit lived in a house without Wi-Fi, which was unusual among the sample group. His experiences of the internet were occasionally visiting a friend's house to watch boxing matches streamed from Southeast Asia over YouTube. He lived with his wife and their son, who was in early primary school. Through his interactions in Bendigo, his curiosity about why other Karen his age could use smartphones and social media had gradually been replaced by mild jealousy. He had discovered their teenage children had taught them how to use the technology, whereas his own son, he realised, was still too young to help him.

Koe Kit used a mobile phone without internet capability. He called his brothers in their village in Burma on a Huawei mobile phone. These "very expensive" phone calls cost him \$10 for every five minutes he spent talking, which limited how frequently he called them. In contrast, Koe Kit's other brother in Australia had older sons who had taught him how to use online video calls to speak to siblings in Burma. If only Koe Kit had the skills to use video calls, he said during his interview, he would be able to do the same. "If I could use Facebook and Messenger, I would call my brothers in the village more," he said.

The experiences of Lee Lee Wah and Koe Kit might be considered in terms of *habitus* and *field* (Bourdieu 1985). Habitus is an individual's "system of dispositions" that determines their "modes of practice" in the fields in which they find themselves (Bourdieu 1990, p. 77). Bourdieu likened a *field* to – among other things – an uneven football ground, where players compete for various types of economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital (Thomson 2014). Such competition defines players' relationships to one another and establishes, consolidates or redefines their place in the field (Glick Schiller 2005, p. 442).

Although the focus of this thesis is primarily the family interactions that occur within a *transnational social space* (Roudometof 2005), the more complex concept of a *transnational social field* helps to illustrate the importance of habitus in a settlement context. Transnational social fields were in part inspired by Bourdieu's (1985) conceptualisation of *field* (Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004). As Go and Krause (2016, p. 11) argue, social fields are relational and their boundaries fluid, making them "particularly amenable to transnational and global analysis". A transnational social field "incorporates its participants in the day-to-day activities of social reproduction in ... various locations" (Fouron & Glick Schiller 2001, p. 544).

Development of the dispositions and practices needed to communicate transnationally through the smartphone as an internet device seems a helpful way of responding to the demands of a new field after settlement in a third country. A specific type of *smartphone habitus* relevant to a transnational social field might be considered as engagement with not just a smartphone itself, but also its apps and its internet functions. Some participants, however, have experienced a lag in being able to adopt a smartphone habitus, or like Koe Kit, have yet to do this. Bourdieu's concept of *hysteresis* (Hardy 2014) is helpful in explaining why. A hysteresis effect can occur when there is a *change* in field, and players experience a

mismatch between their new conditions and their habitus or “feel for the game” (Hardy 2014). Hysteresis explains the lag in players responding to their field disruption.

Examples of the way this concept has been applied include “welfarist” school leaders trying to negotiate change in an education system that expects schools to adopt more corporate practices (Courtney 2017) and young professionals’ home ownership aspirations amid a UK property market in which prices are soaring out of reach (Crawford & McKee, 2016). An example in Bourdieu’s own work – one that is particularly relevant to a transnational discussion – is that of Algerian migrants in Paris “caught between the expectations and dispositions (habitus) that they acquired in Algeria and the new and disturbingly different surroundings (field) in their adopted country” (Hardy 2014, p. 134). In a setting in which intimate face-to-face interaction with distant kin is now more reliant on smartphones and social media, Koe Kit (and others before their transitions to smartphones) can be said to have experienced a mismatch between their existing habitus, grounded in proximate interaction, and their new field, in which digital practices are required to enter virtual spaces.

The contrasting experiences of Lee Lee Wah and Koe Kit demonstrate a general difference between younger and older participants in this study. All 16 members of the younger group, most aged in their late teens and early twenties, used social media and video calls, but to varying degrees. The younger participants used their own accounts and devices to communicate with friends in various parts of the world. Many interacted through text-based messaging and Facebook timelines. Some also used Snapchat, Instagram and Skype. Lee Lee Wah, for example, spoke of scrolling through her Facebook feed, frequently adding “likes” to her friends’ posts. Often, she would post “selfies” to her Instagram and Facebook accounts, using filters to present the best possible photos of herself. “My phone is a very good camera. It has a beauty camera,” she said. Lee Lee Wah had embraced technology and felt comfortable using it.

Of the 14 participants in the older group, thirteen used video calling. The other was Koe Kit. Some older participants were using Facebook, but mostly as observers rather than content producers. Occasionally, an older participant would mention Skype or oVoo as something they had tried but not engaged with very much. The only older participant who had used the internet before arriving in Australia was Ler Soe Bler, a 42-year-old man who had been in Australia about three years. He had begun using Facebook in a refugee camp in 2010, and oVoo and Skype, for video calls, in 2012. But when he arrived in Australia a couple of years later, he disengaged with social media, due largely to being in a new setting and adopting different daily practices. Only after about 12 months did he begin using video calls to speak to his family in the US.

Younger participants have been able adopt smartphone and video calling practices in Australia sooner than older participants. Some differences can be explained by when they arrived in Australia. For example, those people who had arrived 10 years before their interview did not start out with smartphones and Facebook Messenger video calls, which were not available worldwide until 2015 (Chowdhry 2015). But other important differences between the younger group and the older group are evident. Most people in the younger group were using social media very soon after settlement, while the 13 older participants who had transitioned to video calling generally took longer to learn how to use smartphones and apps, despite many arriving in Australia with teenage or adult children. Even those older participants who arrived after the smartphones and video calls boom in the community in 2015 had taken up to two years to adopt the technology, with only a couple engaging with it in their first six months in Australia.

Some of the younger participants arrived in Australia after female participant, Eh Law Gay, 57, but began using smartphones and video calling before she did. Once Eh Law Gay did adopt the technology – with help from her children – she noticed a significant difference. “With video calls, we know what they are doing when they are talking to us,” she said.

“Through the phone call, we couldn’t even see what was happening.” The help of young people had enabled Eh Law Gay to use smartphones and video calls. This was also the case for Lee Lee Wah, whose friend had shown her Facebook. It was the type of help that Koe Kit could not access. Such assistance in a settlement environment has been central to participants’ opportunities to construct real-time visual co-presence – and is the focus of the next chapter.

Conclusion

A migration journey from the camps of Thailand to Bendigo results in participants needing to remap their family networks in order to keep in touch with distant kin. After settlement in a third country, participants have found presence in transnational social spaces (Roudometof 2005), where interactions between families across borders, often at the household level, result in a type of little transnationalism (Gardner & Grillo 2002) among participants and their networks. This is ensuring participants are connected migrants (Diminescu 2008). Calling family members by way of a voice call and a basic mobile phone can achieve such transnational connections. Engagement with smartphones, social media and video calls presents additional opportunities for transnational communication and, especially, intimacy.

This chapter has established that almost all of the participants who want to construct real-time visual co-presence – through transnational video calls to distant kin – have learned to do so since settling in Australia. Noticeable differences in transition to video calling, however, have occurred during the settlement process. This chapter has hinted at the support that proximate friends and families have provided to participants to facilitate a transition to video calling. In the next chapter, I explore this help in depth. It is something I label *digital brokering*.

Chapter 6: Digital brokering: how Karen migrants help each other transition to smartphone video calls

Introduction

Many younger Karen participants interviewed for this project have helped their parents use video calls to maintain important transnational relationships after settling in Australia. Furthermore, almost all older participants (only some of whom have relatives in the younger group) have received significant help from their children to transition to transnational video calls. Spaces that these video calls provide enable *real-time visual co-presence*, a term I introduced in Chapter Two to emphasise the immediate, aural and visual elements of a video call, and what is created and experienced when these elements combine. This process of younger people helping older people, often informally in the family home, is significant in terms of the participants' transnational relationships with distant kin. In this chapter, I define this process as *digital brokering*. I liken it to the language brokering that often occurs in migrant settings (Bauer 2016).

Language differences between generations underpin much of the cultural brokering that occurs in such contexts, primarily because younger migrants often have a better grasp of the dominant language in their new setting. This helps older migrants to communicate, aiding their social integration. I argue that digital brokering is the equivalent of language brokering in terms of the virtual spaces that migrants access and occupy after settlement. In these settings, smartphones and social media are the dominant language and integration includes engagement with a virtual world. Important outcomes of digital brokering for participants in this study are more opportunities to engage in intimate face-to-face conversations over video – and, thus, improved transnational relations. I demonstrate this by considering the brokering interactions of participants. Before doing so, I engage with language brokering research.

Learning from each other

Cultural and language brokering

Language brokering is one of a range of cultural brokering tasks migrant children engage in to mediate between family members and their new environment (Lazarevic, Raffaelli & Wiley 2014, p. 518). Cultural brokering involves various activities in which migrant children “play principal roles in constructing versions of the new world for their parents” (Bauer 2016, p. 24). Children of migrants often “have greater access to the majority language and cultural customs, and the prioritisation of the family raises expectations for children to serve as language brokers” (Rainey et al. 2014, p. 464). This is especially relevant to humanitarian migrant settings, where “children typically learn the host language more easily and quickly than their parents” (Hynie, Guruge & Shakya 2013, p. 14).

Language brokering stretches beyond language itself, often requiring the broker to “take into account cultural differences, intent of the communication, as well as the power dynamics between parents and child and the third party in the communication” (Weisskirch 2012, p. 1147). Language brokering may require a young person to navigate “meaning in two languages and the relationships among the adults involved” (Weisskirch 2012, p. 1147). Tasks of the language broker include helping parents understand messages contained in letters, medical appointments, business transactions and television shows (Dorner, Orellana & Jimenez 2008).

Literature in the field tends to focus on the *socioemotional*, *behavioural*, *academic*, *relational*, *cultural* and *parental* outcomes of language brokering (Shen, Tilton & Kim 2017). Some studies suggest the language-brokering process is a “normative” part of development in a migrant setting, others conclude that it brings parents and children closer, and others still report adverse effects on the relationships between young people and their parents (Roche et al. 2014, p. 78). Language brokering research has often focused on adolescents and youths of

Mexican and Central American background living in the United States (see Kim et al. 2018, Corona et al. 2012 and Roche et al. 2014 for examples). In one such study, Roche et al. (2014, p. 87) suggests that most language brokering tasks conducted in everyday settings are “no different than other forms of helpfulness for immigrant parents and have little consequences for parenting”. In another study, Corona et al. (2012, p. 795) found that parents have “mixed emotions regarding the language brokering experience”, including feeling proud of their children for helping, but also embarrassed and ashamed that they need to. Other studies show similar ambivalence in younger people who perform brokering tasks. These brokers experience positive and negative emotions related to their work, ranging from feeling proud and happy, to embarrassed and angry (Niehaus & Kumpiene 2014, p. 125).

Language brokering can occur in the context of wider responsibilities for young people in a migrant setting. Younger humanitarian migrants, Karen among them, have been shown to be “resettlement champions” for their families in such contexts, helping their parents with anything from interpreting to providing for them financially (Hynie, Guruge & Shakya 2013, p. 24). Such work “treads a thin line between empowerment and vulnerability” but the young people involved are often “resilient and resourceful” (Hynie, Guruge & Shakya 2013, pp. 25-26). Similar results can be seen throughout this chapter, where I focus on a specific emerging type of brokering that young people provide.

Helping each other get online

During the fieldwork for this project, it became apparent that many Karen humanitarian migrants were actively staying connected with family members and friends in other countries. I asked participants how they had learned to use social media and video calls, and whether or not someone had assisted them in that process. Equally, I focused on whether participants had helped anyone else to learn. It soon became clear that a culture of support was evident among Karen humanitarian migrants trying to use the internet to stay in touch with family and friends from whom they had been separated.

Of the 16 younger participants, 13 said they had received some kind of help to use social media, particularly Facebook. This had either coincided with, or eventually led to, their using Messenger for video calling. Four of the 13 had received help in a refugee camp before arriving in Australia. The other nine younger participants were assisted to learn Facebook after settlement. Invariably, help had come from a friend or relative. In most cases, the person assisting was about the same age as them. Occasionally, they were slightly older or slightly younger. Younger participants, it emerged, never learned social media from their parents. For two of the three who did not speak of receiving help from a peer to use social media, it was less clear what their learning process had been. The third, Lell Lell, a 22-year-old male, had picked up social media himself – and had not needed help from others.

Len Wah Htoo, a 19-year-old woman who had been in Australia two years, recalled how a reunion in Bendigo with a friend from her refugee camp served as her introduction to social media and smartphones. “She helped me create a Facebook [account],” Len Wah Htoo said. “I had to go to her house. We were new here and didn’t have any internet.” That encounter led her to video calling her brother and his young children in the United States. Another participant, Taw Boe, a 22-year-old woman, had received help while still living in a refugee camp. A friend had initially taught her the basics of Facebook – but she did not see the platform, or its associated Messenger app, as anything but simple fun before moving to Australia. “Now, I feel like Facebook is actually a good way of communicating,” she said. “It is beneficial ... I can communicate with my sister and other friends around the world. It makes our relationships strong.”

Some of the younger participants had learned quickly from others, sometimes observing them, asking questions and being shown how to download an application. It was rarely a lengthy process. Their independence grew quickly, especially when acquiring their own – often budget – smartphone. One participant, 19-year-old Soe Kell Soe, got onto Facebook with help from her cousins, and before long, realised she could navigate it herself.

In the case of Ku Ku Soe Paw, a 23-year-old woman who had been in Australia about two years, it was actually a younger relative – a 14-year-old niece – who set up a Facebook account for her to use.

Many young people were highly engaged with Facebook, which involved scrolling through newsfeeds, posting pictures and exchanging messages. Naw Wee Wah, a 22-year-old woman, was slightly different from most other younger participants in being largely disinterested in social media. A friend had helped her get online after Naw Wee Wah had arrived in Australia. She had used Facebook, Messenger and Snapchat before disengaging, choosing instead to contact the few family members she had in a refugee camp by phone. Despite her lack of interest in the internet, Naw Wee Wah explained how she still helped other Karen people in her age group learn how to use Facebook. “I help my friends who are newly arrived in Australia,” she said.

Naw Wee Wah’s willingness to help others reflects a wider trend among younger participants. Fourteen out of the 16 younger participants had helped other Karen who had settled in Australia to use Facebook and video calls. Another younger participant offered a different type of transnational form of assistance: she gifted family members in a refugee camp in Thailand a smart device on which they could talk. This was sent over in 2015, when video calling was becoming more popular and accessible. The only younger participant who did not offer any digital assistance to others was Tha Ku Htoo Bler, a 21-year-old male, who had lived in Australia for less than a year. He had followed his brother to Australia, which meant separating from his parents. This is an important point, because, as I explain in the next section, most young people helped their parents and other older relatives in close proximity to them.

Showing your parents: technology as a new language

Of the fourteen younger participants who had helped other Karen in Australia use smartphones, social media and video calls, 11 had provided such assistance to a parent or parents. The other three had not been able to. Naw Wee Wah, mentioned above as helping other newcomers to Australia, had lost her parents when she was younger. Lell Lell, a 22-year-old male, had also lost his mother and father, and was raised by his grandmother. He lived in Bendigo with her and was helping her speak with family in a refugee camp by way of video call. The other was Ku Ku Soe Paw, whose parents remained in a camp in Thailand. After learning to use Facebook herself, Ku Ku Soe Paw helped a sister-in-law call people through Messenger after arriving in Australia. Ku Ku Soe Paw hoped she could get her parents online so they could speak to her over video. “They will be much happier and will probably feel closer,” she said. These stories demonstrate that all of the younger participants who had been able to help their parents in Australia use smartphones and video calls had done so.

Various ways of helping

Andrade and Doolin (2016, p. 413) identify positive outcomes of ICT use for refugees as the abilities “to participate in an information society; to communicate effectively; to understand a new society; to be socially connected; and to express a cultural identity”. This model is relevant to considerations of how transnational communicative practices might enhance settlement experiences. Galperin and Arcidiacono (2019, p. 483) engage with the question of whether parents “learn from” or “lean on” their children when it comes to internet use, concluding that adults often rely on children to perform internet tasks for them rather than acquire skills from them.

This is a relevant discussion in terms of the assistance younger people in this project offered their parents. Much of the help younger participants gave their parents occurred in

suburban homes they shared. The installation of Wi-Fi internet – to use at any time – was a crucial moment for the participants. Its presence created the potential for rich experiences of real-time visual co-presence. Younger people were central to their parents’ experiences of this. Tha Ku Htoo Bler, a twenty-one-year-old male, observed that older people were dependent on younger Karen to use smartphones – and many remained isolated if they did not have such help. “Older people who live with their children can learn from them if they want to,” he said. “But for those who live alone, they can’t ask others for help.”

Younger people helped their parents in various ways. Sometimes they set up a Facebook account for a parent, and showed them what to do, perhaps using a newly acquired smartphone or tablet. Other times, they responded to their parents’ requests for them to call a family member overseas using their own account and device. In some cases, it was more a matter of a young person first contacting a distant family member then thrusting the smartphone into the hands of their mother or father. This is an example of *primary* and *secondary* interactions playing out in the same physical space (Goffman 1963) and demonstrates how interactions can collide in environments where physical co-presence and virtual co-presence are experienced simultaneously. All of this interaction was informal, evolving organically over time.

