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**Resettlement Experiences of Vietnamese  
Refugees in Britain, 1979-1989**

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# **Resettlement Experiences of** **Vietnamese Refugees in** **Britain, 1979-1989**

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## List of Abbreviations

**BCAR:** British Council for Aid to Refugees

**BRC:** British Refugee Council

**DHSS:** Department for Health and Social Security

**JCRV:** Joint Committee for Refugees from Vietnam

**MSC:** Manpower Services Commission

**SCF:** Save the Children Fund

## Introduction

Since the signing of the 1951 Refugee Convention, Britain has had a long history of receiving and resettling refugees.<sup>1</sup> 20<sup>th</sup> century Britain resettled diverse refugee exoduses, from European Jews fleeing fascism in the 1930s and WWII, or refugees escaping Communist upheaval, such as Vietnamese refugees or Hungarians after 1956. These refugee arrivals each harbour unique insights into the arduous process of resettlement, which this research seeks to investigate through the study of Vietnamese refugee resettlement in Britain. Experiences of resettlement are defined by the relationships refugees have with different spheres of society, relationships which will form the framework of this research. Thus, seeking to probe the following themes concerning the individual and collective experiences of Vietnamese refugees; identity, community, culture, family, mental health, and agency.

Vietnamese refugees resettled in Britain provide a particularly valuable case study into the dynamics of resettlement, because of the extreme extent of their 'foreignness' to Britain. Not only did they have almost no previous experience or contact with Western culture, but there was no pre-existing community of Vietnamese immigrants.<sup>2</sup> This contrasts significantly with European refugees resettled earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, who were more familiar with western society. Moreover, Ugandan Asian refugees resettled from 1972 depended on established Asian communities in Britain as support networks when the government's dispersal policy isolated them.<sup>3</sup> The uniqueness of Vietnamese refugees' resettlement is therefore a rich opportunity to evaluate the most acute effects of resettlement on individuals and their relationships with different 'spheres'.

Firstly, the public sphere concerns Vietnamese refugees' relationships with government authorities, refugee resettlement agencies and the public. To varying extents these relationships were characterised by provision insensitive to cultural needs, restriction due to limited financial investment, as well as instances of compassion or hostility. Secondly, the community sphere concerns relationships within the cohort of Vietnamese refugees, where a sense of community developed from the ground up after secondary migration. This

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<sup>1</sup> Liza Schuster, 'Ch. 4: Refugee and Asylum Policies in Britain', *The Use and Abuse of Political Asylum in Britain and Germany* (Oxford: Taylor and Francis, 2003), p. 132.

<sup>2</sup> Becky Taylor, 'Our most foreign refugees', in *When Boat People were Resettled 1975-1983*, ed. by Becky Taylor, Karen Akoka, Marcel Berlinghoff, Shira Havkin (Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2021), p. 127.

<sup>3</sup> Tony Kushner and Katharine Knox, 'Ch. 11: Refugees from Indo-China', *Refugees in an Age of Genocide* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 1999), p. 319.

established a mutual support network of self-help organisations, providing spaces for emotional and social support, cultural expression and demonstrations of refugee agency. Finally, the individual and family sphere will investigate the impact resettlement had of fostering family and inter-generational tensions, provoked by the psychological and social difficulties of resettlement on an individual level. These spheres will provide an invaluable framework for the investigation of the nature, tensions, and significance of Vietnamese refugees' relationships during resettlement.

The crisis of 'Boat People' fleeing Vietnam after the Fall of Saigon in 1975, required neighbouring countries to take refugees into camps, and by 1978, overcrowding necessitated humanitarian intervention, with Margaret Thatcher agreeing to host a Vietnamese resettlement programme for 10,000 refugees at the 1979 UNHCR Geneva Conference.<sup>4</sup> The Joint Committee for Refugees from Vietnam (JCRV) was set up to oversee resettlement. However, the actual work was undertaken by refugee agencies funded by the JCRV. The three main agencies were Save the Children Fund (SCF), Ockenden Venture and the British Council for Aid to Refugees (BCAR), later the British Refugee Council (BRC).

The programme followed three steps. Firstly, reception of refugees into camps to prepare them for British society, intended for a maximum three months but delayed by limited housing availability.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, permanent housing was organised through offers from local authority housing associations, aiming to disperse refugees across Britain to avoid overburdening local resources. Finally, agencies would support refugees during assimilation into society. The summarised outcome of this programme was unemployment and isolation, with the dispersal policy being abandoned in 1984.<sup>6</sup> Reception centres failed to sufficiently prepare refugees, causing cultural shock, worsened by the context of recession and isolation. The result was a phenomenon of secondary migration, whereby Vietnamese refugees remigrated to urban centres, congregating and establishing community networks for self-help and support.

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<sup>4</sup> Liza Schuster, 'Ch. 4: Refugee and Asylum Policies in Britain', *The Use and Abuse of Political Asylum in Britain and Germany* (Oxford: Taylor and Francis, 2003), p. 140. and Taylor, 'Our most foreign refugees', pp. 110.

<sup>5</sup> Vaughan Robinson and Samantha Hale, 'The Geography of Vietnamese Secondary Migration in the UK', Research Paper in Ethnic Relations No.10, (Coventry: University of Warwick, 1989) p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Samuel James, 'Vietnamese Londoners' (unpublished MA Dissertation, University of London, Goldsmiths College, 2011) p. 116.

## **Literature Review**

This research exists within the tradition of refugee studies, an interdisciplinary field increasingly supported by strong historiographical contributions, advocated by proponents such as Philip Marfleet.<sup>7</sup> In collaboration with other disciplines, investigating historical case studies of refugee exoduses provides elucidation of dynamics involved in refugee flight and resettlement, which may inform future policy responses to refugee crises.<sup>8</sup>

Key contributions to refugee studies' general practice have provided inspiration for this research. Firstly, Oliver Bakewell's argument that research should feature more 'policy irrelevant' approaches, avoiding the hazard of focusing on government policy concerns, obscuring significant social dynamics.<sup>9</sup> Historians have adapted accordingly, highlighting alternative themes. For example, Dr Neil Spicer's sociological approach to refugee resettlement, investigating dynamics of; experience of place, social exclusion, social networks, construction of neighbourhoods and generational differentiation in experience, themes of utmost relevance to evaluation of Vietnamese refugees.<sup>10</sup>

Recognising differentiations in experience was championed by Egon F. Kunz, investigating the influence of refugees' experiences of marginality in their home countries, on resettlement experience.<sup>11</sup> Heterogeneity can depend on other factors, as considered in this research, such as proximity to fellow refugees, generation, ethnicity and gender. Ethnicity is particularly relevant given that 77% of Vietnamese refugees were ethnically Chinese individuals from rural North Vietnam, fleeing ethnic cleansing and economic oppression.<sup>12</sup> The remaining refugees were ethnically Vietnamese, mostly from South Vietnam with middle-class professional backgrounds.<sup>13</sup> Heterogeneity also resulted from the resettlement's reliance on multiple

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<sup>7</sup> Philip Marfleet, 'Explorations in a Foreign Land', *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 32 (2013), pp. 15.

<sup>8</sup> Klaus Neumann, 'Ch. 10: Uses and Abuses of Refugee Histories', in *Refugee Journeys*, ed. by Jordana Silverstein and Rachel Stevens (Canberra: ANU Press, 2021), pp. 211-12.

<sup>9</sup> Oliver Bakewell, 'Research Beyond the Categories', *The Journal of Refugee Studies*, 21 (2008) pp. 432-453.

<sup>10</sup> Dr Neil Spicer, 'Places of Exclusion and Inclusion', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 34, (2008) pp. 491-510.

<sup>11</sup> Egon F. Kunz, 'Exile and Resettlement', *The International Migration Review*, 15 (1981) pp. 41-51.

<sup>12</sup> Tamsin Barber, 'Differentiated embedding among the Vietnamese refugees in London and the UK', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 47 (2020), pp. 4837-4838.