Saw Law Tha, a 19-year-old woman who had been in Australia for about four years, helped her parents use a Facebook account. While she had learned to use Facebook herself soon after arriving in Australia, it was about two years before Messenger introduced video and she began showing her parents. For participants without strong literacy skills, video calls presented more opportunities to communicate. Saw Law Tha helped her father talk to his mother, who had remained in a refugee camp. “They have a shop that has a Facebook account, so if we call that account, someone can get my grandmother,” she said. With Saw Law Tha’s oversight, both her parents used a Facebook account their son had set up for them. “Before they were able to use Facebook [Messenger], they were not happy living in

Australia,” she said. “But after I taught them how to use it, they were able to keep in touch with [my grandmother], and have contact with her every day, so they felt much better living here.”

Hser Pyo Way, a 20-year-old woman, had a similar experience. Although she learned how to use Facebook while still living in a refugee camp, it was not until eight months after her family arrived in Australia that she began showing her parents what video calls could do. It is not entirely clear why this delay occurred, beyond the fact that Hser Pyo Way had developed different communicative practices to her parents after settlement. Eventually, they asked her to help them better keep in touch with her grandparents who remained in Southeast Asia. “They were not able to talk to my grandparents [by video] without my help,” she said. “So, to begin with, I called for them, but later on, they could do it more by themselves. My dad still struggles.” Hser Pyo Way concluded that older Karen people needed more formal help, possibly even in an educational setting, to use the internet in the early stages of settlement. “They might need someone to help them with social media,” she said.

Len Wah Htoo, a 19-year-old woman, helped her father learn to video call after his friend set up a Facebook account for him. This was something she believed “a lot” of other young people were doing. Len Wah Htoo was very happy to help, though she was slightly concerned that her father sometimes “liked” posts on Facebook, and she feared he would share something unintentionally that might embarrass both of them. Many other older participants had not learned to use Facebook before being introduced to video calling.

For some younger participants, providing ongoing help was satisfying but difficult. Ner Moo Htoo Soe, a 25-year-old man, explained that helping his parents with technology made him happy. It was through his Facebook account that his parents spoke to relatives in Burma, who had a smartphone but limited internet access. He regretted that he was sometimes too busy to help. For some younger participants, help remained a feature of daily life. This seemed especially the case for younger people who offered their own devices and

accounts to their parents when they wanted to go online. Ner Moo Htoo said many young people shared their social media accounts with their parents. “Most of the young people do that. Not 100 per cent – not all of them.” This raises an important question about dependence and independence.

Lee Lee Wah, a 19-year-old woman, spoke of handing the device to her mother each time her cousins in Thailand showed up online. “I feel like even though I’m letting my mum talk with my cousins by Messenger video call, she doesn’t actually use Facebook. I don’t know why. They only talk. Then they finish.” One possibility for feeling this way is that her parents used the device simply like a telephone, rather than in the more interactive ways that apps allow. They did not engage further with social media or video calling or distinguish the applications from the device. They had not developed *smartphone habitus*. Nonetheless, Lee Lee Wah observed that such interaction made her mother happy. “She would keep in touch with them more, if she knew more about it,” she said.

Other younger participants engaged with the question of whether they were helping their parents with technology or just doing the work for them. For example, Ta Bler Aye, a 20-year-old woman, said she helped her parents to video call, but she doubted whether she was helping develop their skills. Ta Bler Aye had lived in Australia less than a year at the time of being interviewed and reflected a new type of transnational migrant. She had learned to use video calls in a refugee camp to speak with her sister in Australia. It was in the camp that she began helping her parents get involved in the conversations. “Actually, my parents weren’t using it themselves at this time,” she said. “I stayed beside them when they were using Facebook to have a conversation.” Ta Bler Aye and her parents later moved to Australia, leaving other family behind. Her role as facilitator of her parents’ video calls continued. “I don’t teach my parents ... how to use the internet or social media,” she said. “But I help them call people by Facebook [Messenger].” This was a task that Ta Bler Aye’s

sister and brother-in-law – now proximate kin – were responsible for when she was out of the house.

Some younger participants noticed significant progress in their parents' use of the internet, and their attitudes towards it. Kaw Thu Wah, a nineteen-year-old woman, recalled how her parents yelled at her, accusing her of wasting all her time on the internet, before she taught them how to use it. From that point on, they became regular users of it and were much more accepting of their children's technology use. Kaw Thu Wah said it was necessary to help older Karen simply because "our parents don't know how to use the internet". On the other hand, Kaw Thu Wah said she had no need to teach her younger sisters, who were in primary school, because "they just know it as well. They have friends who tell them". At the time of being interviewed, Kaw Thu Wah said her mother had begun speaking to another of her daughters in the United States on video call for up to three hours at a time. She had fully embraced video calling and was using it through a tablet. It was important for the family to be able to video call rather than speak to their family only by phone, Kaw Thu Wah said, because "I have a niece. If we can't see them, we have to ask [about her]."

Taw Boe's story: setting up Facebook for a parent

Helping a parent navigate technology often brought with it a range of emotions for a young person. Taw Boe, a 22-year-old woman, saw Wi-Fi connected in her home soon after she arrived in Australia with her mother and siblings. This was an exciting time; it meant speaking with her sister in a refugee camp in Thailand was suddenly a different experience. She enjoyed seeing their faces again through video as they talked. Taw Boe had learned how to use Facebook while in a camp, a few years before our interview, and warmly welcomed the chance to use Messenger. Her mother, however, was sceptical of the new connection into her house. Taw Boe recalled:

When she saw us use it [the internet] for the first time, she asked: “Why do you want a Wi-Fi connection? Why are you using social media?”

Taw Boe’s explanations to her mother about what social media could do were initially not enough to convince her that its presence in her home, where Taw Boe’s younger siblings also lived, was a good idea. Over the coming months, however, she began to win her mother over, simply by video calling in her presence. When her mother saw her other daughters through video, she began to realise what the technology could do. This was the catalyst in her becoming, as Taw Boe said, “interested in using Facebook”. Transnational video calls soon became communal affairs in their home. While that had great benefits for her mother, it created additional responsibility for Taw Boe, who became frustrated at constantly being asked to initiate a video call. She recounted:

Sometimes ... she [my mother] would come to my bedroom and say, “That one, that one [pointing to a profile picture] – can you call them for me?” It was so annoying. When I tried to sleep at night, I thought it would be so good to set up her own [account], so she could call everyone she wanted to.

This took time but was achievable. After about two years of living in Australia, Taw Boe set up a Facebook account for her mother. It was another six weeks before her mother wanted to use it herself. “Sometimes she used my Facebook account to contact people,” Taw Boe said. “I felt it was so annoying for me.” Eventually, her mother did begin using her own account to engage in video calls independently. Taw Boe’s responses to her mother are akin to what Hochschild (1983) describes as emotion management. Hochschild’s work developed ideas about the performance of the self in important ways, bringing the emotional aspects of individuals engaged in social interaction to the fore. Taw Boe’s experience of contained frustration – tempered by a desire and dedication to help her mother – was a type of surface acting that Hochschild (1983) recognised in the professional settings in which flight

attendants worked. Taw Boe's experience of helping her mother with technology shows how help to use digital technology can become a type of work performed in the home.

Taw Boe said her mother had felt at a loss in a new country – especially due to having left adult children behind – but that video calls had helped her feel more settled and even happier. “She didn’t know how to adapt to the new country. She found it very hard to live a new life,” Taw Boe recalled. “Most of the time, she wanted to go back to the refugee camp, saying, ‘I don’t want to stay here’.” For the first two years in Bendigo, Taw Boe said, her mother had spent two years at home, watching movies and longing for the refugee camp she had left behind. Taw Boe noticed a significant change in her mother’s mood after she introduced her to video calling. Taw Boe explained:

I think after using Messenger, she has been much happier because she knows how to press that one, how to communicate, and it also makes it easier for her to communicate and for [them] to see each other’s face and feel close to each other, even though she is far away from her children and relatives ... Now, she has told me that she doesn’t want to go back anymore. She feels happy here.

This section has demonstrated how younger people have helped their parents to video call. Furthermore, it has shown how this video calling has opened up new possibilities for older Karen migrants in Australia. This has sometimes meant seeing the faces of transnational family members – in some cases, their very own children – for the first time since separation, leading to more interactive and meaningful communicative routines. The video call has often increased even further in appeal once older migrants have realised they can see the faces of young grandchildren on the other side of the world – and interact with them in a way that was not possible through a voice telephone call. Such experiences are also reflected in the stories of older participants, which I turn to now.

Learning from your children: how digital help is received

Of the 14 participants in the older group, 13 had received help to use social media. In all these cases, this help had come from their child or children. All these children were either teenagers or young adults at the time of assisting the older participants. This help – primarily to video call, but occasionally also to use Facebook – often came some period after an older participant had settled in Australia or the child teaching them had learned how to use social media themselves. No participants in the older group had helped anyone else use social media or video calling platforms. But some of them did tell stories of other people in their age group – not interviewed for this study – providing such support to friends and partners. No one spoke of a parent, of any age, helping their child to use social media. This reflected that help to use smartphones and apps was mostly something younger people provided each other with before, or soon after, settlement, and something they offered older people in the longer term.

Various ways of being helped

Older participants did not always understand their children's internet use in the early stages of settlement. Some were suspicious of digital technology, while others were unaware of exactly what it was meant for. Over time, however, older participants such as Taw Boe's mother noticed the extent to which their children were engaging with the online world. A younger person's own transnational internet use often centred on social media interactions and video calls to family members or friends in other parts of the world. These calls often occurred in front regions (Goffman 1959) – communal spaces within a house, such as the living room.

Boe Loe Thar, a woman in her fifties, recalled the moment she saw her son involved in a video call. "I was so surprised the first time [I saw him using it]. I'd never seen anything like that," she said. "That you can talk to each other and see each other face to face is a bit surprising." Boe Loe Thar and her family had settled in Australia in 2009 – before

smartphones and social media were widely used among their community. Her son's introduction to social media came in 2010, when he was studying at an English-language school with other younger Karen migrants. Boe Loe Thar did not use video calls until years later when some of her relatives in Burma themselves acquired a smartphone. Her son then began helping her. "They now have phones and reception," Boe Loe Thar said. At the time of being interviewed she was solely reliant upon her son to facilitate video calls through his own account. "As an older person, it's kind of confusing. You can't do it yourself," Boe Loe Thar said. "You have lost your memory ... Young people can learn more quickly and easier than us."

Everyday reliance on children as facilitators of technology was also evident in other participants' responses. Eh Law Gay, a 57-year-old woman, spent four years in Australia before one of her daughters, also in Bendigo, introduced her to video calling. As detailed in the introduction to this thesis, it meant Eh Law Gay could speak with another of her daughters in the United States. The experience of seeing her "face to face" made Eh Law Gay happy, like she "lived close to her, not far away". For some time, however, the daughter who helped Eh Law Gay with Messenger determined when her mother could make transnational calls – and they did not live together. "Whenever I went to my daughter's house in Bendigo, she opened Facebook and we would talk to my daughter in the USA," Eh Law Gay said. Interestingly, she lived with two other children who did not help her use the internet. "If my son or daughter in this house helped me video call, that would be the easiest way of doing it," she said. The daughter who had taught her had also taught her father, Eh Law Gay's husband. Using his basic skills of being able to start a video call, he had begun taking over smartphone duties for his wife at home.

Ler Soe Bler, a 42-year-old father, said he had frequently relied on his daughter to help him use the internet but was gradually gaining independence. He was unusual among the older group for having learned the basics of Facebook in a camp through a computer, but it

was only in Australia that he had developed his skills. Ler Soe Bler assumed his daughter had learned how to use video calls from her friends. “Young Karen people are good at social media nowadays,” he said. “Now I am working, so I don’t have much time to learn about social media and use it.” Transnational video calling, with family in Thailand and the US, however, had become an important practice for Ler Soe Bler. “I can use it myself now,” he said. “My daughter created a Facebook group and taught me how to use it, and how to call three people at once. I feel happy, because it’s like a big conversation about daily things – daily life.”

Ner Too Soe was a 41-year-old man who had been in Australia for four years. For his first two years, he had voice called his parents in Thailand, and his siblings and friends in the United States. His digital-savvy teenage daughter then helped him embrace video calling. “My son created it. He is 16 years old. But after that, my daughter helped me to use this and press that,” he said. “I have been using it ever since. I like Facebook and Messenger ... I use it for communication.” For Wah Wah, a 47-year-old man, video calling was also a preferred way of contacting distant kin. With the help of his son, he had learned how to turn on a device, open Messenger, click on the profile pictures of people he wanted to talk to, and make a video call. He laughed when asked whether he might be able to help someone else use it. “If others ask me how to open it or how to ‘like’, I can do it,” he said. “But if they ask me how to create an account, I can’t.”

For some older participants, receiving help from young people was an obvious outcome of a settlement experience in which their children received better education than they ever had. Wah Wah was one who shared this view. “I never went to school when I was young and I didn’t know anything – how to write,” he said. “My son didn’t help me with anything when he was a child in the camp. Since arriving here, I’ve been happy that he is helping me back.” Another male participant, Ngway Ngwar, aged in his forties, expressed similar sentiments. “I feel good [asking my daughter to help me],” he said. “As Karen culture

goes, most of the parents have not been to school when they were young. So, we send our children to school and try to learn from them.”

For Ngway Ngwar, reliance on his daughter for technology advice was already proving more beneficial than computer classes he was attending at TAFE. He said:

I haven't really learned much from school. Whenever I go to computer class, it's just a short period of time. I don't have enough computer time. If they taught us longer, it would be better and I would be able to use it more.

Ngway Ngwar believed smartphone technology would become increasingly important. He envisaged, for example, that the bills he paid at a post office would soon have to be paid online. To some extent, he was worried he would not be able to meet the demands of a more digital society. But he took comfort in knowing he could ask his daughter for help.

Other older participants, such as 58-year-old male participant Law Say, were initially resistant to learn about new technology, thus they became their own barriers to smartphone engagement. “When I first arrived here, I didn't want to use social media, because I didn't know what it was,” he said. It was more than a year before Law Say's children began helping him. “After I started using it and realised I could call people on the video call, I felt like it would be good that someone had taught me when I first arrived in Australia.” Interestingly, Law Say's introduction to Facebook had occurred by accident when he had asked one of his daughters to help him with English. “Whenever I asked for help from them, they were always busy with their study and sometimes using Facebook. So, that's why I ended up using Facebook,” he said.

The challenges of such help can also be understood by considering the thoughts of Ki Thu Htoo, a 31-year-old woman who was much older than most of the younger participants and younger than all of the older participants. Her perspective reflects the insight of someone situated in between these two generations:

Some parents don't feel comfortable or they don't feel right just to have to ask the kids to do it for them. It can be very frustrating for them ... Sometimes the kids don't really want to do it, or don't have time to do it, or feel they don't have to do it. That's where the conflict is starting.

Receiving help from children was not possible for everyone. Kot Kit, introduced earlier as the man whose son was not yet old enough to teach him how to video call, had mixed feelings about the fact other Karen people in Australia had children old enough to help them use social media. "I feel happy, but also sad. My brother's children can help him with social media stuff. I want to learn something from my son, but my child is too little," he said. Koe Kit had sensed such technology had a lot to offer and believed his path to learning how to use it rested on his son. It was likely, he concluded, that his boy – who was in early primary school – would be able to learn smartphones and video calling before he could learn himself. Although he recognised that he would likely be a "little bit shy" about asking his son for help when the time came, Koe Kit considered younger Karen as having a responsibility to take care of their elders. "The Karen between 18 and 20 are the most intelligent. A lot of the older people learn from them. They can help the older people's lives become easier," he said. Koe Kit knew what younger Karen were capable of in a Western setting. He had seen them adapt more quickly to new surrounds and embrace technology. He had seen other young people helping their elders get connected. But he remained on the outer.

From language brokering to digital brokering: constructing real-time visual co-presence

In the transnational setting in which digital communication acts to reunite distant kin, real-time visual co-presence can be constructed, allowing intimacy to be experienced in various ways. With such construction, digital differences can widen. I argue that such differences, however, can create conditions in which those with the ability to use digital

technology are positioned to help others who do not have that ability. In the context of this study, it is first young Karen migrants who have helped each other use Facebook, which has led, sooner or later, to video calling. The second stage of help during settlement has involved younger people helping their parents use smartphones and video calls (and sometimes Facebook) – after they have already transitioned to such communication themselves.

The differences in these scenarios might be representative of digital divides based on age, geographical settings and in terms of when settlement occurred. But it is the response to these differences that is particularly interesting. I argue that the extent to which younger participants are helping their parents is closely linked to other types of cultural brokering they are performing after settling in Australia. Specifically, I argue that this digital assistance resembles language brokering, which is also occurring in the lives of participants in this study. To consider this further, I turn to this explanation, by Kam, Guntzviller and Stohl (2017, pp. 47-48), of what underpins language brokering (with my emphasis added):

Language brokering occurs because family members *lack familiarity* with the *new environment's mainstream language and culture*. They need assistance from language brokers to *successfully function in the new environment*.