<sup>13</sup> Kushner and Knox, p. 307.



voluntary agencies, with minimal government coordination, meaning agencies inevitably took different approaches, resulting in diverse experiences.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, the work of Stefan Manz and Panikos Panayi regarding cultural transfer provides an important foundation for this research, highlighting the long-term and confusing process of cultural adaptation for refugees. Furthermore, as demonstrated by Vietnamese resettlement, cultural adaptation is mutual, also impacting the host country and its authorities.<sup>15</sup>

Early historiography specific to Vietnamese resettlement in Britain often took a narrative approach, chronicling the overall process and logistics of resettlement, or focusing on the international pressure Britain was under to intervene because Hong Kong was a Crown colony. One example comes from Danièle Joly investigating Ockenden Venture's work in Birmingham, presenting the dispersal policy and depicting different approaches of refugee agencies.<sup>16</sup> Such research provides necessary context upon which future research can stand; however, its analysis is limited to government policy and institutions, restricting representations of refugees' individual social experiences.

Later historiography of Vietnamese resettlement was increasingly analytical, however again focusing on the glaring policy failures of the resettlement programme, namely, the inadequacy of dispersal and its consequence, secondary migration. For example, Vaughan Robinson and Samantha Hale's geographical approach to secondary migration and dynamics motivating it, provide important elucidation of Vietnamese agency.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, Alice Bloch and Liza Schuster identified three phases of resettlement; Deportation, Detention and Dispersal, highlighting the limited choice which characterised government relationships with Vietnamese refugees.<sup>18</sup> However, again overemphasis on policy obscures other dynamics shaping resettlement, such as which relationships refugees relied on after government policy failed them.

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<sup>14</sup> Danièle Joly, 'Ch.6: Resettling Refugees from Vietnam in Birmingham', in *Reluctant Hosts*, ed. by Robin Cohen and Danièle Joly (Aldershot: Avebury, 1989), pp. 76 and Kushner and Knox, pp. 314-5.

<sup>15</sup> Stefan Manz and Panikos Panayi, 'Refugees and Cultural Transfer to Britain', *Immigrants and Minorities*, 30, (2012), pp. 122-151.

<sup>16</sup> Joly, *Reluctant Hosts*, pp. 76-95.

<sup>17</sup> Robinson and Hale.

<sup>18</sup> Alice Bloch and Liza Schuster, 'At the extremes of exclusion', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 28, (2005), pp. 491-512.

Other historiography takes inspiration from refugee studies' recommendations and applies them to Vietnamese resettlement in Britain. The earliest is from Tony Kushner and Katharine Knox, who, after sustained focus on policy and refugee agency intricacies, subsequently analyse the personal experiences of Vietnamese refugees in different spheres, featuring similar themes to this research; impact on family dynamics, different generations' experiences, and long-term effects of trauma.<sup>19</sup> Tomlins, Johnson and Owen investigate ethnicity as a 'resource' steering the housing careers of Vietnamese refugees, recasting secondary migration beyond the simple alternative to dispersal, and instead demonstrating dynamics of identity, social belonging and community, themes critical to this research.<sup>20</sup>

Becky Taylor explores the significance of the late 1970s-80s economic context and multiculturalism, as forces which shaped resettlement. For example, how the retrenchment and marketisation which characterised the late 1970s Conservative Government, meant limited funding for resettlement was front-end loaded under the misguided hope that investment in reception camps would facilitate fast assimilation.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, Tamsin Barber assesses the heterogeneity of resettlement experiences of Vietnamese refugees, particularly how different experiences of integration, embedding and invisibility.<sup>22</sup>

The contribution of my research will follow the same fashion, revealing complex dynamics of resettlement as demonstrated by Kushner and Knox, Barber, Tomlins et al. and Taylor. Rather than foregrounding dispersal policy failures, the more personal and emotional dynamics will be explored through different levels of Vietnamese refugees' relationships. This will contextualize dispersal alongside the forces of Vietnamese identity, community networks, culture and agency used to overcome policy failures which significantly impacted mental health, family dynamics and experiences of belonging, isolation, and cultural adaptation.

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<sup>19</sup> Kushner and Knox, pp. 306-331.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Tomlins, Mark R.D. Johnson, and D. Owen, 'The Resource of Ethnicity in the Housing Careers and Preferences of the Vietnamese Communities in London', *Housing Studies*, 17, (2002), pp. 505-519.

<sup>21</sup> Becky Taylor, 'Ch. 4: Marketisation and Multiculturalism', *Refugees in Twentieth Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p.209. and Kushner and Knox, p. 313.

<sup>22</sup> Barber, pp. 4835-4852.

## **Methodology**

This research investigates two kinds of primary source; research reports from refugee agencies and government, and newspaper articles, seeking to investigate the relationships of Vietnamese refugees with different spheres from 1979 to 1989. The assimilation of Vietnamese refugees was hardly complete in 1989, with refugees continuing to arrive via family reunion, resulting in Vietnamese refugees amounting to 24,000 by the 1990s.<sup>23</sup> However, the majority arrived in the early 1980s, hence a decade from 1979 provides insight into the dynamics of the first wave. This contrasts with longer-term evaluations such as from Stephen Samuel James or Jessica Mai Sims, which valuably draw attention to second-generation Vietnamese refugee communities since 1989. However, to maintain sufficient focus on early dynamics of resettlement, this research is smaller in scope.<sup>24</sup>

The first group of primary sources come from three collections: the Ockenden Venture Archive, the University of Bristol Pamphlet Collection, and the Refugee Council Archive. Research reports provide valuable insight into the perspectives of the JCRV and government authorities, revealing their observations about resettlement. The same is true for reports from refugee agencies, providing perspectives of the intermediaries on resettlement and their frustrations. Research reports were produced to review and adapt the programme, therefore containing valuable interviews and surveys of Vietnamese refugees and revealing agencies' efforts to adapt the programme. A consideration however, is that they present observations and assumptions about Vietnamese refugees from researchers or volunteers, often obscuring refugees' agency over resettlement. Moreover, they are inevitably bound up with the power dynamics which characterised refugees' relationships with the public sphere, featuring silences regarding certain issues due to Vietnamese refugees' reluctance to complain to or overburden authorities.<sup>25</sup>

Most historiography is dominated by this first kind of primary source, which prompted this research to incorporate alternatives. Newspaper sources have complex power dynamics of their own between journalist and refugee subject, however they provide an important

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<sup>23</sup> Barber, p. 4837 and Taylor, 'Marketisation and Multiculturalism', p. 209.

<sup>24</sup> James, 'Vietnamese Londoners' and Jessica Mai Sims, *The Vietnamese Community in Great Britain – Thirty Years On*, (Runnymede: Runnymede Trust, 2007).

<sup>25</sup> Tomlins, Johnson and Owen, p. 511.

perspective where voices of Vietnamese refugees are published. The specific newspaper sources studied for this research were drawn from the UEL Refugee Council Archive, specifically archivist Paul Dudman's compilation of newspaper sources concerning Vietnamese refugees. Newspaper sources provide opportunities to ascertain public and media attitudes towards Vietnamese refugees, through interviews, personal stories, and interest pieces. This collection provided a significant opportunity in allowing valuable access to smaller scale local newspapers, likely impossible to access online. However, this also meant that a certain level of context about such publications' production and reception was inhibited.

As a white, middle-class woman, with no family history of refugee flight, I must not presume to relate to the difficult experiences of trauma and adaptation discussed, thus I will approach sources with due respect and caution. Amal Hassan Fadlalla argues that in any media or humanitarian activist's presentation of refugee voices, is the danger of appropriating refugees' suffering to produce authoritative knowledge, particularly when such practice takes place without accountability.<sup>26</sup> Klaus Neumann, also makes the important criticism that refugee historiography often presumes to provide lessons for the future. He recommends instead, drawing attention to narratives which disrupt and unsettle current notions of refugee experience, allowing 'alternative futures to be imagined', rather than presuming to provide answers.<sup>27</sup> This research strives to take on these considerations, unsettling narratives of Britain being traditionally welcoming and successful at resettling refugees, rather than appropriating and presuming to resolve the complicated experiences of Vietnamese refugees.

This research's analysis will feature consistent reference to themes of refugee resettlement. Identity will refer to an individual's sense of self and purpose, constantly under reconstruction, determined by their interactions and relationships with others and shared traditions, values and culture, a theme of utmost significance to the dislocation of resettlement. Cultural adaptation, relates to the process set in motion by Vietnamese refugees' move from one socio-cultural background to another, requiring them to adapt to different sets of language and semantic signifiers.<sup>28</sup> Community, refers to Vietnamese refugees' experience of inclusion

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<sup>26</sup> Amal Hassan Fadlalla, 'Contested Borders of (In)humanity', *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development*, 38 (2009).

<sup>27</sup> Neumann, pp. 213.

<sup>28</sup> Manz and Panayi, p. 132.

or exclusion from locals or fellow refugees in particular spaces.<sup>29</sup> Finally, agency gauges the extent to which refugees could control the trajectory of resettlement. This definition is drawn from Subaltern studies, which displaces elites as the agents of change, relocating the agency of the subaltern.<sup>30</sup>

Each chapter of this research will review primary sources seeking to reveal dynamics of relationships and experiences of Vietnamese refugees within specific spheres. Chapter 1, will consider relationships in the 'public sphere', referring to local and government authorities, charity refugee agencies and the British public. This will highlight experiences of cultural adaptation and lack of community during contact with British society, refugee agencies, and local authorities. In doing so, the impact of these relationships on refugees' identity, culture and sense of community will be explored, along with how far refugee agency was inhibited.

Identity, culture and community will continue into Chapter 2, concerning the 'community sphere', relationships within Vietnamese refugee communities. The impact of such relationships in reaffirming conceptions of identity and culture will be highlighted, along with community-based efforts to retain Vietnamese culture. Therefore, how identity and culture were navigated and how initial differences were overcome to build community networks after the secondary migration will be explored. Furthermore, the agency of Vietnamese refugees in building significant community networks will be investigated.

Chapter 3 will bring identity and culture alongside family and mental health, considering the 'individual and family sphere'. This will explore how resettlement tested refugees psychologically, navigating the trauma of refugee flight, resettlement, and challenges to identities and feelings of purpose. This chapter also seeks to reveal tensions within families, marriages and between generations, fostered by the arduous process of resettlement which had specific impacts on certain groups.

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<sup>29</sup> Spicer pp. 491-493.

<sup>30</sup> Wanning Sun, 'Ch 2: The Chinese Subaltern', *Subaltern China*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2014), pp. 32-34.

## Chapter 1: Vietnamese Refugees' Relationships within the Public Sphere

The relationships of Vietnamese refugees with the 'public sphere,' concern their social and institutional interactions with three groups during resettlement. Specifically, government institutions, such as local authorities and public services, refugee resettlement agencies, who handled resettlement, and finally the British public. This chapter will investigate the experiences of refugees with regards to identity, cultural adaptation, community and agency. Identity was inevitably rattled and reimagined by the process of flight, arrival in a new country, and adaptation to its society. Cultural adaptation was an imperative struggle throughout relationships with local authorities, agencies, and during attempts to obtain housing, jobs and social welfare provision. This was even a two-way process for agencies who adapted procedures to support refugees more appropriately. Community was shattered by dispersal and its loss was evident in interactions with British people. Finally, agency of refugees was significantly inhibited throughout public sphere relationships, from the control of government authorities over resettlement, to Vietnamese refugees' hesitancy to criticise or complain, and seem ungrateful. However, as will be demonstrated, this changed significantly in the final years of the 1980s when Vietnamese refugees asserted themselves as agents in resettlement through defiance and criticism.

### Government and Public Services

Vietnamese refugees' relationships with government and public services were characterised by two dynamics, firstly, a lack of understanding about refugees' cultural backgrounds and secondly, the limited choice refugees had during resettlement. As will be revealed, these dynamics made cultural adaptation even more arduous. During the decade researched, refugees increasingly acted out of desperation and a growth in confidence, to exert agency via secondary migration and criticism of government policy, shifting the balance of their relationships with government and public services.

The dispersal policy was an ad hoc policy response to Vietnamese refugees, failing due to its assumption that spreading the burden of refugee resettlement would reduce costs for local authorities and promote faster assimilation.<sup>31</sup> As a 1981 Ockenden Report acknowledged, policymakers overlooked how dispersal would strip Vietnamese refugees of their sub-cultural

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<sup>31</sup> Schuster, p. 130.

infrastructure, crucial for mutual support.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, from its inception, policy lacked the foundation of appropriate cultural understanding. Furthermore, Vietnamese refugees were housed in a process which disregarded their cultural preferences, such as proximity to community support or living among extended family. A 1980-81 survey summarises the impact of this disregard for refugees' housing, finding that 18% of Vietnamese refugees were unhappy with their immediate environment, and 10% were living in unsatisfactory living conditions, such as without water supply, heating, hot water, and cookers or with dangerous electrical wiring.<sup>33</sup> Overall the dispersal policy resulted in isolation from community, causing an unintended wave of secondary migration towards urban centres, drawn by hopes of better economic and social circumstances. This remigration of Vietnamese refugees, 54% of whom moved within 2 years of initial resettlement, was a key way in which refugees asserted agency through defiance, contrasting with the limited control which characterised relationships with government.<sup>34</sup>

Dispersal also had practical flaws, with its reliance on local authorities to make offers of accommodation to house refugees, despite the context of massive government cuts and housing shortages, causing further difficulties in relationships with Vietnamese refugees. No financial support was provided in exchange for housing offers, meaning local authorities were confronted with choosing whether to provide scarce resources to refugees, when the existing population was also in need.<sup>35</sup> Robinson defines the overall effort to disperse refugees in clusters of 4 to 10 families, as 'spatial engineering', with the greatest limitation of choice and control experienced by any refugee group in Britain. He concludes that the policy was likely implemented due to the lack of power refugees had in their relationships with government to oppose policy, reiterating the lack of agency permitted to refugees during housing provision.<sup>36</sup>

Vietnamese refugees' successful assimilation was also hindered by the inadequacy of education through language and training courses, meaning provision of key skills failed,

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<sup>32</sup> Ockenden Venture Archive, 7155/7/7/1, Mark Braham and Peter Fenwick, *The Boat People in Britain*, 1981, p. 92.

<sup>33</sup> 7155/7/7/1, Braham and Fenwick, p. 21 and Ockenden Venture Archive, 7155/7/5/2, Peter Rees, *Resettlement Problems*, March 1987.

<sup>34</sup> Vaughan Robinson, 'Up the creek without a paddle? Britain's boat people ten years on', *Geography*, 74, (1989), p. 335.

<sup>35</sup> Taylor, 'Our most foreign refugees', p. 129.