The digital help younger participants provide their parents can also be considered as relating to *language and environment*. In the participants' new offline world, the mainstream language is English and the new environment is Bendigo, Australia. On the other hand, in an online world, where virtual co-presence is sought, smartphones, social media and video calling are the *mainstream language and culture*, and a digital space is the *new environment*. Interpreting the mainstream language in such an environment relates not to spoken language, but to the functioning of the smartphone and its platforms. If someone does not possess the digital literacy needed to access and engage with this new environment, brokering can help. A new type of brokering – *digital brokering* – assists people without the familiarity of digital technology to function. Digital brokering is not simply online language brokering, which

would suggest the same process being transported to an online setting and otherwise functioning as usual. Digital brokering, instead, is about supporting *access* to the digital environment.

Not only is digital brokering comparable to language brokering, the two can be intertwined. Expectations and practices of digital brokering are often entangled with expectations and practices of language brokering. I seek to demonstrate this by considering digital brokering in relation to both the wider cultural brokering responsibilities that younger participants engage in, and the expectations that older participants carry about their children's responsibilities to help them. I now detail some of this brokering and these expectations.

Settlement challenges

After settling in Australia, participants were faced with the challenges of integrating into an environment markedly different from a refugee camp. They were propelled, in various ways, into education, work, healthcare, retail and other social settings. Although they had significant and generous support from local refugee advocates, multicultural services and volunteers (AMES & Deloitte 2018), they faced many challenges as families. In this context, younger participants, as teenagers and young adults, began helping their parents settle into their new surrounds. Often, this meant helping them overcome language barriers. Gilhooly and Lee (2017, p. 153) have demonstrated that learning English “is still a major issue in the resettlement process” for Karen living in the US. In particular, language discrepancies between children and their parents are evident (Gilhooly & Lee 2017, p. 145).

Similarities can be seen in this study. Educational differences between the two groups were clearly evident, particularly in terms of spoken English. At the time of their interviews, all participants could speak some amount of English, but proficiency levels varied significantly, from the ability to express only basic greetings, to being able to engage in fluent conversations. Typically, younger people were more comfortable speaking with me in

English, but many were still hesitant to, and used an interpreter during their interview. Some older participants believed their children should help them overcome language barriers in Australia, due to their superior levels of education. “I have never been to school before, so it is very difficult for me to understand everything,” said Larr Larr Kwee, a 42-year-old woman. “I always need my children’s help. They are expected to help more in Australia.”

All participants had entered education upon arriving in Australia. Depending on their age, they had attended secondary school or TAFE. As part of Australia’s settlement programme, adults are eligible for 510 hours of English-language education (Sampson 2015, p. 102). Older participants spoke about learning English for the first time – or even attending school for the first time. Wah Wah, a 47-year-old man, described how daunting it was entering a classroom for the first time. The setting was an adult education centre in a suburb of Melbourne, where he lived before relocating to Bendigo. He recounted:

I found it very difficult. I also felt a bit sad, as I had never been to school. For the first month, the teacher had to hold the pen in my hand.

Six of the eight older male participants were studying English at TAFE in Bendigo, while the two others had studied there previously. One of those former students had left to instead learn in a religious setting, while the other had suspended his studies to pursue casual employment. Only two of the older female participants were still attending TAFE. The others had left to care for a sick partner, study at the same religious setting or work.

Some older participants spoke of having supportive teachers at TAFE and welcoming environments in which to learn. They enjoyed conversing with others and mostly saw the value in learning English and computer skills that would enable them to adapt to everyday life in Australia. But many still found it difficult. Par Thu Kot, a 52-year-old man, said he enjoyed his education, but found learning a new language immensely challenging. “It is very good to go to English class, but it is very hard, even though I have a good teacher,” he said.

“I had no English [when I came here]. I’d also never been to school before.” For Larr Larr Kwee, a 42-year-old woman, the challenge of learning English had at times made her feel sick. “It was a bit stressful,” she said, describing her initial classes at TAFE. “It made me feel dizzy. It was like I had a headache. I learned a lot at school, but when I got home, the English just disappeared.”

Younger people were conscious of the challenges that older people faced. Kaw Thu Wah, a 19-year-old woman who studied at TAFE, said older Karen needed much more help learning English than younger people did. Classes were something she enjoyed, but she was unsure about how much they were helping her parents, who could not read Karen language. Participants in the younger group had attended school in a refugee camp. They generally spoke of positive learning experiences in Australia – but many also found learning English difficult. Most of the younger group were aged 23 or under – many of them, in fact, were 19 – and remained enrolled in various types of education. Three younger male participants, aged between 18 and 21, studied English at TAFE. The fourth, aged 25, worked full-time. Seven younger female participants also studied English at TAFE, three were completing secondary school education, one had studied at university and the other did not specify what she was doing. A few also said they were in part-time or casual employment.

Education and financial challenges can in part explain why older participants tended to come to rely on younger participants for help with language – and also technology. Work and education responsibilities were often complex for older participants for a couple of reasons: first, because they had to provide income for their families; and second, because they were generally less familiar with educational settings than younger people tended to be. This is consistent with other research. In their 2012 study of Karen in New South Wales, Australia, Watkins, Razee and Richters (2012, p. 126) found that Karen women faced the challenge of making up an existing educational gap – having not gone to school when

younger – while also overcoming barriers to “social, vocational and educational participation”.

The younger participants in Bendigo seemed to have adapted to educational settings faster than the older participants. This improved the younger participants’ chances of formally developing their literacy skills and, informally, their digital literacy skills. In time, these skills enabled them to begin helping older people. Younger people recognised this and sought to help their parents how they could. Rarely was this recognised as payback for receiving their parents’ care as children but tended to be more associated with typical intergenerational exchange, especially as parents approached old age. Sometimes it was recognised as a power inversion that migration from the camps to Australia had brought about. In any case, often what emerged was cultural and language brokering.

Help with language

Some younger participants described helping their parents as an important part of Karen culture and a practical necessity in Australia. A sense of responsibility sometimes weighed on the mind of a younger person, especially if they were observing their parents’ struggles and isolation up close. Ner Moo Htoo Soe, 25, had been in Australia about eight years at the time of interview. His English was among the strongest of the 30 participants, and he spoke freely without the need for an interpreter. His advanced language skills seemed to have helped him connect with Australian society in a way his mother, whom he migrated with, had not been able to. Sensing her isolation, he felt responsible to help her adapt to life in Australia. “The easy thing for her is if I try to teach her how to speak, how to learn – because we stay in the house together,” he said. His own commitments, however, to his employer and his friends, sometimes made this teaching difficult.

Taw Boe, the 22-year-old woman who had set up a Facebook account for her mother, also provided other brokering to her. This included translating documents, and taking her to

appointments, where she interpreted what was said. “I have to take more responsibility, because life in the refugee camp and life in Australia are totally different,” she said. Len Wah Htoo, 19, said she was very happy to provide similar support. She helped her father attend appointments and go shopping, acting as a language broker. She believed other young people were generally willing to help in such ways because it meant older people could improve their English through exposure to the language.

Tha Koh, a 23-year-old woman, said she felt some disappointment that her own language skills limited the extent to which she could help her parents. She identified her English as more advanced than her parents’ but regretted sometimes not being able to offer sufficient language brokering to them. She could not, for example, read all of the letters that came in the mail. Tha Koh explained:

Sometimes I feel disappointed, because my parents are getting older. They put their hope in my siblings and me. I want to help them as much as I can, but sometimes when I can’t read the English, I am so disappointed because I want to help with everything.

Disappointment was noticeable in other participants who helped their parents. Hser Pyo Way, 20, had moved to Bendigo in search of a house for her parents and siblings who remained in Sydney. This scoping of a suitable place to live – property brokering, essentially – was part of a wider portfolio of responsibilities. She explained:

I also helped my parents with documentation. Sometimes, my parents would get a letter in the mailbox but couldn’t read it because they have never been to school before.

Sometimes I also helped them with their homework for their language [course] and took them to appointments ... I was a little bit busy.

Hser Pyo Way thought back to the care that her parents had provided her in the camp, especially when it came to paying school fees, and felt a duty to help them in Australia. “We have to help each other,” she said. Despite relocating for her family in an effort to help them

further, Hser Pyo Way still felt some guilt in doing so. Leaving her parents, she said, meant she passed her proximate brokering duties onto her younger sister, who was still in her mid-teens. “I want to help my parents, but don’t want my sister to have to do all the things for [them],” she said.

Transition to digital brokering

In such a context, it is not difficult to see how younger people’s brokering responsibilities have widened in scope to include digital tasks. Adding one informal brokering task to another or filling a gap where it was needed were outcomes in many of the participants’ homes. Lee Lee Wah, a 19-year-old woman, explained how the language brokering her brother provided their parents inspired her to offer them digital brokering. She said her brother spoke better English than she did, so she focused her attention on helping her parents with technology. “Because if I understand, I help; if they understand, they help,” she said. To Lee Lee Wah, this was simply something Karen people did, the evidence of which she saw all around her. “I see my friend helping her mother. And her mother helping her children. Helping each other.”

Alternatives to digital brokering

Some younger participants suggested that an alternative to helping their parents with technology might be more education in both a formal setting and informal Karen community setting. Saw Law Tha, 19, was “happy to help” her mother, when asked – and such requests came whenever she was unsure about how to use the technology. This was something Saw Law Tha did not think was unusual, though she felt it would be good if her mother could use Facebook independently. Saw Law Tha believed such independence was likely to be achieved through a combination of learning within a TAFE setting and less formally through connections with other people in the community. Both scenarios took the teaching and learning out of the home – and beyond the family.

Lee Lee Wah, also 19, agreed that teaching Karen adults about social media in a school setting was a good idea, while Ner Moo Htoo Soe, a 25-year-old man, also believed this would help them “feel more connected” to their distant family members. On the other hand, Len Wah Htoo, 19, believed a continued focus on her mother’s English at her TAFE college was more beneficial than social media classes would be. Better English, she said, would help her mother when she went shopping. “If she needs something, she can ask.”

Thar Ler Saw’s story: from language brokering to digital brokering

The experiences of Thar Ler Saw, a 59-year-old man, demonstrate how language brokering can lead to digital brokering – and, ultimately, help someone feel more connected to both transnational and local communities. For the first couple of years that Thar Ler Saw lived in Australia, he felt out of place in his suburban surrounds in Bendigo. He had spent 14 years in a refugee camp, where his wife had passed away. Speaking no English, he felt alienated when he arrived in Australia with his teenage daughter. He recalled trying in vain to read signs at the supermarket and to understand what cashiers were saying. Letters he collected from his mailbox went unread and Thar Ler Saw felt some distance from his daughter’s schooling experience due to his inability to communicate with her teachers. This resembles Gilhooly’s (2015, p. 12) study in which Karen settled in the US “cited lack of English speaking ability” as a barrier to their getting involved in their children’s education.

At the time of our interview, Thar Ler Saw lived with his daughter in a small flat. Over the course of three years in Bendigo, the two of them had helped each other adapt to their new home – and progress had been made. Thar Ler Saw’s daughter had improved her English markedly in that time, which proved crucial not only for her own experiences in a new social environment, but also for Thar Ler Saw’s. She had become a language broker to her father. Gradually, because of this, Thar Ler Saw began to feel more connected to the society in which he lived. Two years into their time in Australia, Thar Ler Saw’s daughter had also begun teaching him how to video call. His knowledge of social media was still

developing but had reached a point where he could talk to his friends using Messenger. As a result, Thar Ler Saw was also feeling more connected to his transnational community.

Thar Ler Saw believed it was necessary for young people to help their parents learn to use the internet. But he appreciated the challenges they faced in doing so. “They are responsible for looking after and helping their parents back,” he said. “But sometimes they are very busy, so we don’t ask for help. We understand that.” Thar Ler Saw’s story demonstrates the importance of his daughter’s increasing English-language and technology skills to his own life. His reliance on her – however implicit – demonstrates a younger person’s role as a cultural broker, of which both digital brokering and language brokering are core features.

Discussion: Explaining digital brokering, not digital divides

The numerous stories in this chapter have demonstrated the challenges Karen participants face in engaging in meaningful digital communication with family in other countries after settlement. Stories about how participants in this study have learned to use social media to improve transnational communication have demonstrated clear digital differences between younger people and older people. In this sense, it might be tempting to consider digital brokering simply in the context of something that helps to bridge a “digital divide” (Friemel 2016).

A first-level digital divide relates primarily to differences between internet users and non-users (Friemel 2016, p. 314), while a second-level digital divide refers to how variable levels of proficiency can be among those online (Hargittai, Piper & Morris 2018). Both could be argued to be relevant to this study – and worthy of exploring in more detail. Digital divides are often talked about in relation to the supposed advantages of “digital natives” – young people who have grown up with the internet (Hakkarainen 2015, p. 918). Most commonly, supposed digital natives have been born after 1980 and “are more sophisticated in

their usages of the Internet, smart mobile phones, and mobile devices than the prior generation” (Akçayır, Dündar & Akçayır 2016, p. 435).

Older people “are often considered to be on the ‘other side’ of the digital divide” (Ballantyne & Burke, 2017). This is often a feature of migrant households, where older people “tend to use online communication tools less frequently than the younger generation” (Ballantyne & Burke, 2017, p. 415). Cho’s (2009, p. 27) study of migrants from Burma, including the Karen, in New Zealand demonstrated that internet use was far more common among younger members of the diaspora. This resulted in a “knowledge and cultural gap” between children and their parents. Such discussions are compatible with this thesis, despite some ambiguity about what constitutes an “older” person. Studies of internet use differ in their parameters for determining what an “older person” is. Consequently, sample groups in studies about “older people” can vary considerably in age (Hunsaker & Hargittai, 2018, p. 3938). In such a context, “older” can consist of a number of highly variable life stages.

It is clear that age remains an important theme when considering digital differences. What is more striking in the case of this study, however, is *why* digital brokering has been the response to digital differences among participants. It is not accurate to say that digital differences result in digital brokering occurring. But this chapter demonstrates that such brokering can proliferate when language brokering already takes place. In the context of this study, therefore, it is more useful to focus on responses to digital differences than causes of it.

Digital brokering underpinnings

Digital brokering is a process that occurs *outside* of digitally mediated co-presence, not within it. It is physical co-presence – literal face-to-face interaction – in order to achieve richer forms of virtual co-presence. To explain this in terms of Goffman’s dramaturgical sociology (1959), digital brokering involves a cultivation of virtual co-presence through a face-to-face encounter involving proximate individuals. Digitally mediated co-presence

requires knowledge of and proficiency with technology. Before participants can interact in transnational ways, they must be able to access the interaction region itself. In participants' efforts to help proximate family members do this, they have engaged in what might be considered *teamwork* (Goffman 1959). This is the essence of digital brokering – actors helping each other to not just perform the lines but to access the performance space in the first place.

Several participants learned to use social media before coming to Australia. Some had a friend who taught them about social media as a way of keeping in touch with people leaving their refugee camp to settle in a Western country. Others considered it something fun to use – until they themselves settled in Australia and realised its potential for transnational communication. A number of young people were introduced to it by friends – peers about their age – soon after arriving in Australia. It was a culture of helping – a type of brokering to deal with the loneliness and uncertainty of a new life. Over time, as these young people provided more help to their parents, especially language brokering, there emerged a need for them to also offer assistance in the form of digital brokering. This was an extension of what they were already doing – helping their parents become more integrated into their new surrounds, to help them feel less isolated and lonely. But digital brokering was somewhat different. It was offering integration into a transnational social space.

Younger participants have played a crucial role in their parents' transnational communication, primarily through familiarising them with smartphones and video calling. This has allowed them to create important new links to digital spaces where old relationships can potentially flourish. Even with its obvious benefits, however, digital brokering is an extra responsibility for brokers. This responsibility brings with it a sense of pride and feelings of frustration. It can be empowering, making younger participants feel like they are helping. But it can also take a toll on them as they forge their own way in a new society.

Digital brokering is a step towards achieving integration in a transnational sense. Similar to the ways in which language brokering (and other types of brokering) have been bridges for an older migrant to access their new society (that is, their physical surrounds), digital brokering is a bridge towards more diverse transnational practices. Such mediation provides older Karen migrants more opportunities to connect – and reconnect – with distant kin from whom they have been separated. I argue that this does not come at the expense of integration into their new society. Instead, it potentially has the opposite effect – it can help to stabilise the older person's social world, making them feel more settled in their physical surrounds. I demonstrate this further in the next chapter.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how digital brokering has occurred in a Karen settlement context in regional Australia. Almost all participants in my study have received some kind of help from family and friends to use digital media. This has allowed them to connect with distant kin through video calls. Such a brokering process has first occurred among young people – friends and family members who are about the same age. Younger people have then helped their parents make a similar transition to social media. This has proved transformative, leading to more diverse experiences of virtual co-presence. In the next chapter, I explore the outcomes of these communicative changes, considering participants' experiences of real-time visual co-presence in terms of greater intimacy and happiness. I also explore how real-time visual co-presence interacts with other types of co-presence in ways conducive to diverse transnational communicative experiences.