<sup>36</sup> Robinson, p. 332.

making cultural adaptation and obtaining employment more difficult. A 1982 JCRV report described English Language education in reception camps as a bare minimum, resulting in 5% of Vietnamese refugees being fluent, and only 33% having basic survival proficiency.<sup>37</sup> This initial failure was exacerbated by inadequate provision provided after resettlement. Via dispersal, refugees were resettled anywhere offers were made, not necessarily places with histories of ethnic minorities or immigrant resettlement. These would have been 'inclusive spaces' where local authorities and institutions would be culturally sensitive.<sup>38</sup> For example, few Vietnamese refugees were resettled in Bradford, which had well-developed English as a Second Language (ESL) courses.<sup>39</sup> Refugees demonstrated agency through their response to this deficiency, via secondary migration to urban centres such as Birmingham and London, where ESL was more developed.<sup>40</sup> A 1980-81 survey reiterates how dispersal undermined provision, acknowledging that in Manchester, where ESL provision was established and experienced, the success rate for language learning of Vietnamese refugees was 90%, however in Lancashire, which lacked a history of immigrant populations, the success rate was 41%.<sup>41</sup>

Dispersal's lack of understanding also disregarded the logistics of accessing such important courses, with many refugees outside the periphery of ESL language and skills training courses from the Manpower Services Commission (MSC).<sup>42</sup> Therefore, it was difficult for local authorities to justify funding courses which could not be attended. Moreover, as a source from an Ockenden researcher highlights, education provision overlooked how courses conflicted with the education time requirement of less than 21 hours, needed by refugees to qualify for welfare benefits.<sup>43</sup> Consequently, obstacles of poor language proficiency and skills obtained in Vietnam, which were not recognised as qualifications in Britain and which MSC courses would have rectified, were not appropriately addressed, hence 83% of refugees were

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<sup>37</sup> Ockenden Venture Archive, 7155/7/2/14, *JCRV report on Vietnamese refugee programme*, November 1982, p. 12.

<sup>38</sup> Spicer, p. 493.

<sup>39</sup> Taylor, 'Marketisation and Multiculturalism', p. 251.

<sup>40</sup> Joly, *Reluctant Hosts*, p. 86.

<sup>41</sup> 7155/7/7/1, Braham and Fenwick, p. 96-97.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ockenden Venture Archive, 7155/7/5/14, David Ennals, *Training and Employment of Vietnamese Refugees in the UK*, 1983.



still unemployed in 1982.<sup>44</sup> This highlights the government and local authorities' failure to consider, understand and provide for the specific needs of Vietnamese refugees.

A further feature in such relationships was difficulty communicating and understanding each other, evident in refugees' attempts to access social welfare provision via bureaucratic British institutions. Statutory bodies such as the DHSS, hospitals, doctors, schools, social services, the police and housing departments relied on refugee agencies to act as middle men, due to their lack of training for interactions with refugees.<sup>45</sup> Even the idea of social workers or welfare systems was culturally foreign to Vietnamese refugees, therefore they often struggled to understand the power structures involved in such institutions and use them appropriately.<sup>46</sup> Further difficulties arose when claiming benefits or reporting issues with housing, because poor language proficiency and cultural preparation meant Vietnamese refugees were baffled by forms and bureaucracy hurdles. An article from *The Times* describes this difficulty navigating bureaucracy, due to its contrast with running a business in Vietnam where 'the taxman comes every quarter to collect the same amount of money'.<sup>47</sup> This experience of Minh Duong, who succeeded in overcoming such obstacles thanks to an independently run Head Start Course, is a success story, an exception to the general experiences of Vietnamese refugees' relationships with local authorities.<sup>48</sup>

Finally, when discussing the relationships of Vietnamese refugees with government and local authorities, how the refugees themselves perceived these relationships reveals a significant shift by 1989. This perspective is routinely overlooked in current literature, and is largely absent from research reports, however, multiple newspaper articles provide important revelations. 'Home Truths' from 1990 reveals how Vietnamese refugees used to be 'natural Tory supporters' and 'The Boat Party', from 1989, provides evidence of Vietnamese refugees' feelings of 'deep gratitude to Britain'. The same articles also reveal how this relationship changed in response to the government's decision in 1989, to repatriate Vietnamese refugees still held in Hong Kong camps. The response to this treatment of their compatriots was 'angry

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<sup>44</sup> 7155/7/2/14, *JCRV report on Vietnamese refugee programme 1982*, p. 14.

<sup>45</sup> Joly, *Reluctant Hosts*, p. 83.

<sup>46</sup> Ockenden Venture Archive, 7155/7/7/4, Felicity Edholm, Helen Roberts Judith and Sayer, *Vietnamese Refugees in Britain*, 1983, p. 33.

<sup>47</sup> Refugee Council Archive, RCA/EV/QU40 BRC/Box 7, Paul Eastham, 'Vietnamese group given a head start', *The Times*, 18th July 1987.

<sup>48</sup> Refugee Council Archive, RCA/EV/QU40 BRC/Box 7, Andrew Culf, 'A decade on, UK still not a real home for Vietnamese', *The Guardian*, 14th December 1989.

and bitter' to the government 'selling out to oppression', 'hurting those who strived for 14 years not to be a burden'.<sup>49</sup> Vietnamese refugees' identity had for a time been informed by appreciation of Britain's generosity, however, this was jolted by the treatment of their compatriots.

At a similar time, further criticism of government is evident regarding the resettlement programme itself, with Vietnamese community organisations calling for 'massive shifts in resources' due to 'failure' and inappropriateness of training and employment schemes.<sup>50</sup> This demonstrates a growth in confidence of Vietnamese refugees in relationships with government and local authorities, exhibiting agency by criticising policy. Such agency was also demonstrated by secondary migration which followed initial resettlement, and the policy of dispersal was not abandoned by government until 1984, further demonstrating the government's blindness and disregard for the cultural preferences of Vietnamese refugees, which characterised their relationships.<sup>51</sup>

### Refugee Agencies

As the institutions at the frontline of resettlement for Vietnamese refugees, relationships with SCF, BCAR and Ockenden Venture must not go unevaluated. Such relationships featured similar themes to those with government, lack of cultural understanding and refugee choice. However, research also reveals important specific dynamics, inconsistency in their approaches, frustration, with lack of government funding and cultural expertise, and adaptation of their procedures in response to inadequacies.

Different approaches and philosophies of refugee agencies inevitably resulted in Vietnamese refugees having different experiences of isolation, cultural preparation and heterogeneity in relationships with each agency. As highlighted by historians and the primary source material, The Refugee Council took a centralised approach using large reception centres, whereas Ockenden Venture and SCF employed small centres and a family approach.<sup>52</sup> SCF was particularly dedicated to fostering ties between refugees and the local community at this

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<sup>49</sup> Refugee Council Archive, RCA/EV/QU40 BRC/Box 7, Catherine Pepinster, 'London's Vietnamese: Home Truths', *Time Out*, 31st January – 7th February 1990 and Richard Caseby and Mark Ellis, 'The boat party', *The Sunday Times*, 17th December 1989.

<sup>50</sup> Refugee Council Archive, RCA/EV/QU40 BRC/Box 7, Nicholas Rowe, 'Vietnamese attack refugee schemes', *Independent*, 21st July 1989.

<sup>51</sup> Joly, *Reluctant Hosts*, p. 81.

<sup>52</sup> Kushner and Knox, pp. 315-6.

early stage, which Ockenden Venture did not deem necessary, an assumption which often resulted in the shift from camps to accommodation being more traumatic.<sup>53</sup> Such heterogeneity between organisations led to tensions between them, particularly when competing for JCRV funding, as highlighted in a 1983 Home Office report. This report also charged Ockenden Venture and BCAR's reluctance to emulate SCF's use of Vietnamese refugees as fieldworkers, as the 'single most significant self-imposed limitation' of the programme.<sup>54</sup> This demonstrates how a lack of collective concern and collaboration inhibited the development and adoption of critical changes which would have improved support and agencies' relationships with refugees.

Another key characteristic is how agencies began to recognise restrictions to their support provision. Reports point to frustrations with insufficient funding from the JCRV, which had front-loaded money into reception camps, also recognising how inadequate cultural expertise about Vietnamese refugees inhibited support. A newspaper article entitled 'Boat people are running out of time and money,' conveyed this frustration regarding the JCRV's reluctance to extend funding beyond March 31<sup>st</sup>, 1988. Refugee Action, from 1981 SCF's specific organisation for Vietnamese resettlement, recognised how Vietnamese refugees were experiencing continued difficulties with cultural adaptation and isolation.<sup>55</sup> However, they had to accept that convincing the JCRV provide more than £100,000 was unlikely, even though £220,000 was needed.<sup>56</sup>

Frustration is also evident in agencies' realisation of the limitations of their own cultural expertise about Vietnamese refugees. This particularly left overworked agency workers feeling impotent and inadequate about their support for refugees, due to the difficulty and time it took to gain their trust and understand them.<sup>57</sup> Newspaper sources and agency reports reveal how agencies depended on outward and visible signs of refugees' problems, an inherently unreliable form of support given agencies' poor cultural insight.<sup>58</sup> These silences

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<sup>53</sup> 7155/7/7/4, Edholm, Roberts and Sayer, p. 35.

<sup>54</sup> Ockenden Venture Archive, 7155/7/7/7, Dr A.M. Agathangelou, *Evaluation of the Refugee Reception and Resettlement Programmes (1979-89)*, July 1989, pp. 92-93.

<sup>55</sup> Kushner and Knox, p. 318.

<sup>56</sup> Refugee Council Archive, RCA/EV/QU40 BRC/Box 7, Sarah Boseley, 'Boat people are running out of time and money', *The Guardian*, 29th December 1987.

<sup>57</sup> UoB Library Pamphlet Collection, HV 640.5.V5 BAN, Suzanne Bang, and Rosalind Finlay, *Working to Support Refugees 1982*, (Derby: Refugee Action, 1987), p. 64.

<sup>58</sup> Refugee Council Archive, RCA/EV/QU40 BRC/Box 7, Janet Watts, 'When the boats came to shore', 1984.

existed because refugees were uncomfortable complaining, or were confused about who to complain to, because they misunderstood agency power structures. Reports also highlight how this resulted in unrealistic expectations of agency workers, misunderstanding the extent of their powers, or how certain refugees had a suspicious attitude to workers, fearing they sought to control or humiliate them.<sup>59</sup> This reveals a further barrier to productive support during resettlement in relationships between refugees and agencies.

As refugee agencies conducted research to improve their understanding of the Vietnamese refugees, they not only recognised problems, but worked to address them, demonstrating cultural adaptation of their own. This parallels Manz and Panayi's argument that cultural adaptation is a process of mutual restructuring.<sup>60</sup> Research reports such as 'Resettling Refugees: Lessons of Research', particularly flagged how dispersal stripped refugees of important community support networks, and a need to address the workforce's cultural insensitivity. Such inadequacies were also recognised by Refugee Action's director, who argued that the policy of dispersal had 'only served to multiply the disadvantages and cultural shock faced by Vietnamese refugees.'<sup>61</sup>

A report for the JCRV in 1983 recognises insufficient cultural understanding among refugee agencies, and provides an evaluation of a potential solution, employing and training Vietnamese refugees to be fieldworkers. This demonstrates efforts to evaluate and improve relationships with Vietnamese refugees, by using Vietnamese fieldworkers to 'put matters into cultural context' during refugees' interactions with public services such as doctors. Furthermore, this report observed how Vietnamese fieldworkers developed their own kind of social work, a demonstration of agency in resettlement work.<sup>62</sup> Vietnamese fieldworkers were often more effective than non-Vietnamese fieldworkers, a realisation which Ockenden Venture and the JCRV were reluctant to accept, likely due to their paternalistic attitude to resettlement.<sup>63</sup>

SCF and Refugee Action, however, were early proponents of Vietnamese support workers, and developed training schemes for Vietnamese and Chinese support workers. These

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<sup>59</sup> Ockenden Venture Archive, 7155/7/7/5, Simon Field, *Resettling Refugees*, 1985, p. 53.

<sup>60</sup> Manz and Panayi, p. 132.

<sup>61</sup> RCA/EV/QU40 BRC/Box 7, Culf, 1989.

<sup>62</sup> Ockenden Venture Archive, 7155/7/2/15, *JCRV Report – Vietnamese Refugees*, June 1983, p. 4.

<sup>63</sup> 7155/7/7/7, Agathangelou, p. 92.

workshops dedicated to improving support provision allowed for more appropriate non-Western training to be developed through collaborative relationships between Vietnamese and Chinese individuals and agencies. For example, highlighting the need for support workers to check assumptions and values underlying their decisions.<sup>64</sup> This was valuable adaptation, borne out of refugee agencies' attempts to evaluate and amend resettlement, improving support relationships with Vietnamese refugees.

### The British Public

One of the distinctive challenges of Vietnamese resettlement was that most refugees had no previous experience with Western society, a 'cultural gulf' which made developing community relationships with the public even more difficult'.<sup>65</sup> Reception centres' inadequate preparation of refugees for British society, particularly failing to secure English language proficiency, prevented social interaction with neighbours, heightening refugees' experiences of isolation. A Refugee Action report, 'Last Refuge', provides interviews with elderly people such as Doan Thi Hoan, describing feeling 'silenced' and 'handicapped', lacking the confidence and language to interact with British people.<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, surveys of Vietnamese refugees demonstrate how they themselves identified key differences between Vietnamese and British culture, for example how the 'English like to be quiet and alone' contrasting to Vietnamese togetherness culture.<sup>67</sup> This reiterates how the establishment of 'social bridges' was inhibited, a term Spicer uses to analyse first-generation immigrants' struggles to socially integrate, particularly when communities have no significant history of immigration.<sup>68</sup> For Vietnamese refugees, cultural differences restricted the establishment of community relationships, a point supported by statistics that 41.6% of surveyed Vietnamese 'hardly mixed at all with local people'.<sup>69</sup>

Relationships with ordinary British individuals could also be negative, particularly because the context of economic shortages in housing and employment fostered tensions among

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<sup>64</sup> HV 640.5.V5 BAN, Bang and Finlay, p, 53.

<sup>65</sup> Barber, p. 4837 and Taylor, p. 210.

<sup>66</sup> UoB Library Pamphlet Collection, HV 640.5.V5 LAS, Vu Khanh Thanh, *Last Refuge*, (Derby: Refugee Action, February 1987), pp. 10-11.

<sup>67</sup> 7155/7/7/4, Edholm, Roberts, and Sayer, p. 40.

<sup>68</sup> Spicer, p. 507.

<sup>69</sup> 7155/7/7/1, Braham and Fenwick, p. 92.

resentful British individuals, resulting in racism and harassment.<sup>70</sup> Kushner and Knox draw parallels with the experiences of Ugandan Asians' resettlement in the UK, also encountering public hostility.<sup>71</sup> Upon arrival, refugees in 1979 prompted racial hostility from the National Front, from protests at Sopley reception centre, to the dissemination of information flyers and hoax letters aiming to foster public hostility.<sup>72</sup> Newspaper articles also mention harassment via National Front posters, slogans, and even 'swastikas', painted outside Vietnamese households.<sup>73</sup>

Furthermore, both primary sources and historiography acknowledge that such behaviour was not isolated to far-right extremists, but part of a spectrum of racism and xenophobia featured in certain relationships with the public.<sup>74</sup> Examples range from harassment in rural areas such as Shropshire, where bricks were thrown through windows, to fights and petrol bomb attacks on family cars.<sup>75</sup> This traumatic experience exacerbated refugees' isolation from community, compelling families to resettle elsewhere among those they identified with. Hence, as Robinson and Hale argue, secondary migration was not solely driven by economic interest, but particularly after 1984 was encouraged by the desire to live in safety among other Vietnamese refugees.<sup>76</sup> Tomlins, Johnson and Owen highlight how evidence regarding racist incidents is likely minimal compared to its real extent, due to significant levels of underreporting by the Chinese and Vietnamese community.<sup>77</sup>

Despite hostility, Taylor notes, importantly how refugee agencies and resettlement would not have functioned without the compassion and goodwill of volunteer workforces.<sup>78</sup> This compassionate spirit was a feature in Vietnamese relationships with the public, particularly volunteers for agency support groups. Joly notes how early publicity surrounding 'boat people' stimulated this spirit, however, it could fade as the drama of refugee reception subsided,

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<sup>70</sup> Taylor, 'Marketisation and Multiculturalism', p. 210.