Chapter 7: Seeing and knowing: intimate experiences of digitally mediated co-presence

Introduction

It is the central argument of this thesis that digitally mediated co-presence has helped to shape the settlement experiences of Karen participants in this project, bringing richness to their transnational family communication and contributing to feelings of contentment in online and offline surrounds. Digital brokering, introduced in the previous chapter, has helped this process, particularly by enabling participants to construct real-time visual co-presence using video calls. This brokering has also helped facilitate another type of digitally mediated co-presence, *ambient co-presence* (Madianou 2016), contributing to a multidimensional digital transnationalism for participants. In this chapter, I demonstrate how real-time visual co-presence and ambient co-presence intersect to provide richer ways of communicating with distant family, friends and communities.

Real-time visual co-presence: reconnected through video calls

Much of this thesis has emphasised the importance of the video call. This focus is grounded in an argument that the multi-dimensional features of *real-time visual co-presence* offer separated family and friends rich opportunities to communicate in meaningful ways. This section uses data from the participants' interviews to validate this argument in the context of a humanitarian migrant setting in regional Australia. In particular, I demonstrate how video calls provide spaces for communicative exchanges that resemble those that occur during proximate face-to-face interaction. This, I argue, is particularly important to participants seeking, in various ways, to be intimate with friends and family through transnational communication.

In the opening chapter, I introduced Eh Law Gay, who spent four years in Australia, longing to be with her daughter in the United States, before she began using video calls to speak with her face to face. Seeing her daughter again – something achieved through digital brokering – made Eh Law Gay feel close to her, and more comfortable living in Australia. “I felt much happier, because I was able to see her family through video call,” she said. “After the video calls, I felt more comfortable.” Despite the distance that remained between them, Eh Law Gay felt intimately connected to daughter. Eh Law Gay’s experiences were not unusual among the participants in this study, especially those in the older group. For a number of them, video calls – once accessed – were experienced as different to voice calls, primarily because the video calls enabled them to see each other’s face.

Many reasons for real-time visual co-presence

In Chapter Two, I built on the concept of *real-time co-presence* (Baldassar 2016), which itself stems from Goffman’s work. I introduced *real-time visual co-presence* to demonstrate the multi-faceted nature of the shared space created when two or more people communicate through video calls. Such calls are qualitatively different to other modes of communication. To explain how, I consider some examples of the way participants have experienced video calls and relate them back to Goffman’s understanding of social interaction. Eh Law Gay’s need to see her daughter’s face demonstrates one of many reasons that participants used video calls (see Table 5). Other participants spoke of video calls, and real-time visual co-presence, giving them a space in which they could engage with young nieces and nephews, whose language was still developing, meaning they communicated in more visual ways. Some participants used the space to discuss migration plans, while others spoke of video calls being important to building “stronger” and “closer” relationships. Taw Boe, a 22-year-old woman, sometimes used video calls to discuss remittances and health concerns with a sister in Thailand, while Lell Lell, a 22-year-old male participant, spoke of engaging in “everyday” conversations with his sister in a refugee camp. For Say Thu Soe, a

48-year-old mother, video calls had provided a site in which she could see her daughter's face again – after decades apart. (I detail their story in the next chapter.)

Table 5: Selected reasons for, and outcomes of, transnational real-time visual co-presence

Name	Age	Gender	Selected reasons for, and outcomes of, real-time visual co-presence
Tha Ku Htoo Bler	21	Male	Sees his parents and friends he misses
Lell Lell	22	Male	Has everyday conversations with a sister in a refugee camp
Soe Nay Thu	18	Male	Feels connected to his friends in other countries when “face to face”
Ner Moo Htoo Soe	25	Male	Talks with his friends in the US and Thailand
Kaw Thu Wah	19	Female	Sees her young niece still learning to talk
Ta Bler Aye	20	Female	Maintains “strong” relationships with her friends through video calls
Len Wah Htoo	19	Female	Sees her brother's young children
Soe Kell Soe	19	Female	Speaks with her friends who have settled in other countries
Saw Law Tha	19	Female	Talks with an older relative preparing to migrate to Australia
Ku Ku Soe Paw	23	Female	Speaks to her family and friends. Video allows her to “see what they are doing”
Ki Thu Htoo	31	Female	Speaks to a range of family and friends around the world
Lee Lee Wah	19	Female	Speaks to her cousins, and gives device to her parents so they can join the conversation
Tha Koh	23	Female	Maintains a close relationship with her uncle in the US
Taw Boe	22	Female	Speaks with her sister in a camp, discusses remittances and health concerns
Hser Pyo Way	20	Female	Communicates with her friends, hoping video will make relationships “stronger”
Naw Wee Wah	22	Female	Prefers phone calls to video calls
Ngway Ngwar	40s	Male	Speaks to his relatives
Koe Kit	44	Male	Has no access to video calls
Wah Wah	47	Male	Speaks “freely” with his son in the US, also showing him items and surrounds
Thar Ler Saw	59	Male	Has a niece in Thailand
Ner Too Soe	41	Male	Spoke to his parents in a camp, before they migrated to live with him
Ler Soe Bler	42	Male	Engages in group video calls with his family
Par Thu Kot	52	Male	Speaks to his children in a camp. They plan to migrate to Australia
Law Say	58	Male	Has young grandchildren in the US
Boe Loe Thar	50s	Female	Speaks with her family in Burma and Thailand
Eh Law Gay	57	Female	Feels “close” to her daughter in US when using video calls
Say Thu Soe	48	Female	Reconnected with a daughter she has not seen in decades
Twel Twel Taw Law	45	Female	Feels “happier” seeing her siblings through video calls
Larr Larr Kwee	42	Female	Believes video calls with her family and friends overseas makes “life much easier”
Kwal Wah Kee	44	Female	Sees her friends' faces “and what they are doing”

These examples demonstrate the diversity of experiences that video calls facilitate. The visual aspect of this real-time visual co-presence significantly enhances many of these experiences. Participants' video-calling practices demonstrate the responsibilities,

engagements, love, and need for emotional healing important after settlement. Real-time visual co-presence, achieved through video calls, plays an important part in the maintenance and strengthening of important relationships.

I return now to Goffman's work to develop a deeper understanding of some of these experiences of real-time visual co-presence. I start with Goffman's notion of *face*. Goffman (1967, p. 5) writes that in each social encounter in which a person finds themselves, they tend:

to act out what is sometimes called a line – that is, a pattern of verbal and nonverbal acts by which he expresses his view of the situation and through this his evaluation of the participants, especially himself.

Through its ability to reveal the face, video calls allow for important social roles to be performed. These are relevant to the range of activities reflected in Table 5. Participants can perform their roles as children, parents, siblings, aunts, grandchildren, uncles, aunts and friends. By seeing each other's face, video callers can engage in activities in which the conceptual *face* can be maintained.

Through video, these performances can involve both verbal and nonverbal acts. This allows for a range of communicative options, using a combination of visual and aural elements – interaction that resembles a face-to-face encounter. This makes real-time visual co-presence different from voice calls and text messages. Video shared on Facebook posts or as attachments in instant messages is also both visual and aural. The person who views or receives that video can respond to it, but this is not the same as interacting in real-time with another person *within* the video. Real-time visual co-presence provides such a space, further demonstrating how it varies from other types of communication.

The qualitative difference between a video call and a voice call, for example, is clear in the case of Wah Wah, a 47-year-old man, who spoke of video calls giving him the ability

to talk more freely with his son in the US. There was something about being able to see his son face to face that was conducive to longer, more meaningful conversations. “Before, I hadn’t seen my son’s face,” he said of voice calls made in the early stages of his settlement. “I had no idea what to talk about. So, the calls had been shorter. Through video calls, I can freely say what I want to say.” Again, this might be explored in the context of Goffman’s (1967) concept of *face-work*, which is a response to the sacredness of an individual’s “face” and efforts to preserve it. The importance of “face” as a metaphor of someone’s identity indicates the importance of face-to-face encounters creating conditions in which people feel like they can be themselves. Wah Wah’s experiences of seeing his son’s face, and showing his face to his son, granted him the freedom to be himself and to express what he wanted to.

Par Thu Kot, a 52-year-old man who spent two years making voice calls to two of his children in a refugee camp, said his transition to video calls had made him feel happier living in Australia. This, too, was because of the richness that the visual aspect had brought. “Video calls are a little bit better than phone calls, because we can see each other,” he said. “Ever since I spoke to them on video calls, I have felt much happier.” Other older participants also spoke of feeling happier once a younger person introduced them to social media, particularly video calls. For example, Twel Twel Taw Law, a 45-year-old woman, said she simply felt happy that a video call could allow her to be “face to face” with her siblings overseas.

The importance of seeing

For Ler Soe Bler, a 42-year-old male, video calls added a new dimension to the transnational conversations he had been engaging in since leaving a refugee camp. “Through the phone call, we couldn’t even see what was happening,” he said. “With video calls, we can know what they are doing when they are talking to us. I feel like it makes us close, even though we are far away from each other.” Participant Ner Too Soe, a father and casual worker in his forties, also described the difference a video call made to a transnational conversation with distant kin:

I feel like talking on video calls is better than by phone. We can see each other. We can see them and what they are doing when we're talking to them. I feel close to them. I'm happy they are doing fine.

These sentiments can be considered in terms of Goffman's (1963, p. 17) assertion that actors involved in focused face-to-face interaction must sense "they are close enough to be perceived in whatever they are doing". Recall Goffman's (1963, p. 89) suggestion that:

Face engagements comprise all those instances of two or more participants in a situation joining each other openly in maintaining a single focus of cognitive and visual attention – what is sensed as a single *mutual activity*.

Even though Goffman "stressed the relevance of spatial distance and the participants' orientation to their mutual positions" (Licoppe 2009, p. 1924), it is the "visual attention" that is striking when considering these participants' experiences of video calls. The video call challenges the importance of physical proximity in face engagements due to the cognitive and visual attention that can be achieved without it over distance. The spatial distance between transnational communicators becomes more relevant to the qualitative difference between video calls and other communicative options. In this study, the video call has allowed participants and their distant family members to hold each other's visual attention (not just their cognitive attention), resulting in more engaging mutual activities. Because video callers have been better able to perceive what each other was doing, these video calls can, indeed, be considered face engagements.

The importance of showing

Wah Wah also engaged in activities that amount to "showing practices" (Licoppe 2017). When he and his son spoke over video, they were able to show each other their homes and their possessions. These activities added depth to their conversations, often stretching them out longer. This suggests that it is not just visual attention that focuses on the face that

is important to producing digitally mediated co-presence, but also visual attention that focuses on a place or a possession. In his book, *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger (1972) demonstrates the importance of “seeing” to how a person settles themselves in their surroundings. Berger (1972, p. 7) writes:

Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak. But there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled.

In the case of “showing practices”, and guided tours of participants’ homes that have been described in other parts of this thesis, “seeing” is important to both the person being shown and the person doing the showing. Through showing and being shown items or homes, participants conversing through a video call develop an understanding of their own world and their distant family member’s world in new ways, beyond words that describe them during a voice call – or even a video call. These two worlds, in fact, combine to form a transnational world in which both people now exist. It is important, therefore, for each person in a conversation to be familiar with the other’s physical surrounds, because, in a way, they each belong to these transnational surrounds after settlement. Real-time visual co-presence allows a qualitatively different integration into a transnational world.

The visual attention that video calls grant to participants might also be viewed in terms of the *mutual entrainment* that Campos-Castillo and Hitlin (2003, p. 169) deem as crucial to co-presence. Their emphasis of “attention, emotion and behaviour” in co-presence situations underscores the importance of participants being *focused on*, rather than necessarily *physically proximate to*, each other. “Attention, emotion, and behaviour” might contribute to the “mutual entrainment” that brings those separated by distance together, binding them and carrying their interaction along, without it being reliant upon what is *said*.

In this context, participants might experience a synchronised state of focused interaction through what they *see*, not just what they *hear*. Again, this demonstrates the qualitative difference between video calls and voice calls.

Video calls – and the real-time visual co-presence they enable – are also notably different from *written* forms of transnational communication, which is significant in the context of the older participants in this study who do not have strong literacy skills. Younger participants in this study were generally more engaged with Facebook, email and text messaging than their parents were. Better literacy skills often meant video calls were integrated into more diverse communicative routines that greater resembled connected presence (Licoppe 2004) or polymedia (Madianou & Miller 2012) environments.

For older participants, text-based social networking (Davies 2012, p. 28) proved challenging and, for many, even impossible, thus limiting their options for transnational communication. The video call, however, offered another option, beyond a voice conversation. This is particularly important among a group whose membership includes some people who have not gone to school or learned to write in their own language. Even so, some of the younger group themselves expressed the importance of the video call to their own transnational relationships. For example, Ku Ku Soe Paw, a 23-year-old student, said seeing the other person's face during a conversation was crucial. "Because of that, we talk more," she said. "We know more about what they are doing. I feel closer."

The richness of face engagements

Ku Ku Soe Paw's sense of "knowing more" about a person as a result of longer conversations can be considered in terms of the accompanying gestures and non-verbal messages she shared through video calls. This is a significant aspect of the video call's ability to simulate a face engagement, in which two or more people are "maintaining a single focus of cognitive and visual attention" (Goffman 1963, p. 89). To explore this more, it is useful to

consider the differences between physically proximate face-to-face interaction and telephone calls. Thompson (2020, p. 5) discusses these differences, writing:

In a face-to-face conversation you use a wide range of symbolic cues, facial expressions and gestures as well as the spoken word, whereas in a telephone conversation, you have only the spoken word and your interlocutor must either speak or issue a constant stream of fillers to reassure you that he or she is still on the line and paying attention ... Without the fillers, the interaction is at risk of breaking down.

The wide range of communicative tools characteristic of a face-to-face conversation can be present in a video call, too. Provided the internet connection is stable and uninterrupted, the video call can potentially follow the same pattern as a face-to-face conversation. Indeed, “symbolic cues, facial expressions and gestures as well as the spoken word” (Thompson 2020, p. 5) can drive the conversation, or allow it to meander in a way that a voice call cannot. A video call does not need the “constant stream of fillers” to which Thompson refers.

This demonstrates the extra “space” that a video call offers for what Baldassar (2016, p. 149) describes as a “kind of passive co-presence”. This relates to the camera being left on while participants go about their usual activities in the home. On the other hand, this extra space might facilitate more dynamic and *active* ways of communicating, perhaps relegating the spoken word to a secondary, passive role. Examples of this might be when someone is leading their relative in another country on a virtual (and visual) tour of their home or when a child without much language is engaging through hand gestures and facial expressions. Without the forced and unnatural “stream of fillers” required to structure a voice call, the video call is a much more fluid communicative tool, resembling proximate, face-to-face interaction and face engagements.

This can explain some participants' accounts of video calls making transnational communication "easier and more convenient". For example, Ner Too Soe said his transition to video calls made his daily communicative practices much more accessible, contributing to his feeling more content living in Bendigo. "After using Facebook, my life has started feeling happier and more comfortable," he said. For Ner Too Soe, it had been a long two years in Australia before his children helped him video call. Transitioning to real-time visual co-presence especially improved his communication with his parents, who had remained in a refugee camp in Thailand, before later joining him in Australia. Ner Too Soe described how video calling transformed his experience of separation:

It was a big change. Before I could use Facebook and Messenger, I only sometimes spoke with my mum. Since then ... I noticed myself talking to my parents more and more. It became easier and more convenient.

Real-time visual co-presence and intimacy

It is fitting to speak about the richness of these experiences in terms of intimacy. Marlowe, Bartley and Collins (2017, p. 98) have demonstrated how young people from an ethnic minority background in New Zealand use social media "to maintain and augment relationships across geographically dispersed family networks". In particular, "synchronous audio-visual technologies" – that is, video calling – helped these participants experience feelings of proximity, or being there, over long distances. One participant, for example, said video calls "make it more intimate because you can see their faces and reactions and stuff" (Marlowe, Bartley and Collins 2017, p. 93).

Pananakhonsab's (2016) study of cross-cultural romantic relationships further emphasises the ways in which video calls can contribute to feelings of intimacy over long distances. In that study, relationships involving people from different parts of the world were maintained through a combination of physical co-presence and virtual co-presence practices,

the latter often across borders. One participant described seeing “facial expressions and bodily movements” through video as helping couples feel “emotionally closer to each other” (Pananakhonsab 2016, p. 152).

This is true of participants in this study, too. Table 5 and the examples above demonstrate the importance of video calls in facilitating activities that contribute to participants feeling “closer” to distant family. This closeness can be considered in terms of everyday conversations, playful interaction with a young child and highly emotional reunions. Demonstrating the importance of such communication, I return to Jamieson’s (2011, p. 1) understanding of intimacy as something that describes “the quality of close connection between people and the process of building this quality”. Jamieson (2011, p. 3) observes that intimacy is characterised by “a wider repertoire of practices” that stretch beyond someone sharing their feelings through conversation. Intimacy comprises close association, trust, and practices of loving, caring and sharing (Jamieson 1998, p. 7).

The video call routines in which participants engage are part of an intimacy-building process. Participants love, care, share, build trust and simply spend time with each other, in close association, through the private spaces that video calls provide them. These various activities constitute repertoires of practice (Jamieson 2011) when it comes to intimacy. These practices are doubtless only one part of an even wider repertoire of intimacy practices the participants engage in, online and offline.