<sup>71</sup> Kushner and Knox, p. 323.

<sup>72</sup> Taylor, 'Marketisation and Multiculturalism', p. 219.

<sup>73</sup> Refugee Council Archive, RCA/EV/QU40 BRC/Box 7, 'Too frightened to go out', *SIYU*, June 1984.

<sup>74</sup> Taylor, 'Marketisation and Multiculturalism', p. 210.

<sup>75</sup> Refugee Council Archive, RCA/EV/QU40 BRC/Box 7, Kate Finch, 'But the Boat People are still unhappy', *The Sunday Telegraph*, 29th June 1986.

<sup>76</sup> Robinson and Hale, p. 20.

<sup>77</sup> Tomlins, Johnson and Owen, p. 511.

<sup>78</sup> Taylor, 'Marketisation and Multiculturalism', pp. 211-212.

resulting in 'compassion fatigue'.<sup>79</sup> Compassion fatigue is acknowledged in research reports, revealing how agencies were aware of the importance of volunteer enthusiasm to the programme, and understood the risk of losing it.<sup>80</sup>

Such compassion and sympathy were displayed by the majority of the public and frequently recognised by refugees themselves. As Kushner and Knox argue, instances of hostility were counter-balanced by generosity of the public, particularly volunteers and middle-class women.<sup>81</sup> Newspaper accounts demonstrate this, such as 'Islington's Vietnamese', mentioning how refugees were careful not to overstate racial harassment so as to not detract from British generosity. This article also reveals how British communities often recognised the cultural contributions of Vietnamese refugees; 'courageous and resourceful people' contributing to the borough's 'vitality and cosmopolitan atmosphere'.<sup>82</sup> Appreciation therefore went both ways, thus it would be misrepresentative to cast all public relationships as largely insignificant or negative since the situation was far more nuanced.

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<sup>79</sup> Joly, *Reluctant Hosts*, p. 79.

<sup>80</sup> 7155/7/7/5, Field, p. 18.

<sup>81</sup> Kushner and Knox, p. 324.

<sup>82</sup> Refugee Council Archive, RCA/EV/QU40 BRC/Box 7, 'Islington's Vietnamese', *One Islington Campaign Against Racism*, 1984.

## Chapter 2: Vietnamese Refugees' Relationships in the Community Sphere

Given the tensions in public sphere relationships, Vietnamese refugees drew on other relationships to reshape their experiences. These relationships were in the community sphere, specifically community networks established after secondary migration. Construction of community relationships was made particularly difficult by initial divisions existing between ethnic Chinese and ethnic Vietnamese refugees. However, as this chapter will show, divisions were somewhat overcome, and Vietnamese refugee communities were established in urban centres. Agency was demonstrated through refugees' defiance of dispersal and establishment of communities which served two purposes, firstly employment and support networks addressing the shortcomings of governmental policy with self-provision.<sup>83</sup> The second function was providing a social and cultural space for activities, which reconsolidated identities and community debilitated by flight from Vietnam and resettlement. Furthermore, such organisations allowed individuals to engage with Vietnamese culture, retaining traditions and their mother-tongue, alleviating the impact of cultural adaptation. These proactive community relationships reflect Bett's 'refugee innovation' which applies to both economic and social actions undertaken by refugees to improve their circumstances.<sup>84</sup>

Upon arrival in Britain, not only was there no pre-existing Vietnamese community, but the cohort of 'Vietnamese refugees' featured intra-group divisions.<sup>85</sup> These were not just from ethnic diversity, three quarters of refugees being ethnically Chinese and one quarter being ethnically Vietnamese, but other diversity was represented in religious, geographical and first language backgrounds.<sup>86</sup> This made the foundations upon which to build a community tenuous, further compounded by dispersal's consequences of isolation and marginalisation. British society lacked cultural compatibility, a host-related factor which would have shaped resettlement experiences positively, therefore the need to establish supportive community networks was even more necessary.<sup>87</sup> The phenomenon of secondary migration, whereby 8,000 refugees moved to London by 1986, was therefore not simply a significant form of agency in defying government spatial engineering. The phenomenon also allowed refugees

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<sup>83</sup> Tomlins, Johnson and Owen, p. 518.

<sup>84</sup> Alexander Betts et al., 'Ch. 8: The role of innovation', *Refugee Economies*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 166-168.

<sup>85</sup> Barber, p. 4847.

<sup>86</sup> Tomlins, Johnson and Owen, p. 509.

<sup>87</sup> Kunz, p. 46.



to congregate in urban centres, building crucial community relationships with those who they identified with and had shared values, traditions and food habits.<sup>88</sup> A key dynamic which overcame initial differences, was the shared difficult experience of resettlement in Britain, a force which brought the community and their identities into alignment. As Keri Roberts found, it was a common opinion that it was better to be unemployed amongst other Vietnamese refugees, than to be unemployed and socially isolated, reiterated by the high unemployment levels in areas where refugees migrated.<sup>89</sup>

Ethnically Chinese refugees also drew on relationships with the existing Chinese community in Britain. This dynamic has garnered little attention, usually focused on the role of Chinese 'ethnic' employment providing jobs to refugees from Vietnam in Chinese supermarkets and restaurants, or the exploitation of refugees working in Chinese black markets.<sup>90</sup> Primary sources also contain little reference to these relationships, one being a report from Edholm et al., that Chinese reactions to initial resettlement of Vietnamese refugees had been cautious, featuring some resentment of privileged treatment, and concluding that such relationships were slowly improving particularly due to their closer cultural affinity than with British traditions.<sup>91</sup> However, refugees were not pre-disposed to assimilate into the Chinese community based solely on ethnicity, reiterating how, upon arrival, refugees from Vietnam had no pre-existing community with which to build community relationships. The establishment of community networks was slow but eventually successful, overcoming internal divisions through shared experiences of resettlement and secondary migration, overlapping identities and fostering the development of valuable relationships in the community sphere.

These community relationships were then used by Vietnamese refugees as devices in reshaping experiences of resettlement. This was firstly in the way Vietnamese refugees built self-help techniques and organisations within communities, to overcome deficiencies of the government programme. Certain refugees sought to respond to unemployment inhibited by poor language proficiency and limited skills transferability, by using their own managerial

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<sup>88</sup> Kushner and Knox, p. 319 and Kunz p. 47.

<sup>89</sup> Keri Roberts, 'The labour force experiences of refugees in Britain' (unpublished doctoral thesis, The University of Sheffield, 1998) p. 265.

<sup>90</sup> Roberts, p. 263-4.

<sup>91</sup> 7155/7/7/4, Edholm, Roberts and Sayer, p. 35.

roles or self-employment to provide jobs for fellow refugees. Examples of such individuals are evident in correspondence from Joyce Pearce, Ockenden Director, to a Sub-Committee on Race Relations, highlighting Huyhn Boi Tran, a Chinese supermarket manager enabling the employment of 20 Vietnamese refugees under him by 1984, and Mach Lien Xien, a sewing factory owner who employed 8 Vietnamese refugees.<sup>92</sup> A study as early as 1982 found that despite the illusion that the job centre was the most viable channel for jobs, Vietnamese tended to use personal contacts to secure employment, reiterating how community relationships were used to resolve problems, from inadequate support, collectively.<sup>93</sup>

Such self-provision did not just apply to employment, but Vietnamese refugees also used community networks to provide advice and emotional support for each other, eventually developing relationships into formal organisations. For example, Birmingham's Midlands Vietnamese Community Association (MVCA), from 1982 acted as a community advice centre for Vietnamese refugees, eventually being funded by the city council, legitimising its role.<sup>94</sup> Community self-help organisations also became specialised and sophisticated over time, such as the An-Viet Housing Association, set up in 1988 and officially recognised in 1989, which provided fellow refugees with 'sensitive housing provision' from 'culturally competent staff'.<sup>95</sup> This growth in confidence and sophistication is epitomised by the establishment of the Vietnamese Refugee National Council representing 38 community organisations, featuring a chairman, Luong Tan Tuoc, a constitution, and a nine member executive, filling the void of effective national coordination.<sup>96</sup> These self-help organisations built from community relationships, shared identity and experiences, can be identified as 'refugee innovation'. This refers to agency exhibited by refugees, highlighted by Betts' research into refugee economies, whereby refugees transform their structural situations to produce new opportunities when constrained by government.<sup>97</sup>

'Refugee innovation' also extends to social importance, including the creation of community spaces for fellow refugees to learn skills and foster their own ideas. This is mirrored by how

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<sup>92</sup> Ockenden Venture Archive, 7155/7/2/5, Joyce Pearce, *Letter to D J Gerhold*, 5th December 1984.

<sup>93</sup> Ockenden Venture Archive, 7155/7/7/2, Karen Moore, *A follow up study of Indochinese refugees*, 1982.

<sup>94</sup> Joly, *Reluctant Hosts*, p. 86.

<sup>95</sup> Refugee Council Archive, RCA/EV/QU40 BRC/Box 7, 'Corporation registers first Vietnamese HA', *Housing Associations Weekly*, 22nd September 1989 and Tomlins, Johnson and Owen, pp. 515-516.

<sup>96</sup> Refugee Council Archive, RCA/EV/QU40 BRC/Box 7, Luong Tan Tuoc, 'New Focus for Vietnam groups', *Refugee Community News*, 25 (January 1987) and RCA/EV/QU40 BRC/Box 7, Rowe, 'Vietnamese attack refugee schemes'.

<sup>97</sup> Betts et al., pp. 168-171.

Vietnamese refugee community organisations were also a means for engagement and preservation of cultural traditions and Vietnamese identity. In Spicer's analysis of social inclusion, he points to such social networks and relationships as crucial for emotional support, developing the confidence and self-esteem of refugees, reducing feelings of isolation and depression.<sup>98</sup> Newspaper articles regularly highlight how communities became spaces for engagement with culture, through activities such as pop groups, Tet festivals, New Year, play schemes and youth groups.<sup>99</sup> Perhaps most significantly given Vietnamese parents' concerns about children's detachment from Vietnam, mother-tongue classes were held in Vietnamese and Mandarin.<sup>100</sup> Cultural engagement also extended to the production of Vietnamese community publications, such as Phu-Nam Vietnam a newsletter for Vietnamese women.<sup>101</sup> Even a small concentration of Vietnamese refugees in Oxford relied heavily on relationships with each other, using support groups to keep up their language, or to keep memories of home alive and 'look on the bright side'.<sup>102</sup>

A necessary caveat to prevent overstating the positivity of community organisations, is that a majority were run by South Vietnamese refugees. This meant, as Joly highlights, there was an initial distortion in the clientele of many organisations towards ethnically Vietnamese refugees, until ethnically Chinese refugees began to feel more welcome.<sup>103</sup> A further limitation is how secondary migration, whilst establishing important community relationships between Vietnamese refugees, in turn worked to limit interactions with British people further. This parallels Spicer's trend of 'segmented integration', whereby communities are established, however they remain socially and geographically separate from the host society.<sup>104</sup>

Overall, relationships between Vietnamese refugees in the community sphere were crucial to redefining experiences of resettlement. Through secondary migration and links of common experience, culture and identity, refugees from Vietnam overcame initial differences and established strong community networks. From these networks emerged important

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<sup>98</sup> Spicer, pp. 491-493.

<sup>99</sup> Joly, *Reluctant Hosts*, p. 88.

<sup>100</sup> Refugee Council Archive, RCA/EV/QU40 BRC/Box 7, Nick Fielding, 'The boat people', *News Society*, 20th November 1987.

<sup>101</sup> Refugee Council Archive, RCA/EV/QU40 BRC/Box 7, 'Reaching Out', *Sparrow*, October/November 1987.

<sup>102</sup> Refugee Council Archive, RCA/EV/QU40 BRC/Box 7, Br. Bamabas Phan, 'Vietnamese Refugees Ten Years in Britain', *Oxfordshire Refugee Council Newsletter*, March-April 1989.

<sup>103</sup> Joly, *Reluctant Hosts*, p. 89.

<sup>104</sup> Spicer, p. 493.

demonstrations of agency, improving their circumstances regarding employment, emotional and practical assistance, community and cultural expression. This demonstrates how valuable community relationships were in transforming the trajectory of resettlement for Vietnamese refugees, particularly since relationships with the public sphere were inadequate.

### Chapter 3: Vietnamese Refugees' Relationships in the Domestic Sphere – Individuals and Families

There is a final sphere in which themes of family, mental health, identity and cultural adaptation can be explored, the domestic sphere, relationships Vietnamese refugees had with family members and the personal impact of resettlement. As Kunz argues, the experiences of individual refugees are not homogenous, each experiencing different extents of marginality from communities.<sup>105</sup> This chapter will explore how individuals' circumstances of age, gender and company during resettlement and cultural adaptation impacted their sense of identity, family relationships and mental health. These dynamics were shaped by varying experiences of isolation, guilt, loss, failure and trauma. Trauma refers to the emotional shock following certain events, which may lead to long-term psychological difficulties. The term frequently used in primary sources from 1979-89 is 'stress', referring to causes of similar neuroses as caused by trauma, therefore for it is taken as a contemporaneous reference to trauma.

Certain general characteristics can be identified in primary sources concerning individual experiences of Vietnamese refugees. The initial emotions upon arriving in Britain of appreciation and relief, contrasted significantly with feelings of deep loss and guilt for their compatriots and Vietnam.<sup>106</sup> Such commonplace emotions among Vietnamese refugees are recognised in a 1982 JCRV report, which highlights myths of returning to Vietnam which often developed among refugees at early stages.<sup>107</sup> This was likely a psychological coping mechanism to survive the trauma of resettlement and adaptation to a strange environment. The trauma of cultural adaptation, along with two other 'stress factors', refugee flight and environmental stresses from living in England, are identified as causes for prevalent mental health issues among refugees according to Jay Yap Ye-Chin's 1981 report.<sup>108</sup> Moreover, a 1990 article identifies how refugees had experienced further trauma during resettlement, in the case of Nguyen Ba Dat, this was as well as his experiences of concentration camps in

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<sup>105</sup> Kunz, p. 42.

<sup>106</sup> Taylor, 'Marketisation and Multiculturalism', p. 230.

<sup>107</sup> 7155/7/2/14, JCRV report on Vietnamese refugee programme 1982, p. 17.

<sup>108</sup> Refugee Council Archive, RCA/EV/QU60 RCA/Box 1, Jay Yap Ye-Chin, M.A. (ED.), *The Inner World of the Vietnamese Refugee*, (Wiltshire: Southeast Asian Outreach, 1981).

Vietnam.<sup>109</sup> Therefore, mental health issues were not just derived from persecution and flight from Vietnam, but also from traumatic resettlement.

The inevitable effect of cultural adaptation on mental health was exacerbated by the specific nature of the resettlement programme, as outlined in Chapter 1.<sup>110</sup> Dispersal had not accounted for consequences of stripping refugees' of their 'sub-cultural infrastructure', isolation and depression.<sup>111</sup> Furthermore, practical difficulties of poor language proficiency during interactions with authorities fed into existential feelings of alienation and dislocation.<sup>112</sup> Vietnamese refugees' mental health problems revealed themselves at different stages depending on the individual. For example, in a 1987 article, a Vietnamese community leader described how 'shock' had only just begun to catch up on certain people 8 years after resettlement.<sup>113</sup> Therefore, not only were mental health difficulties commonplace among refugees, but they manifested themselves at unpredictable points during resettlement.