Real-time visual co-presence as distinct from other virtual co-presences

The importance of the video call in providing a space in which a range of intimacy practices can be performed is an important part of the qualitative difference between real-time visual co-presence and other types of virtual co-presence. To discuss this further, it is worth revisiting one of Jamieson’s doubts about the extent to which physical co-presence can be substituted for by other types of co-presence. As introduced in Chapter Two of this thesis,

Jamieson (2013, p. 18) argues that for some people, being physically co-present is more important than “disclosing” intimacy and can be a way to “both express and enable intimacy”. Jamieson (2013, p. 18) writes:

The research literature reveals instances in which couples claim love, shared knowledge and deep mutual understanding, despite also noting that they have little need for talk and say very little to each other.

Jamieson’s (2013) argument that virtual co-presence cannot compare with such a state of physical co-presence is valid in terms of the type of virtual co-presence to which she refers. This includes quite contrived social media activity like “poking” other users (which was an early feature of Facebook). Certainly, no form of virtual co-presence can entirely simulate being there physically, especially in terms of distant family members being able to experience the sensation of touch and feel the warmth of each other’s body. The importance of real-time visual co-presence, however, is that it can simulate most other things about a face-to-face encounter. It allows for synchronicity of voice and face; it can integrate gestures and other non-verbal communicative tools into the conversation; it can create a space where interaction can meander; and it provides private spaces where those talking can, potentially, divulge all of their deepest feelings. Although not an absolute substitute for physical co-presence, real-time visual co-presence is a significant step towards it.

The significance of this step is fundamentally based on real-time visual co-presence’s ability to replicate important aspects of face-to-face interaction in which two people “maintain a single focus of cognitive and visual attention” (Goffman 1963, p. 89). This is what separates it from other forms of virtual co-presence and allows for diverse communicative experiences in which intimacy practices can be performed. It is worth further outlining other types of virtual co-presence in order to emphasise this point more. To do this, I refer to four main types of communication that facilitate virtual co-presence, as theorised by Baldassar (2016, p. 153). These are video calls (what Baldassar referred to as facilitating real-

time co-presence), text messages (which might be referred to as *discretionary co-presence*), voice telephone calls; and social media posts. In all four of these examples, physical proximity as a requirement for co-presence has been transcended, and in the case of transnational relationships, is not possible anyway.

It is only real-time visual co-presence – achieved through video calling – that fulfils the requirements of a face engagement in the way that Goffman saw it. This is demonstrated through his description of the “single focus of cognitive and visual attention – what is sensed as a single *mutual activity*” (Goffman 1963, p. 89). The video call offers the mutual engagement, or entrainment, of two people, engaging simultaneously, with the presence of the “wide range of symbolic cues, facial expressions and gestures as well as the spoken word” (Thompson 2020, p. 5) that feature in face-to-face interaction. Other forms of virtual co-presence differ in that they lack the visual aspect or the temporal synchronicity of a mutual engagement; they involve text-based interactions; or they centre on asynchronous artefacts (Hogan 2010), such as photos or video, posted to social media accounts, often to wide audiences.

Real-time visual co-presence limitations

People, of course, engage with different types of communicative technology for a range of reasons. Not everyone seeks intimacy and, indeed, some people might choose communicative practices that allow them to avoid it. Likewise, intimacy can be experienced through many forms of virtual co-presence – from voice calls, to instant messages. In the case of this study, it is important to emphasise that while real-time visual co-presence offers a distinct experience of intimacy, a video call is certainly not the only way for transnational communicators to be intimate. It is also important not to overstate the importance of video calling on participants’ overall settlement experiences, despite it clearly having positive effects.

Reconnecting with distant kin, after all, is not a neat solution to all the challenges of migration. Law Say, a 58-year-old man, said being able to speak to family in the US through video had made him feel happier in Australia – but not completely. “I’m still having trouble with English, so that’s the main reason I’m still not really happy living here.” Law Say had been in Australia less than three years at the time of being interviewed. His limited English skills were bothering him; they contributed to his feeling isolated and “stuck”. “If I could speak English and understand what people are saying, I would feel happy living in Australia,” he said. “I would be able to do whatever I want.”

Video calls could only do so much for some of the other participants, too. They offered a certain intimacy that stretched beyond a voice conversation – but were ultimately not a complete substitute for physical co-presence. This demonstrates that real-time visual co-presence is a step towards physical co-presence (and away from other forms of virtual co-presence) but that the distance between the two remains significant. For example, Kwal Wah Kee, a 44-year-old woman, lived in Canberra before relocating to Bendigo in search of a Karen community she could interact with in person. She had begun using video calls a year before her interview. “It has made me feel much happier living my new life in Australia, because I can communicate with friends who live overseas by video call – and see them face-to-face,” she said. Even so, Kwal Wah Kee viewed a “real community” – that is, an offline one – as more important than an online community. To find that, she had felt compelled to leave Canberra for Bendigo. At the time of her interview, about 20 other Karen people were gathered in her backyard outside, sharing food, talking together and laughing. Kwal Wah Kee had found her community.

The importance of real-time visual co-presence is not its ability to wholly substitute physical co-presence, but to provide face engagements that replicate face-to-face encounters in ways that other forms of virtual co-presence do not. My reason for considering the qualitative differences between real-time visual co-presence and other forms of virtual co-

presence, then, is not to declare real-time visual co-presence better – but to emphasise its versatility. As demonstrated in this section, video calls can make participants feel “closer”, their relationships “stronger” and their interactions “easy and convenient”. They can facilitate everyday conversations and significant emotional reunions. Real-time visual co-presence’s ability to replicate many aspects of face-to-face interaction provides much potential for a “wider repertoire of practices” (Jamieson 2011, p. 3) of intimacy to be performed. This, I argue, is why many participants in this study have engaged so much with video calling technology to see distant family members’ faces, strengthen relationships and have simple, everyday conversations. It is not surprising that a number of participants, once experiencing the intimacy of these exchanges, have reported feeling happier living in Australia.

Beyond ‘not knowing’: ambient co-presence after digital communication

Online worlds are partitioned into *private* and *public* domains (Zhao and Elesh 2008). After using the concept of real-time visual co-presence to consider the largely *private* spaces of the video call between family members, I now engage with *ambient co-presence* (Madianou 2016), which some participants experienced when present in both private and public online spaces. In the context of participants in this study, a private space can best be understood in terms of a Messenger video call (and real-time visual co-presence) and a public space can be thought about in terms of Facebook posts to networks of family and friends.

As demonstrated, many participants spoke of experiencing intimacy through video calling in ways that helped them feel closer to their distant family members. These feelings endured after devices were turned off. Participants took comfort in knowing a face-to-face conversation was potentially the click of a button away (even if that still meant seeking help from a child to achieve it). Participants’ feelings of passive connection to their transnational social networks can be understood in terms of *ambient co-presence* (Madianou 2016). Ambient co-presence is a type of mediated co-presence that, unusually, does not rely on

“mediated interaction” (Madianou 2016, p. 183). It is, instead, peripheral to social interaction. Madianou (2016, p. 186), whose work on polymedia and smartphones I introduced earlier, developed ambient co-presence to explain “the peripheral awareness of the actions of distant others, made possible through affordances of polymedia environments”.

Madianou explains ambient co-presence through the story of a transnational mother named Donna who looks at her Facebook account throughout the course of a day, allowing her to see what her children are posting. This helps her to know what they are doing, even if the posts are not targeted at her (Madianou 2016). Donna then comments on photos and posts regularly about her children, contributing to a state of ambient co-presence (Madianou 2016). Ambient co-presence, Madianou argues, can co-exist with mediated co-presence, which Donna demonstrates by still engaging in lengthy video calls with family members (Madianou 2016). The distinction between these two co-presences is also evident among Karen participants in this study.

Madianou (2016, p. 196) writes of the “reassuring nature of ambient co-presence”. Even though the digital experiences of the participants in this study only partially resemble those of a polymedia environment, the significance of the video call in combining the aural, the visual and the immediate is powerful enough to achieve feelings of intimacy that last beyond the call itself. Throughout the video call, a participant can gauge how their distant family member or friend is, as well as perhaps gain insight into their daily routines, surrounds and plans. These insights can be gained through signals that distant kin both give and give off (Goffman 1955). Importantly, video calls can also be part of a richer social media environment in which participants can “know” what their distant kin are doing, even after the call has ended. This is possible through monitoring a Facebook newsfeed and interacting with posts on it. Even for those participants who do not use Facebook itself, a video-calling application such as Facebook Messenger allows users to potentially see when someone was

last active, or to see a green light that tells them they are online. All this can contribute to feelings of “knowing” without a new video conversation being initiated.

This ability to “know” is in contrast to the “not knowing” I introduced in Chapter Five when talking about Boe Loe Thar’s separation from her husband during civil war. This brings me to Madianou’s (2016, p. 196) second point relevant to this study: that an important part of ambient co-presence is the “anxiety that often emerges in its absence”. In the context of this study, the absence of ambient co-presence is both relevant to the pre-digital age in which participants were displaced from their villages and separated from family members, and an early settlement context in which they have yet to reconnect digitally with those they have left behind. After digital brokering, ambient co-presence can remove at least part of the anxiety of “not knowing”, through access to status updates and other posts, as well as access to information about when someone was last online. This information can reassure someone seeking to find out how a distant family member is and be passed onto others through physical co-presence. I now demonstrate the effects of this on participants in this study, using examples from both pre-digital and post-settlement stages of their lives.

Tha Koh’s story: two different kinds of separation

Tha Koh, a 23-year-old woman, did not get the chance to say goodbye to her parents after fleeing her village in Karen state for what would be the last time. Aged just 11, she had already grown familiar with the process of running into the jungle to escape hostilities between the military and Karen insurgents. On this occasion, her intentions were the same: to avoid government soldiers who often stormed violently into Karen villages. In her family’s haste to flee into the jungle on foot, Tha Koh was separated from her parents. Left with only her uncle and one of her sisters – and with what they believed was no option to turn back – she began a journey to the border and beyond. After several nights sleeping in the forest, the three of them made it across the Thai border into a refugee camp where Tha Koh remained for 10 years.

It was the early 2000s. The lines of communication between refugee camps and villages in Karen state were not strong. For Tha Koh, establishing contact with her parents – wherever they were – seemed impossible. So, she and her sister sat and waited in the refugee camp for any sign to filter through that their parents were alive and well. The possibilities that came from not knowing circled around in Tha Koh's head:

I was worried about my family. I wondered whether it was possible for us to meet again.

Are they alive? Sometimes we were so sad because we were apart from our parents. It

was hard for us to see each other. I just spoke to my sister face to face and we would cry

a lot. I couldn't do anything to see my parents at that time.

Life was bearable in the camp. Tha Koh, a Christian, was able to attend school and noticed a marked difference between schools there and those back in her village. For starters, she had books, pens and pencils. Importantly, Tha Koh, her sister and their uncle felt safe from attack. But the unanswered question of where her parents were remained a source of constant torment. With no mobile phone, let alone an internet-connected smartphone, Tha Koh had no sense of whether her mother and father were still alive. This situation presents a different ambience to what Madianou (2016) describes. It is an atmosphere characterised by absence, rather than presence. For Tha Koh, the absence of her parents, and a sense of not knowing where they were or how she could contact them, informed her daily life. It was a situation that might be described as the opposite of ambient co-presence.

Tha Koh's disconnection also reveals the inequalities of mobile phone distribution in the early 21st century. Mobile phones became more widely available from the 1990s and the first internet-connected handset arrived on the market in the early 2000s (Charlesworth 2009). But Tha Koh's communicative options were significantly limited. She could hope someone else in a refugee camp, or a nearby town, had access to a telephone, through which she might be able to find out if anyone had seen or heard from her parents. Alternatively, she could ask someone travelling between her camp and her former village to pass on the

message that she was safe in the hope it would reach her mother and father. For more than a year, none of these options bore fruit and she continued to wait.

Tha Koh's story ended happily. Some 18 months after her arrival in a refugee camp, she was told that her parents, along with the rest of her siblings, had safely arrived in another camp along the border. Her parents were sick and had been sent to the camp hospital. A concerned camp leader had inquired about their family and helped spread the word through the camps that they had two missing children. A link was soon made, a reunion was organised and Tha Koh soon found herself breaking down as she embraced her parents again. She recounted that moment:

I was so happy to meet them again. I was so excited. We told each other, "It's good to see you", but also the tears came out. They were happy tears not sad tears, because we missed each other ... I was very happy to meet my family again because I knew they had all survived and had escaped from the soldiers.

It was more than eight years before Tha Koh was granted a visa to resettle with her family in Australia. By the time she was interviewed for this project – less than a year after she had left Thailand – the spread of smartphones and social media had transformed long-distance communication both in refugee camps and in the West. When I met her in the house she shared with her parents and siblings, Tha Koh reflected on the technological transformation that had occurred in her short lifetime. In her house, she said, a Wi-Fi connection and smartphones had become part of her everyday experiences – to the point that it would now seem strange without them. That 18 months she had spent not knowing the fate of her family seemed increasingly unlikely to repeat itself in the age in which she now found herself:

At that time, if I had Facebook or social media like today, it would have made a big difference and I would have been able to speak with my mum and sisters.

Indeed, Tha Koh found herself in a new, digital age, one that was increasingly unrecognisable to the old one. But one particular aspect of her new social life in Australia resembled her early experiences in the refugee camp: she was still experiencing separation from family; her uncle, the man who had led her through the jungle to the safety of a refugee camp, had resettled in the United States. Due to the distance, Tha Koh had resigned herself to probably never seeing him in person again. Through social media, however, Tha Koh had fostered an online relationship with her uncle, often speaking on video call. “Using the video call makes me feel closer to my uncle because we both can see each other while we are talking,” she said. “I feel it is a real conversation when I see him on video face to face.”

Technology had eroded some of the distance between them and replaced Tha Koh’s absent longing for closeness with her uncle with a feeling of everyday familiarity with what he was doing. This extended to social media more generally, giving her a sense of “permanent accessibility” characteristic of connected presence (Licoppe 2004, p. 152). Her smartphone had served to “heighten the awareness of significant others” (Madianou 2014, p. 678), such as her uncle. “Even if we don’t meet again,” Tha Koh recounted, “I’ll still feel close because I’ll still be in touch with him.”

Separated and reconnected

Other participants had similar stories of separation, which included long periods of “not knowing” what had happened to their family. These were often in contrast to their contemporary situations in which separation remained, but a level of “knowing” about the wellbeing of distant family members was possible. Larr Larr Kwee, an older participant, lost contact with her family after fleeing their village, but later reunited with them in a refugee camp. Her second separation, resulting from her migration to Australia, had brought less anxiety about the wellbeing of family members long distances away. Facebook, she said, made her life much easier. She could keep in touch with anyone she wanted to overseas, especially her daughters in the refugee camp.

Ler Soe Bler, a male participant who had lived in Australia for three years, was born in 1974. As a teenager, his family had sent him to another village to study. Consequently, he was not with them when they fled their village due to persecution from the Burmese military. Ler Soe Bler lost contact with them, unaware that they had settled in a village close to the Thai border. “I was always trying to ask about my family to travellers. But I got no answers. I was always upset,” he said. Later, life in his new village also became unsafe, forcing him to flee across the Thai border, for the promise of some relative safety in a refugee camp.

Even after seeking that sanctuary, Ler Soe Bler remained alone; he knew nothing of his family’s fate. He constantly worried about his parents and siblings. His father was a member of the KNU resistance, so Ler Soe Bler often wondered whether Burmese soldiers had killed him. “I always had an upset feeling, especially when I saw other people having a great time with their family,” he said. “I couldn’t do anything at this time except pray to God.” But one day, things changed: his family arrived in his camp. They were safely reunited – and Ler Soe Bler’s days of worrying whether they were even still alive were over. “I was the happiest person. Nothing had happened to them – like I had worried about.”

For Ler Soe Bler and his family, however, more separation was to come. He had moved to Australia with his wife and two teenage daughters about three years before our interview. Two of his brothers were living in the United States, one of his sisters was living in Australia and three brothers and one sister lived in Thailand. Several months before our interview, his father had passed away in a refugee camp, where Ler Soe Bler’s mother remained. The loss of his father was immense, but Ler Soe Bler had at least been able to remain in contact with him until the end. “When I was separated from my family [the first time], I didn’t have any way of contacting them,” he said. “It was such an unhappy time. I had to worry a lot about my parents. They were the two people that I loved the most in my life.” With his father now gone, Ler Soe Bler could at least keep in contact with his family members overseas to provide and receive support. Technology, he said, made this possible. “I

don't have to worry anything about them, because I can know straight away what is happening to them.”

Kwal Wah Kee, a 44-year-old woman, left her village as a teenager in search of work in neighbouring Thailand. With her family near destitute, Kwal Wah Kee found informal employment as a domestic worker and sent money home. She remained in this work for about one year, before military attacks on her village intensified and she returned home to help her family. “There was nothing that could help me communicate with my family at that time. There was no phone, no technology,” she said. “My dad came up there and told me they could no longer live in the village anymore.” Upon arrival home, Kwal Wah Kee – still a teenager – used her capital gained from cross-border travel to help her family flee their village and trek towards a refugee camp in Thailand.

During her interview, Kwal Wah Kee reflected on how she felt closer to her village in Burma after moving to Australia than she had the first time she had left home to work in Thailand. The main factor in that was an ability to use Facebook and share video calls with family members who remained living there. “Even though Australia and my village are a long way apart, I still feel close to my village,” she said. “But when I worked in Thailand, even though it was a short distance from my village, it was so hard to communicate with my family. It made it so hard to feel close to them.”

Second separations and reconnection barriers

Many older and some younger participants experienced a second separation. Those who had fled their villages in Burma had been separated from kin a first time, and many who had migrated to Australia separated from someone when leaving a refugee camp. In the period between participants fleeing a village and leaving a camp for Australia – often between 10 and 30 years – smartphone technology had radically transformed transnational

communication, disrupting the experience of geographical distance as a barrier to a sense of closeness between two people.

Participants spoke of the vastly different world they now inhabited. Their physical surroundings in Australia differed greatly from their previous homes in Southeast Asia. But the geography of their social worlds had also transformed significantly. Some were physically further away from their family members than ever – but technology made them feel closer than they had during periods of separation in a pre-digital age. Participants had the potential to know distant kin were safe even without directly interacting with them. But breaking down such barriers was dependent upon access to technology – at both ends. Even after digital brokering in Bendigo, barriers to transnational communication often came in the form of disruption at the other end. This was evident among some participants' stories of trying to contact family or friends in Burma.

Younger participant Taw Boe, 23, expressed her sadness at not only being separated from a close friend from a refugee camp, but losing contact with her altogether after she moved to a village in Burma without internet access. Taw Boe said:

I want to communicate with her as she is one of my dear friends from the camp ... but I can't. It makes me feel upset, because I can't see what she is doing and how she is living her life. Is she having a safe life or not? It makes me really sad.

Taw Boe explained the difference between her friend in Burma and her other friends – across multiple locations – with whom she was connected on Facebook. Even when she went periods of time without having a direct interaction with these other friends online (that is, a video or instant message conversation), Taw Boe had some understanding of how they were. “Some of my friends are posting pictures [on Facebook] and I know what they are doing and what they have been doing, even though I have not been in touch with them,” she said. This example of ambient co-presence was an experience that Taw Boe regretted not being able to

share with her friend in Burma. “Because she hasn’t got any Facebook account, or internet, it is so hard for me to know what she is doing,” she said. “It also makes it hard for her.”

Despite the intimacy he had achieved through video calls with his son in the US, Wah Wah, 47, also worried about family members he could not contact in Burma. “I don’t know what they’re doing, and whether everything is OK with them,” he said. “Are they healthy? Do they have enough for themselves?” Despite the distance to the US being greater, he was less worried about his son. It is reasonable to suggest that with conflict continuing in Burma, Wah Wah would, of course, be more concerned about his relatives there. However, he spoke about his inability to easily get an update on them as something that added to his worries. This was something to which younger participant Saw Law Tha, 19, could relate. Migration to Australia for her meant losing touch with her great aunt, whom she had previously been able to travel to Burma from her refugee camp to visit. “She has no connection. I feel really unhappy when I miss her and want to speak with her,” Saw Law Tha said. “I sometimes feel worried about her and wonder if everything is OK.”

Access to digital technology does not guarantee ambient co-presence with an entire network of important family members and friends. Digital brokering can do only so much in bridging some communicative divides. Nonetheless, the ability to look at someone’s Facebook profile or at how recently they were active on Messenger can provide comfort that a person is likely, at the very least, safe from harm. The monitoring of someone’s social media account, a form of benign social surveillance (Sinanan & Hjorth 2018), can serve as a basic welfare check. For the transnational humanitarian migrant, who might still have kin living in unsafe refugee camps or conflict zones, such an activity carries significant meaning and serves an important purpose (Robertson, Wilding & Gifford 2016). Such practices, and others that facilitate ambient co-presence represent something that can ease concern when a video call is not practical.

Conclusion: the power of seeing and knowing

The examples in this chapter of *real-time visual co-presence* and *ambient co-presence* have demonstrated the importance of participants *seeing* their family and friends face-to-face, and *knowing* they are safe. Video calls, and the real-time visual co-presence they facilitate, allow participants to connect in ways characteristic of face-to-face encounters and physical co-presence. They can *hear* what the other person is saying, *see* how they are expressing it, and *know* more about them through greater access to gestures, signals and surroundings. They can view someone in their own home, surrounded by their possessions – and by other people, perhaps a young grandchild who cannot yet speak. Although real-time visual co-presence and video calls cannot bridge the physical distance between two people, they allow them to engage in a range of practices conducive to intimacy. Participants' stories in this chapter have demonstrated the positive impact these video-calling routines can have.

Ambient co-presence can potentially bring comfort to participants who have relatives in refugee camps, Burma or other countries – provided those people themselves have digital connections. It can allow participants to know more about where their family members are, how they are feeling, and whether they are safe, through indirect interaction such as Facebook feeds and online activity information. In the case of this study, ambient co-presence can exist without digital brokering, but has the potential to be enhanced by it. For example, a young adult might tell their parents about a relative in a refugee camp they have spoken to. Digital brokering might then involve that young adult teaching their parents how to video call with that relative. The ambient co-presence would occur thereafter, when the parents can see for themselves whether their relative is or has been active online. For those who experienced the trauma of separation in a pre-digital age, this type of peripheral co-presence seems especially important.

The use of smartphones, social media and video calls has helped participants like Tha Koh and Ler Soe Bler engage in transnational communicative routines that were not possible during the precarity of their refugee journeys. Different types of digital co-presence have provided space for participants to not only communicate effectively, but also to engage in performances of family. With reference to the local Karen festivals discussed in Chapter Four, such spaces also allow for the performance of tradition and culture. The stability of these routines stands in contrast with the uncertainty of the participants' earlier lives.

In the context of this study, digital brokering has enhanced participants' ability to experience digitally mediated co-presence. Although not a solution to all issues of access and separation, digital brokering has opened up participants in this study to diverse experiences of co-presence that offer many opportunities for intimacy, security and solidarity among those connected. The physical distance that separates participants from important family and friends in other countries remains significant, but diverse processes of digitally mediated co-presence are redefining what it means to be close. In the next chapter, the conclusion to this thesis, I conceptualise digital brokering further, engaging with questions of what it means in the context of the participants in this thesis. I also consider what possibilities and implications digital brokering has in terms of application in other contexts.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

Introduction

Say Thu Soe's story: mother and daughter reunite after decades apart

I open the conclusion to this thesis with the story of Say Thu Soe, a 48-year-old woman who reunited with her daughter, through a video call, after decades apart. This account of a mother seeing her child's face again after so long revealed itself in a quiet suburban home, in what was a largely unremarkable street in a regional Australian city. It was one family's story – and it involved only a few people – but it captured the effects of separation caused by forced displacement. Furthermore, it demonstrated the extent to which people carry with them the emotional toll of humanitarian migration years after their physical journeys have ended. It was one of the most compelling stories I heard during my fieldwork.

Say Thu Soe was the twenty-seventh person interviewed for this study. Early in her interview, she spoke of not really using social media. "I'm not interested," she said, referring in particular to Facebook. "My son uses it. He never shows me anything. I never ask him." Going by her initial responses, I expected that to be the end of our conversation about transnational communication through smartphones, social media and video calls. It seemed Say Thu Soe had little to contribute to my emerging understanding of digital brokering and the importance of real-time visual co-presence.

But then Say Thu Soe spoke about her daughter. "Whenever I talk about my daughter in Thailand, I cry," she said, with tears forming in her eyes. "It is a happy crying." Say Thu Soe explained how more than 20 years earlier, she had left her young daughter in the care of her ex-husband's family, before she left their village in Burma and crossed the border into Thailand. After spending almost a decade in a refugee camp, Say Thu Soe was able to resettle in Australia. She was further away from her daughter than ever before.

By then, Say Thu Soe had remarried and given birth to a son – but her daughter remained on her mind and in her heart. “After I left my daughter with my mother-in-law, I never had communication with her until I came to Australia. It was a long time not communicating with my daughter after I fled.” It was a disconnection that caused her great sadness. Not until 2015, while living a world away from her village in Burma, did Say Thu Soe begin sensing that a reunion with her daughter was possible. It started when Say Thu Soe reconnected with some childhood friends – other Karen people whose migration journey had led them to Bendigo. She suddenly had a direct line back to the village she had left years earlier:

I asked for a phone number for my village. I called my sister in the village through mobile phone. My sister told me that my daughter was in Thailand, in Bangkok. My sister gave me her number, and I got back in contact.

Say Thu Soe and her daughter quickly agreed to take their discussion into an online setting. But Say Thu Soe did not know how to do that. So, she went to her son, then 16, for help. “I really missed her and wanted to be in touch with her. I wanted to see her face through video.” From their new home in Bendigo, Say Thu Soe’s son helped facilitate an emotional family reunion for his mother, through video calling. (Say Thu Soe explained that she had made her earlier comments about not using social media because “it is not my account and it is not me making the call”.) Her son quickly became the facilitator of video calls between the long-separated mother and daughter and developed a connection of his own with the sister he had never met.

Say Thu Soe, with tears in her eyes, explained how video calls had – in part – mended her broken heart and changed her life in Australia:

After we were reunited, I was so happy. There were tears of joy. Since using video calls, I have felt much happier compared with before, because I can see my daughter face to face. I still feel like, “Is this real?”

Say Thu Soe’s happiness, however, was incomplete. Real-time visual co-presence achieved through video calls was better than no contact at all – but for Say Thu Soe, nothing would beat physical co-presence. After all that time apart, she felt a longing to be there with her daughter, in person. “Even though I can see my daughter on Messenger, I still feel like I want to go back and see her face to face,” she said. At the very least, such a meeting now seemed possible.

Stronger relationships through digital brokering and real-time visual co-presence

I chose Say Thu Soe’s story to open this concluding chapter for two reasons. First, her story of separation and reconnection was at once both deeply personal and wholly relatable, not just to people for whom forced displacement has torn asunder their family, community and village, but for anyone, anywhere, who can imagine themselves faced with such adversity. Second, Say Thu Soe’s story captures the essence of what this thesis is about in conceptual and theoretical ways. The main arguments I have made throughout this thesis, and which I tie together in this chapter, centre on the importance of transnational digitally mediated co-presence in a humanitarian migrant setting; the emergence of real-time co-visual presence, through video calls, as an important part of transnational intimacy practices; and the usefulness of digital brokering as a way of helping to facilitate real-time visual co-presence. All of these themes are evident in Say Thu Soe’s story.

That story is one of great possibilities – the most significant being that Say Thu Soe might one day see her daughter again in person. Such a physical reunion with family members is something many participants in this study hoped they, too, would experience one day. But Say Thu Soe’s story, like those of many other participants in this thesis, is already

one of great outcomes. These outcomes relate to improved transnational communication and stronger relationships. Smartphones, social media and video calls have made them possible. Digitally mediated co-presence, real-time visual co-presence and digital brokering have allowed older migrants who cannot text message to see each other; young children who cannot yet talk to engage visually with a grandparent's face; and many others to feel an everyday connection to family members in other countries. These digital practices have not proven perfect solutions to the challenges of third-country resettlement. But they are significant – in the same way that Say Thu Soe's reunion with her daughter over video remains hugely important, even if they do not meet again in person.

The impact of real-time visual co-presence and digital brokering

In this thesis, I have explored how two groups of Karen humanitarian migrants in a regional Australian setting have used smartphones, social media and video calls to engage in transnational communication. In this conclusion, I summarise my findings, focusing on the two main contributions to scholarship this thesis makes. The first is awareness of the practices of what I have termed “digital brokering”. The second is the extension of scholarship on digitally mediated co-presence with reference to humanitarian migrants and their use of video calls to achieve real-time visual co-presence. In this section, I return to research questions I posed in the introduction, which help me to explain these two main contributions. These three questions are:

1. What are the impacts of social media and smartphone use on the transnational communicative experiences of Karen who have settled in a regional Australian city?
2. What role do generational differences play in experiences of such technology?; and
3. What is the relationship between transnational communication and digitally mediated co-presence?

The findings, especially those relating to real-time visual co-presence and digital brokering, relate to all three of these questions. For that reason, I foreground the findings, in turn providing answers to the questions, rather than addressing each question individually and repeating information.

The transformative effects of smartphones and social media

Smartphones, social media and video calls have transformed the transnational communicative practices of participants in this study, a group of Karen humanitarian migrants living in Bendigo, Australia. I established that 30 participants involved in this study had a desire to be connected with family members and friends in other countries. (The remaining two participants, not discussed in this thesis, have reunited with all four of their significant kin in Australia.) This thesis has detailed the ways in which almost all participants, Say Thu Soe among them, used video calls through a smartphone or tablet to reconnect visually with family and friends in Burma, Thailand or Western countries where they had been resettled. At the time of the interviews, only one of the 30 participants was not able to use smartphones and video calls for transnational communication. Once participants were able to adopt such technology, many felt their social networks were more settled.

Recall, for instance, Lee Lee Wah, the young woman who remained hopeful that her cousin – “the best person” and her “best friend” – would one day migrate to Australia from a Thai refugee camp to live with her in Bendigo. Until that day came, Lee Lee Wah took comfort in seeing her cousin’s face over video and showing her around her house. Through real-time visual co-presence, Lee Lee Wah had moved a step closer to actually being there with her cousin. Then there was Taw Boe, a 22-year-old woman who helped a parent share video calls with another daughter. This kind of digital brokering was a feature of settlement for many participants and was significant in smartphones and their associated communicative apps emerging as a new type of “social glue” (Vertovec 2004) for this group of humanitarian migrants.

It is also worth again mentioning Eh Law Gay, a 57-year-old woman I introduced at the very start of this thesis. After difficult times early on in Australia, she found happiness after reconnecting with her daughter in the United States through video calls. Real-time co-visual presence made her feel close to her daughter again – and comfortable enough to want to keep living in Australia, a long way away from her. “I felt much happier, because I was able to see her family through video call,” Eh Law Gay said. Many humanitarian migrants are separated from important family and friends during the resettlement process (Robertson, Wilding & Gifford 2016) and, furthermore, often face barriers to digital communication (Brown, Hussain & Masoumifar 2019). Eh Law Gay’s story demonstrates that these conditions have been present among participants in this study. This underscores the importance of smartphones and social media in this humanitarian migrant setting.

Stronger, closer and more intimate

Real-time visual co-presence achieved through video calls had a positive effect on many participants. This is shown in Chapter Seven. Seeing the faces of relatives in other countries changed conversations – as did interacting visually with a young grandchild or giving someone a virtual tour of a home. Participants spoke of using video calls to make relationships “stronger” or to feel “closer” to family members. For many, there was something in seeing the other person’s face that helped achieve this. Real-time visual co-presence was often central to participants’ efforts to make transnational communication with family and friends in other countries part of their everyday practices.

I have demonstrated how such communicative practices presented opportunities for intimacy in an online space to diversify beyond the constraints of a voice call or a text message, contributing to a richer “repertoire of practices” (Jamieson 2011, p. 3) being performed. In various ways, this made some participants feel more comfortable living in Australia, demonstrating that a transnational perspective of “refugee integration” should also be considered in terms of digital media access and cross-border social connections.

It is important, however, to consider what new challenges digital brokering and real-time visual co-presence might bring. Being able to communicate freely with family in another country does not guarantee happiness and improved relations. Baldassar (2015, p. 88) argues that greater access to digital technology “increases not only the desire for regular transnational family contact, but also the obligation to be in touch”. This can bring with it expectations about the frequency of contact and level of care provided transnationally, and feelings of guilt if such obligations are not met (Baldassar 2015). Younger participants in this study expressed feelings of frustration, disappointment and even guilt at sometimes not being able to help their parents with challenges of settlement such as learning English, reading letters, finding better accommodation or learning how to use the internet. Little, however, was said about feelings of obligation towards family members in other countries. Further research would help to understand what feelings of obligation exist.

The ambience of knowing

Being able to know whether a relative in another part of the world had recently been active online contributed to feelings of comfort for some participants. Wrapped up in smartphones and social media use, this ambient co-presence was demonstrated through stories of participants such as Tha Koh. In a pre-digital age, she had fled through a jungle with her uncle to the safety of a refugee camp, not knowing for more than a year whether her parents were still alive. In a digital age, she lived in a suburban house in Bendigo with her parents, speaking with her uncle in the United States through video calls – and being able to follow his other activities through social media. This type of ambient co-presence is important for some participants whose digital communicative environment expands beyond the video call.

Maintaining identities online

Increased use of smartphones meant participants, especially those in the younger group, were also engaged with Facebook. This is evident in Chapter Four, in which I provide examples of mainly younger people posting images of Karen cultural festivals on their Facebook timelines. Participants posted photos of these events, which included performances in traditional Karen clothing, for transnational Karen audiences and to express their cultural identities. This demonstrates the ways in which local festivals, attended by Karen people and other members of the community, became transnational events. It also underscores the importance for participants of expressing Karen cultural identity in both a new third-country setting and a transnational one. In this context, participants might be engaging in some form of ethnocultural co-presence.

Generational differences and digital brokering

This thesis has demonstrated that generational differences have been significant among participants in terms of how smartphones, social media and video calls have been accessed and used for transnational communication. Of significance is the different journeys participants have taken to adopting this technology. This is where generational differences were noticeable. Participants in the younger group (those aged 30 or under) had learned from their peers how to use smartphones, social media and video calls, either in a refugee camp or soon after arriving in Australia. On the other hand, participants in the older group (those aged 40 or over) had learned from a younger person, often a child or children.

Chapter Six explained in detail how younger people often brokered their parents' smartphone, social media and transnational video calling experiences. Almost all participants in the older group had received help from their children to use video calls. This occurred in informal ways, often alongside language brokering (Bauer 2016). The presence of language brokering was a catalyst for me to identify digital brokering and draw comparisons between

these two types of assistance that younger people were offering their parents. Digital brokering was often performed in the family home. This involved a young adult child either setting up a Facebook account for their parent or allowing them to use their accounts and devices. Tha Ku Htoo Bler, a 21-year-old male, observed that older people were often dependent on younger people to use smartphones. “Older people who live with their children can learn from them if they want to,” he said. “But for those who live alone, they can’t ask others for help.” Lee Lee Wah captured the sentiments of many young people in saying that Karen people simply helped each other when they needed to. “Because if I understand, I help; if they understand, they help,” she said. “I see my friend helping her mother. And her mother helping her children. Helping each other.”

Some older participants became more independent smartphone users than others. This depended on the extent to which they were able to develop a *smartphone habitus* – that is, learn to engage with the internet and apps. This allowed some participants a greater ability to carefully choose how they communicated with family members in other countries. In the context of experiences of intimacy in transnational interactions, having this ability to choose is important (Alinejad 2019). In some cases, however, participants still relied heavily – or wholly – on their children. Younger participants’ effort to help get their parents connected to their transnational social networks through social media created both independence and dependence. Some older participants had learned how to video call their children and did not need ongoing help. Others were not capable of using Messenger when their children went out; either they could not use the application itself, or their son or daughter had taken the device with them.

Real-time visual co-presence as transnational integration

Marlowe (2019a, p.1) argues that social media and video calling can “potentially transform local resettlement experiences as people maintain significant and ongoing relationships with transnational networks”. Marlowe’s (2019a, p. 7) digital ethnography of

refugee-background migrants in New Zealand found that digital connections were “foundational not only to their well-being for resettlement but also to their participation in New Zealand”. This is where the transnational concepts I introduced early in this thesis are particularly relevant and useful. Having a stable transnational network, I argue, is an important part of “successful resettlement”. If a humanitarian migrant cannot be integrated into an online world, they are at risk of social exclusion. In this context, familiarity with smartphones, social media and video calling becomes an important part of integration. The options for face-to-face interaction and intimacy that real-time visual co-presence offer through video calls can help humanitarian migrants feel more settled in their new physical surrounds. This is demonstrated through the experiences of participants in this study.

Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004, p. 1003) argue “that the incorporation of individuals into nation-states and the maintenance of transnational connections are not contradictory social processes”. I would argue, in fact, that they can be *complementary* social processes. An example of this might be Eh Law Gay, who has learned to use video calls to reconnect with her daughter in the United States and as a result feels happier living in Australia. Her speaking with her daughter’s family in America is a transnational practice, but it does not make her antisocial in relation to her life in Australia. The comfort those video calls bring Eh Law Gay might result in her being more willing to embrace life in her physical surrounds.

Experiences with video calling and real-time visual co-presence are one aspect of the settlement experience for humanitarian migrants. Larr Larr Kwee, a woman in her forties, demonstrates this point well. She explained during her interview that a transition to video calls had made her happier, but so, too, had gaining employment and making more friends in Australia. She believed that all those things contributed to her feeling at ease in a new country. “I felt much more comfortable after I got a job, and learned how to use Facebook,” she said.

According to Andrade and Doolin (2016, p. 414), social inclusion “is a multidimensional, relational, and dynamic process”. Larr Larr Kwee’s experiences demonstrate such multidimensionality, particularly because, after two years, she was becoming more integrated into both her physical surrounds – the wider community in Bendigo – and the virtual spaces in which communication with her family took place. The positive effects of video calling are clear but are only one part of a wider settlement experience.

The significance of smartphones and video calls

The examples above demonstrate the importance of smartphones, social media and video calling to this group of Karen humanitarian migrants in regional Australia. All participants wanted to engage with technology that enabled real-time visual co-presence with transnational family members. Only one of the 30 could not. The other 29 kept in touch with many family members and friends in other countries, though some experienced challenges reaching those in villages in Burma where connectivity and digital literacy barriers rendered communication difficult or impossible. The practices that participants engaged in once connected ranged from everyday conversations, to significant family reunions after decades apart. They demonstrate the importance of humanitarian migrants getting connected in the early stages of settlement in a third country.

Findings in this thesis establish that transnational digital communication is an important part of humanitarian migrants’ settlement experiences. Such communication supports the argument that transnational activities can offer an “enduring solution” (Van Hear 2006) for those who have been displaced, at least once durable solutions such as security and shelter have been found. In that sense, the challenges of settlement endure long after resettlement. Transnational communication, therefore, is an ongoing response to the challenges of a humanitarian migrant’s enduring separation from family.

This thesis offers insight into the role of digital technology in supporting meaningful transnational communication. Consideration of such communication might strengthen appreciation of humanitarian migrants as actively shaping their transnational networks in a way that improves their settlement experiences. This thesis also offers organisations tasked with supporting humanitarian migrants to settle in a third country an opportunity to consider their own role in helping to support such communication.

This thesis is optimistic in its presentation of the effects digital technology can have on humanitarian resettlement and transnational communication. The findings, related to digital brokering and real-time visual co-presence, highlight the emerging possibilities for families to connect across distance, and exist in virtual spaces in ways that can help foster wellbeing. At a micro-level, smartphones and social media offer young people and their families more opportunities to engage transnationally in ways not available to previous generations of refugees. On a macro-level, this creates stronger, more connected transnational networks of people, spread across conflict zones and villages in Burma, refugee camps in Thailand and suburban homes in third countries. Smartphones, social media and video calls, once accessed, offer the humanitarian migrant more agency to define their social networks in ways that powerfully influence everyday lives and relationships.

The optimism of this thesis, however, should not completely overshadow the transnational connection barriers that remain. Digital inequality, indeed, is something that can be experienced sharply at the micro-level, between two people who simply want to talk. Recall, for instance, Taw Boe's regret that she had lost contact with a close friend who lived in a village in Burma without internet access. Such disconnection remains a reality for a number of participants in this study and is particularly relevant for those with important family and friends living in Burma, where someone might be without a strong enough signal to make a video call, or have no internet connection at all.

Finally, on the topic of optimism, it is important to return to a point I made in Chapter Three about the type of data collected during the fieldwork process. As I discussed in that chapter, participants often spoke in optimistic ways about the settlement process. They were respectful towards me as the interviewer and positive about life in Australia and what digital technology could offer them in terms of transnational communication. This study has been developed in a way that honours the participants' narratives. It is important, however, to acknowledge that such narratives, told to an "outsider" in the context of short research interviews, cannot definitively represent the complexity of the settlement experience. The optimism of this thesis, therefore, must be viewed in a broader refugee and settlement context, one characterised by immense challenges.

Theoretical contribution: real-time visual co-presence as intimate face engagements for humanitarian migrants

I now outline the theoretical contribution this thesis makes: emphasising the importance of real-time visual co-presence in a humanitarian migrant setting. In Chapter Two, I proposed the concept of *real-time visual co-presence*, to describe the shared communicative space of a video call. Extending on Baldassar's (2016) concept of real-time co-presence, this new term emphasises the immediate (indeed, real-time), aural and visual elements of a video call, and what is created and experienced when these elements combine.

Real-time visual co-presence, facilitated by way of video calls, is a qualitatively different type of communication than other forms of virtual co-presence. The difference is not simply a result of a visual element being added to a voice call. Instead, real-time visual co-presence not only demonstrates the power of *seeing* and of *hearing*, but also the importance of *knowing*. As demonstrated in Chapter Seven, video calls allow participants to experience a real-time visual co-presence that is rich with opportunities for the performance of intimacy. "Knowing" is gained through the performance of these practices (and is

complemented by the “knowing” that ambient co-presence provides). These practices of intimacy arise from the conditions that a video call creates: a face engagement that replicates many aspects of the highly versatile face-to-face encounter.

A digital age has transformed communication, expanding the meaning of co-presence, which, stretching back to Goffman, has often been talked about in terms of physical settings and mutually engaged people who are proximate to each other. Technology has stretched co-presence over distance, meaning a face-to-face encounter has become just one of numerous ways of achieving co-presence with someone. This has led to, among other things, *text-based social networking* (Davies 2012) and a proliferation of social media. Faster internet and a significant increase in smartphones in the second decade of the 21st century, however, have reasserted the importance of face engagements and face-to-face interaction – through the video call. As demonstrated in the experiences of participants in this study, this reassertion is especially important in a transnational communicative context.

In Chapter Two, I highlighted Baldassar’s (2016, p. 153) observation that types of virtual co-presence, “while different, are no less real than physical co-presence” (Baldassar 2016, p. 153). While this is true, it can also be said that virtual co-presences vary in their resemblance to physical co-presence. I argue that real-time visual co-presence is especially “real” in the way it simulates focused face-to-face interactions, therefore meeting Goffman’s requirements of a mutual engagement and focused interaction. This is demonstrated through Goffman’s (1963, p. 89) description of the “single focus of cognitive and visual attention – what is sensed as a single *mutual activity*”. The video call offers the mutual engagement, or entrainment, of two people, engaging simultaneously, with the presence of the “wide range of symbolic cues, facial expressions and gestures as well as the spoken word” (Thompson 2020, p. 5) that feature in focused face-to-face interaction. Face engagements themselves, I argue, can increasingly be seen as interaction that is not contingent on participants being in close physical proximity. Cognitive and visual attention can occur over distance.

Real-time visual co-presence combines, among other things, synchronicity of voice and face; gestures and other non-verbal communicative tools; spaces where interaction can meander; and privacy, where all matter of personal feelings and stories can be verbalised. In various ways, other forms of virtual co-presence lack the visual and aural synchronicity of a mutual engagement, relying on text-based exchanges, or asynchronous artefacts (Hogan 2010), such as photos or video attachments. This results in qualitatively different interaction. Real-time visual co-presence's versatility lies in its similarity to the face-to-face encounter, where a diverse range of communicative practices is possible in the one space. These possibilities, in turn, create the space for a range of intimacy practices to be performed through video calls. This is particularly important for humanitarian migrants during a settlement phase in a third country, especially if they do not have opportunities for physical co-presence or the ability to engage in text-based interaction. This is demonstrated through participants' own experiences of transnational communication.

Real social situations in real-time

To make a final point about the importance of real-time visual co-presence, I return to Goffman's use of the "theatre" metaphor to describe "real social situations" (Goffman 1959, p. 247). It might be tempting to use the metaphor of the stage to also describe the space that a video call creates. That space itself, however, is less a metaphor than a substitute for, or a replication of, the physical setting. It is not perfect in its replication, but nonetheless, this space facilitates *real* social situations (Goffman 1959, p. 247). This thesis demonstrates the extent to which these situations have real consequences for participants. Real-time visual co-presence is, therefore, aptly named, not just because it happens to be "live". Video calls facilitate real-time visual co-presence, creating significant social situations that are of real importance to humanitarian migrants.

Conceptual contribution: digital brokering

Digital brokering is a specific outcome of engagement with digital technologies, recognised in this thesis as occurring in the context of refugee resettlement. Thus, this thesis, through its focus on transnational communication, offers a contribution to refugee studies. I now outline digital brokering in more detail. Findings in this thesis demonstrate that digital brokering is occurring among participants interviewed. Digital brokering, I argue, is a type of assistance one person offers another during face-to-face proximate interaction. It occurs in the context of physical co-presence – and involves a participant trying to help another to achieve a state of digitally mediated co-presence with distant kin. Digital brokering is a suitable term because of the way in which it involves smartphones and various apps. It is not merely Facebook brokering, video call brokering or smartphone brokering, none of which captures the full essence of what brokering shows itself to be in this thesis. Digital brokering is multi-dimensional, including all of these elements in various ways.

I conceptualise digital brokering as a type of cultural brokering; it is similar to the function that language brokering plays in a migrant family. It can involve teenage and adult children – and possibly people younger than that. Like language brokering, it can involve the children of migrants. Digital brokering can differ from language brokering, however, in the ways it forges transnational rather than local connections. It provides opportunities for its recipients to connect – and reconnect – with family members in other countries. But I argue this does not have to come at the expense of integration into a new society. Instead, it can stabilise a recipient's social world, helping them settle in their surrounds.

Digital brokering, in the transnational context of this thesis, is likely a response to three needs. These are: first, a person's need to communicate with distant family members; second, their need to access technology that facilitates better quality communication than they are already able to engage in; and third, their need to be assisted to use that technology.

The second of these conditions is particularly important – after all, someone may be content to simply speak on a mobile phone without an internet connection, even if they can use video calls. Digital brokering is relevant to the participants in this study because of the relationships they have sought to maintain after settlement in Australia, but which are now transnational. Anyone needing to communicate over distance might benefit from becoming a recipient of digital brokering, meaning it is not inherently transnational. But for transnational family members who may never see each other again in person again due to, among other things, visa restrictions, the stakes are higher.

Types of digital brokering

The child-parent (or adult child-parent) relationship is my main focus of digital brokering in this thesis. I argue that digital brokering among participants serves three main purposes. First, it helps them integrate into a new environment (a virtual space) in which they can engage in important interactions with family members. Second, it potentially allows them to express a cultural identity to transnational audiences. Third, it contributes to their feeling more settled in their host country. This is reflected in interviews, in which participants spoke of their positive experiences of speaking face to face through video calls, and their feelings of being settled, comfortable and even happier in Australia afterwards.

Digital brokering can accelerate as other cultural brokering, especially language brokering, occurs. Interviews demonstrate that brokering work for younger participants has not only increased in a smartphone age but also diversified. Younger participants in this study sometimes expressed frustration at the amount of help their parents needed, and disappointment and guilt that they were unable to provide it all. But they also expressed feelings of pride and satisfaction at fulfilling the “duties” that came with helping their parents. They regularly showed themselves to be empathetic to their parents’ needs and cognisant of the fact that such needs were accentuated after settlement in Australia. Most of all, many spoke of helping in whatever ways they could.

Younger participants were capable of teaching only what they knew. Like language brokers, who are not necessarily fluent in the dominant language, younger participants were not always highly skilled digital users – but their skills were good enough to help their parents. This meant that those learning were helped, but also in ways bound by what might have been the limits of their broker's knowledge. It was often Facebook that young people were introduced to before, on or shortly after arrival in Australia. This led many to transition to Facebook Messenger – and so, when they came to offer brokering to their parents, it was often by using these same platforms.

Peer-to-peer brokering

The findings in this thesis pose an interesting question as to whether digital brokering is necessarily intergenerational. After all, in the early stages of settlement, young people were teaching other young people how to use social media. They were not naturally disposed to teaching their parents how to video call. Rather, they learned themselves before brokering for their elders. Whether brokering is necessarily intergenerational, therefore, depends on whether this first stage of teaching, in which the younger person learns from others, qualifies as brokering.

One thing to consider here is the duration of the help provided. In most cases, younger participants said their initial learning process was brief. Their peers had set them up and sent them on their way. Through experimentation, they improved their social media skills relatively quickly by themselves. In contrast, some older participants had spent more time learning from their children, while others had become altogether reliant on them. A comparison can be made to language brokering here. It has been observed that the work of a language broker “may increase over time as adolescents develop greater linguistic and cultural competencies” (Dorner, Orellana & Jimenez 2008, p. 516). This can encourage parents to become “dependent on their children” (Bauer 2016, p. 24). Such a scenario seems conducive to a family home, where a Wi-Fi network allows easy internet access, and much

digital brokering occurs. In contrast, none of the participants indicated that young people were relying on other young people for extended periods of time outside the home.

It can be said, then, that younger participants received a type of digital brokering, but one that is not on the same scale as the digital brokering that they, in turn, have provided their parents. That is not to say that digital brokering between young people in the same age group could not expand significantly in scope, just that, in the context of this study, it is the smaller of two digital brokering processes, both in terms of its number of recipients and its duration. The main focus of brokering in this context, therefore, is the kind children provide their parents – but digital brokering itself is not necessarily intergenerational.

Possibilities for digital brokering

Digital brokering will interest scholars focused on settlement issues and mediated interaction. It provides insight into the richness of the transnational connections that humanitarian migrants maintain after settlement in a third country; the benefits of digital practices that facilitate communication with family in other countries; the extent to which humanitarian migrants drive their own digital learning; and the potential for transnational communicative practices to positively impact settlement experiences. It is likely useful to policymakers and service providers in the field of humanitarian migrant settlement. Two particular issues stand out here: first, the extent to which digital brokering can add to the portfolio of responsibilities young people bear in a settlement context; and, second, a possible need for more formal digital education for older people to ensure they can easily access technology – and their transnational networks – as soon as possible after resettlement.

In some ways, digital brokering has been a way for participants to overcome digital inequalities. Such barriers to digital inclusion relate to factors such as displacement, low income and education levels, and living in a regional area of Australia (Wilson, Thomas & Barraket 2019; ABS 2016a; UNHCR 2016). The success participants have had in

reconnecting with their family and friends in other countries, despite such inequality, is significant. Government providers and community organisations, however, might seek to find ways in which barriers might be removed to ensure a smoother transition to transnational communication after settlement. This would take the pressure off both younger brokers and their parents.

Much of the second half of this thesis has demonstrated that outcomes of child-to-parent digital brokering include more intimate connections; increased stability of transnational networks and communication processes; more positive experiences of settlement; and increased responsibilities for younger people. Further research with the same participants might reveal how digital brokering experiences change over time and as technology advances. This thesis already demonstrates the extent to which experiences of technology vary between some participants who arrived in Australia before 2015 and others who arrived after that. Further studies with Karen humanitarian migrants in Bendigo could make important contributions to this discussion.

An important consideration for future research relates to whether outcomes of digital brokering are being viewed as group or individual experiences. It is important to consider both. For example, digital brokering provided to an older person might benefit them as an individual, and also their community. Their improved ability to communicate and feel settled in a host country is, after all, beneficial to their wider social group. On the other hand, a younger person who helped them might feel the benefits of this group outcome, but on an individual level experience stress due to the increased responsibility of providing that brokering. Individuals, therefore, might have negative individual outcomes, but positive group outcomes.

In terms of cultural brokering more generally, an individualist perspective often focuses on the effects on the young person. Trickett and Jones (2007, p. 143) have observed that young brokers are often viewed as either experiencing *adulthoodification*, a power inversion

that causes family conflict and disruption, or, more positively, as “aiding the overall family function during the difficult time of cultural transition.” *Parentification* is a similar concept to adultification in that it supposedly “places young members of immigrant families at risk for prematurely adopting adult responsibilities” (Kam, Guntzviller & Stohl 2017, p. 50).

Bauer (2016, p. 33-34) argues that language brokering is essentially “family care work” and should, therefore, be considered in the context of Becker’s (2007) *caregiving continuum*. This continuum treats the levels of care that young people provide their parents as highly variable, ranging from extensive to intermittent. In this sense, younger people do not simply become parents to their parents, but children who provide care in various ways. Such a perspective is also compatible with approaches that treat language brokering as a collective process. Kam, Guntzviller and Stohl (2017) suggest that the concept of *communal coping* (Lyons et al. 1998) can be applied to language brokering. Indeed, central to Lyons et al.’s work is social integration and the ways in which groups of people – usually family members – band together during times of stress.

Further research into the experiences of participants in this study, or those in similar transnational communicative settings post-settlement, would benefit from considering both the individual and group experiences and outcomes of digital brokering. The *socioemotional*, *behavioural*, *academic*, *relational*, *cultural* and *parental* categories prevalent in language brokering research (Shen, Tilton & Kim 2017), mentioned in Chapter Six, seem compatible with this dual focus.

Digital brokering in other contexts

In the context of this thesis, digital brokering practices are evident in Karen humanitarian migrant, transnational migrant and intergenerational settings. They are intimately tied to the experiences of humanitarian migrants. I argue, however, that digital brokering as a concept is not inherently Karen, transnational or intergenerational, nor is it

exclusive to a settlement context. These settings have simply provided conditions in which both a demand for digital brokering has emerged and a response to that demand has been provided. Such demands and responses are likely possible in other communities that transcend these settings. I explore some of these possibilities now.

Other migrant settings

Digital brokering depends on family members being separated and wishing to remain in touch. Therefore, it is relevant to other migrant settings. These likely include humanitarian migrant groups that are not Karen, other transnational migrants who have greater agency over their movement but not yet their digital technology, and people left behind after relatives have moved to another part of the world. In such cases, preferred social media platforms might vary markedly from the participants in this study.

National settings

Digital brokering is likely useful among people or communities with national networks, especially when physical face-to-face interaction is difficult. This is relevant to a country as big as Australia. It might also be useful in terms of older populations without digital literacy whose children have moved to other parts of a country for work, education or lifestyle reasons. Largely unexplored in this study are Karen participants' own social networks across Australia. Recall, for example, younger participant Hser Pyo Way, 20, whose immediate family remained in Sydney while she stayed with extended family in Bendigo. Future research might consider whether digital brokering facilitates communication that leads to further migration within a country. Digital brokering that occurs *across* distance – perhaps Hser Pyo Way continuing to help her family by using Messenger to explain how FaceTime works – is another possibility.

Digital brokering gifts

The idea of gifting devices, mentioned very briefly in Chapter Six through an example of a participant sending an iPad to a refugee camp, is another possibility for further digital brokering research. This could certainly be considered in a variety of contexts in which someone brokers another person's communicative experiences through buying a device for them or setting up a social media account with the aim of integrating them into a long-distance communication routine.

Peer-group digital brokering

This study has shown that peer-to-peer digital brokering does occur, but perhaps less frequently and in shorter durations than child-to-parent digital brokering. Research into the ways that people in the same age group engage in brokering might also reveal interesting results. Possibilities might include a person with unusually advanced digital literacy skills relative to other people in the same setting. This might be an elderly person at a nursing home or a visitor to a setting in which access to technology is seriously limited due to financial constraints or infrastructure issues. These are some possibilities among many.

Digital brokering and gender

In Chapter Three, I identified that 12 of the 16 younger participants were female. This has prevented me from identifying whether digital brokering is something that young men engage in as much as young women. Certainly, it appears that many young women engage in digital brokering – but it is impossible to determine to what extent this is influenced by gender expectations and norms. Possibilities for further research would be to explore this more directly to see whether gendered expectations around provision of care extend to digital brokering.

The future of digital brokering and co-presence

Video calling is a recent communicative tool in the history of humans engaging in social interaction. This thesis has captured a moment in time when video calls have been hugely significant to transnational communication, especially humanitarian migrants seeking to connect with family and friends in other countries. It has emphasised the role digital brokering and real-time visual co-presence can play in such a process. The situations in which many of the Karen found themselves as they tried to connect with distant family after settlement will no doubt change forms as technology advances. This is likely occurring already. For example, with an increasing number of video-calling apps emerging (Nield 2019), a transition to video calls might require increasingly less mediation and less immersion with social media as time goes on.

With technology constantly advancing, co-presence itself will also continue to evolve. The internet has “altered the dynamics of social interaction and the ways in which we come to know others” (Zhao 2007, p. 156). It will, no doubt, continue to transform interaction. The possibilities of where it might lead are many. Consider, for example, this passage from Elliott (2018, p. 122) about the rise of talking machines and their possible impact on co-presence as humans know it:

With face-to-face talk, there is the expectation of mutual attentiveness – one of the core norms of co-presence. Such norms, today and in the future, might become more or less completely deconstructed. In other words, chatbots – or machine-based talk – inaugurate “new roles of sociality”.

It is important to remember, then, that it is not a video call, a smartphone, a social media application, or even being “digital” that is of utmost importance to communication – it is the people involved. Their need to communicate with family and friends – wherever they are – is what really matters. In a fast-moving technological world, digital brokering has been one

response to overcoming the barriers to engaging with technology that helps maintain and enhance relationships. More advancement in technology will likely render such barriers outdated, but also create more in their place. As long as a need to communicate over long distances exists, barriers to doing so will likely need to be overcome. Brokering, therefore, will be challenged to evolve as technology does.

Conclusion

This thesis makes a theoretical contribution to the field of refugee studies, particularly literature that focuses on digital technology and transnational communication in a third-country settlement context. Central to this thesis is digitally mediated co-presence, especially the impact of video calls on the transnational communicative experiences of a group of Karen humanitarian migrants in regional Australia. I have demonstrated that video calls facilitate real-time visual co-presence, bringing the richness of face-to-face encounters to transnational interactions and providing spaces in which intimacy can be performed in various ways. For this reason, video calls, and the real-time visual co-presence they facilitate, are important contributors to the ways in which migrants' "social glue" (Vertovec 2004) has transcended cheap phone calls and become more associated with digital technology.

The main concept this thesis contributes – digital brokering – is a strategy that participants have employed to help enhance their transnational communication. Digital brokering has emerged in an early 21st century age of migration in which smartphones and video calls are redefining how transnational families communicate. Digital brokering is comparable in its function to language brokering, which young migrants often perform as a way of helping their parents navigate language-related tasks in a new society. In the humanitarian migrant settlement context of this study, teenagers and young adults especially were found to be helping their parents achieve richer transnational communicative experiences. These findings demonstrate the importance of smartphones and social media to

settlement experiences. They also show how active humanitarian migrants can be in shaping their own settlement experiences through the use of technology.

The participants who shared stories of their migration experiences during interviews in their suburban homes in Bendigo made this study possible. The pain and struggle of forced migration underpinned their stories – but the love and strength used to counter significant adversity emerged as powerful in their words. This thesis has captured just some of the stories that Karen humanitarian migrants living in regional Australia, and no doubt, other Western countries, carry with them. Many of these stories – like Say Thu Soe’s – continue to play out in suburban homes, in online spaces and across national borders. Indeed, many chapters continue to be written.

Appendices

Appendix one: interview schedule part one

PROJECT: Exploring transnational communication habits of Karen in regional Australia

Interview Schedule (Semi-structured indepth interviews)

Tell me a bit about yourself

- Where were you born?
- Where have you lived?
- When did you arrive in Australia?
- Anything else? (Work, education, family? etc.)

Tell me a bit about your family

- Which family members are in Bendigo?
- Which family members are elsewhere?
- Where are these places?

What is it like to communicate with friends and family?

- Difficulties?
- Routines?
- How do face-to-face and online forms of communication differ?

Tell me about how you use the internet?

- Where/how did you learn to use the internet?
- How have your skills advanced since coming to Australia?
- What do you use the internet for?
- How do you use the internet?
- What social media do you use?
- Who created your accounts – does anyone else use them?
- How many hours per day do you use the internet?
- Who pays for that?

Tell me how you use a mobile phone

- What do you use your mobile phone for – could you break the usage down into percentages?
- What made you choose the phone you have?
- Who else uses your phone – and for what reasons?
- Do you have a plan, prepaid or wireless? Who pays for this?
- How much do you call overseas or interstate?
- Who do you help to use social media or mobile phones?
- Who in your family or community has used your phone or social media account?
- What were the reasons for this?

Appendix two: interview schedule part two

Tell me about helping other people to use technologies – for example a mobile phone, setting up or using a social media account?

- How have you helped these people connect with family or friends overseas?
- What effects has this help had on their relationships with people a long distance away?
- What effects has this had on you? E.g. extra responsibilities or obligations?

Tell me about how other people have helped you to use technologies -- for example a mobile phone, setting up or using a social media account?

- How have they helped you connect with family or friends overseas?
- What effects has this help had on your relationships with people a long distance away?
- What effects has this had on them? E.g. extra responsibilities or obligations?

Tell me about the changes this has led to within your family, or as regards your own relationship with the person you are helping/receiving help from?

- What are people's attitudes to social media and technology? Younger people? Older people? Who do you go to for help when you want to know something? Who comes to you for help? How do you feel about this?

Importance of maintaining relationships over distance

- Why is it important to keep in contact with people a long distance away?
- What differences are there between older Karen people and younger Karen people when it comes to maintaining relationships over a long distance?
- What connection to your culture and homeland can you create or maintain through such communication?
- Has assisting an older person changed the way you communicate online – or changed with whom you communicate?
- Have you become closer to any of the older person's connections as a result of assisting the older person?

Karen community and technology skills, including impact on finding employment and housing

- How equipped have you felt to help other people with technology?
- What do Karen people need to improve their ICT skills and be better able to connect with friends and family at long distance?
- How effective are existing courses in equipping people with relevant skills?
- How have you or family members found housing and employment?
- What role has technology played in this process?

Migration

- What information do Karen people share about life in Bendigo?
- How does that effect a person's decision to come here?
- What is the response as far as likes and shares go?
- How is this posting different between younger people and older people?



COLLEGE OF ARTS, SOCIAL SCIENCES AND COMMERCE

RESEARCH PROJECT – PARTICIPANT INFORMATION STATEMENT

Transnational communication habits of ethnic Karen living in Bendigo, Australia

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Ethics Approval number: E17-056

The Project

This study aims to examine how Karen people in regional Australia are communicating with friends and family in other countries. This work will be reported in a doctoral thesis and other publications by the researcher, Shane Worrell.

Your involvement

An interview of up to 2 hours in length. This can be done in one or two sittings. No preparation is needed. The researcher (Shane) has questions relating to your use of technology, such as mobile phones, to communicate with family and friends overseas.

Shane plans to record these interviews in order to use your reflections as part of his research.

There are no disadvantages, penalties or adverse consequences for not participating or for withdrawing early from the research project.

Checking rights

If you would like a copy of the interview recording or the transcripts, please inform the researcher, Shane Worrell.

You have the right to review the written transcript of the interview and make corrections to personal information in the month after the interview, before they are analysed.

Email:

How the data will be used

Data from the interviews will be used to publish findings in a thesis and other publications such as journal articles, book chapters or books. It may also be used in future research on regional settlement by the same researchers. Participants are welcome to request an email copy of the published research.

Keeping information confidential and secure

Benefits of the research

To you: A chance to reflect on your experience of trying to maintain long-distance relationships and what role technology is playing in this process. It gives you an opportunity to tell your story.

To society in general: People from a refugee background face many challenges in their new country. It is hoped research into how they communicate can help identify specific barriers to effective, fruitful communication among transnational families. This may encourage service providers to focus on ways these barriers can be overcome.

Any questions regarding this project may be directed to the researcher or chief investigator whose contact details are given above.

Appendix four: participant information statement part two

1. Participants names are not disclosed in any written reports. You are welcome to choose a fictional name for yourself, or the researcher can assign one to you when writing up the information. Other potentially identifying information will be edited out when using transcripts.

2. Storage: During the research project, the transcripts and other documents will be kept in a lockable filing cabinet in the researcher's office at La Trobe University.

3. Only if required by law will confidentiality be broken. It can be noted that when tape recordings and transcripts are anonymised using a fictional name, the only personally identifiable data is your name on the consent form. The consent forms are not associated with any particular transcript.

Thank you.

Shane Worrell
Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) candidate
s.worrell@latrobe.edu.au
54 447 903

Sorting out any problems

You have the right to withdraw from active participation in this project within one month after the interview and, further, to demand that data arising from your participation are not used in the research project provided that this right is exercised within one month of the completion of your participation in the project. You are asked to notify the investigator by e-mail or telephone that you wish to withdraw your consent for your data to be used in this research project. A Withdrawal of Consent Form is available.

If you have any complaints or concerns about your participation in the study that the researcher has not been able to answer to your satisfaction, you may contact the Senior Human Ethics Officer, Ethics and Integrity, Research Office, La Trobe University, Victoria, 3086 (P: 03 9479 1443, E: humanethics@latrobe.edu.au). Please quote the application reference number E17-056.



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Consent Form

PROJECT: Transnational communication habits of ethnic Karen living in Bendigo, Australia

Chief Investigator

Dr Raelene Wilding, PhD (r.wilding@latrobe.edu.au)

Researcher

Shane Worrell, PhD candidate (s.worrell@latrobe.edu.au)

I (the participant) have read (or where appropriate, have had read to me) and understood the participant information statement and consent form, and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that even though I agree to be involved in this project, I can withdraw from the study at any time, and can withdraw my data up to one month following the completion of my participation in the research. Further, in withdrawing from the study, I can request that no information from my involvement be used provided this request is received within one month of the completion of my participation in this project. I agree that research data provided by me or with my permission during the project may be included in a thesis and other published research on the condition that neither my name nor any other identifying information is used.

I acknowledge and give permission for the interview to be audio recorded.

YES ☐ NO ☐

Name of Participant (block letters):

Signature:

Date:

Name of Researcher: Shane Worrell

Signature:

Date:

Ethics Approval number: E17-056

ABN 64 804 735 113
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Withdrawal of Consent Form

Project:

Transnational communication habits of ethnic Karen living in Bendigo, Australia

Chief Investigator (PhD supervisor):

Dr Raelene Wilding (r.wilding@latrobe.edu.au)

Researcher:

Shane Worrell (s.worrell@latrobe.edu.au)

I, _____, wish to WITHDRAW my consent to use of data arising from my participation.

Data arising from my participation must NOT be used in this research project as described in the Participant Information Statement and Consent Form. I understand that data arising from my participation will be destroyed provided this request is received *one month* of the completion of my participation in this project. I understand that this notification will be retained together with my consent form as evidence of the withdrawal of my consent to use the data I have provided specifically for this research project.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Please return this form to the following postal address:

Shane Worrell, College of Arts,
Dept. of Social Inquiry, Arts Building 4.05, Gate 4, Bendigo, Victoria 3550

OR email to: s.worrell@latrobe.edu.au

Ethics Approval number: E17-056

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