Certain personal experiences were unique to specific groups within Vietnamese refugees; unaccompanied young people, the elderly, parents, children and women. These differentiating factors of company, age and gender contributed to heterogeneity in experiences, fostering tensions within family relationships. Young unaccompanied refugees have garnered limited historiographical attention, perhaps due to their mobility during resettlement without family attachments. However, as some of the most high-risk refugees to feelings of isolation and mental stress, their unique circumstances were acknowledged by authorities.<sup>114</sup> Reports such as Refugee Action's *Study of Young Single Vietnamese in Britain*, highlight problems specific to young people, 60% of whom suffered from severe depression. Common experiences were, lack of guidance and emotional support from relatives, a sense of failure and defeat at unemployment situations, resulting feelings of failure to support their family in Vietnam. Furthermore, apathy and disillusionment, leading to withdrawal and self-

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<sup>109</sup> Refugee Council Archive, RCA/EV/QU40 BRC/Box 7, Gary Jones, 'We'd rather be back in Vietnam', *News of the World*, 28th January 1990.

<sup>110</sup> Manz and Panayi, p. 132.

<sup>111</sup> 7155/7/7/1, Braham and Fenwick, p. 92.

<sup>112</sup> Taylor, 'Our most foreign refugees', p. 134.

<sup>113</sup> Refugee Council Archive, RCA/EV/QU40 BRC/Box 7, 'Vietnamese: most difficult months', *For a Change*, December 1987.

<sup>114</sup> 7155/7/7/2, Moore, pp. 83-84.

destructive behaviour such as drinking and gambling.<sup>115</sup> Young people also experienced different extents of attachment to Vietnam, gauged using Joly's framework of Rubicon and Odyssean refugees.<sup>116</sup> A 1989 article demonstrates how young people's briefer experiences of Vietnam meant they were less attached to returning there, fitting the Rubicon classification. Hung Dang, a football apprentice, saw Vietnam as his past, whereas older community leader, Kim Huong, 'left more of his heart in Vietnam' wanting to return, fitting the Odyssean classification.<sup>117</sup>

For elderly Vietnamese refugees the strain of resettlement generally amounted to too much, resulting in premature ageing and more extreme feelings of marginality.<sup>118</sup> Refugee Action's report on elderly Vietnamese provides first-hand accounts of such mental health difficulties, concluding that during resettlement Vietnamese elderly's wisdom and authority was challenged, severely affecting their identity, confidence and sense of purpose. Vuong Thi Hoa describes feeling as 'good as dumb or dead' and Doan Thi Hoan, believed her fate was sealed at 87, 'gone is the time that people seek [her] out for advice and guidance'.<sup>119</sup> This demonstrates the reverse in order from traditional Vietnamese generational and family dynamics, which elderly individuals found humiliating, causing them to lose their sense of purpose.

This tension is reiterated in a 1983 JCRV report, outlining a case where an elderly couple were reunited with their son and family. Initial excitement gave way to disappointment at the son's new life and English friends, feeling that he was ashamed of them and had abandoned Vietnamese culture.<sup>120</sup> These examples demonstrate how shifting family dynamics impacted the identities and mental health of elderly Vietnamese refugees. Furthermore, dispersal eroded family links due to the limited choice when obtaining housing, meaning resettlement often followed the mould of the traditional nuclear family set up.<sup>121</sup> This prevented living

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<sup>115</sup> Refugee Council Archive, RCA/EV/QU60 RCA/Box 1, Chris Mougne, *Study of Young Single Vietnamese in Britain*, (Derby: Refugee Action, 1986), pp. 9-17.

<sup>116</sup> Danièle Joly, 'Odyssean and Rubicon Refugees', *International Migration*, 40 (2002), pp. 3-4.

<sup>117</sup> Refugee Council Archive, RCA/EV/QU40 BRC/Box 7, Anne McElvoy, 'When the refugee ship comes in', *The Times*, 17th January 1989.

<sup>118</sup> Kushner and Knox, p. 329.

<sup>119</sup> HV 640.5.V5 LAS, Thanh, p. 10-11.

<sup>120</sup> 7155/7/2/15, *JCRV Report 1983*, p. 3.

<sup>121</sup> Kushner and Knox, p. 328.

among extended family as per Vietnamese tradition, causing further changes in family dynamics due to distance between generations.

Resettlement also caused confrontations between traditional roles and actual capacities for younger parents, undermining their sense of identity and purpose. One of the key triggers for this was the contrast between parents' capabilities with those of their children, who had better English proficiency.<sup>122</sup> Parents had to rely on children for access to essential information. Alongside common dependence on welfare benefits, fathers who were traditionally breadwinners, were confronted with a significant fall in status and respect.<sup>123</sup> As a result domestic difficulties arose within the first decade of resettlement, often made worse by overcrowding in housing provided by councils and housing associations.<sup>124</sup> According to Tomlins, Johnson and Owen, family difficulties were cited as the most common reason for housing associations having to find housing for young South East Asian people, having been told to leave home.<sup>125</sup> This demonstrates the prevalence of family tensions resulting from resettlement and cultural adaptation's impact on parents' mental health and identity.

Resettlement in British society also raised concerns for parents about their children's retention of Vietnamese culture. A 1983 survey found that children's futures were a common point of conflict between traditional expectations and British values.<sup>126</sup> Such concerns were long-term, demonstrated by a 1999 report that even after 20 years since resettlement, 58% of parents were worried about their children's linguistic and cultural identities.<sup>127</sup> The extremity of these feelings is evident in 'Into Calmer Waters', whereby Quach Vinh, describes her children as 'not Vietnamese'.<sup>128</sup> Children's unique circumstances as individuals detached from Vietnam and very capable of assimilation, meant parents were seriously concerned that Vietnamese identity would be forgotten. This dilemma was addressed by a majority of parents through community run weekend mother tongue schools.

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<sup>122</sup> RCA/EV/QU40 BRC/Box 7, Fielding, 'The boat people: still adrift'.

<sup>123</sup> Joly, *Reluctant Hosts*, p. 86 and 7155/7/7/4, Edholm, Roberts and Sayer, pp. 27-32.

<sup>124</sup> Ockenden Venture Archive, 7155/7/5/1, Banton, Frank, *The Vietnamese on Merseyside*, December 1986, p.16.

<sup>125</sup> Tomlins, Johnson and Owen, p. 512.

<sup>126</sup> 7155/7/7/4, Edholm, Roberts and Sayer, p. 27.

<sup>127</sup> Refugee Council Archive, RCA/EV/QU60 RCA/Box 1, Lam, Tom and Martin, Christopher, *The Vietnamese in the UK 20 Years On*, (London: British Refugee Council, 1999), pp. 39-42.

<sup>128</sup> Refugee Council Archive, RCA/EV/QU40 BRC/Box 7, Grant, Linda, 'Into Calmer Waters', *The Observer*, 12th March 1989.



Female refugees encountered conflicts between Vietnamese patriarchal expectations for women to be wives and mothers, and British society, where such values were open to question.<sup>129</sup> This opened opportunities regarding their sense of purpose and identity as recognised in a Refugee Action report. In particular the issue of marriage was a concern for many young female Vietnamese refugees, without families to arrange marriages, and with freedom regarding such matters in Britain. However, the older generation in Vietnamese refugee communities in Britain still held certain cultural expectations, often seeing a young single woman as a threat.<sup>130</sup> Therefore, the isolation of resettling alone in Britain was compounded by a sense of alienation from the Vietnamese community.

A further issue relevant to gendered experiences of Vietnamese refugees concerns domestic incidents and marriage difficulties during resettlement. Tension and a sense of competition were heightened by the desire to succeed at resettlement, therefore matters such as learning English could become points of conflict between marriage partners, particularly when wives were more successful. Resulting incidents of wife-battering and inter-marriage conflict occurred, likely made more frequent by the sense of alienation Vietnamese refugees felt during resettlement, without outside social lives to diffuse frustrations.<sup>131</sup>

Overall, Vietnamese refugee's relationships in the domestic sphere, as individuals and family members, were characterised by challenges to mental health and identity, causing significant shifts in family relationships. Cultural adaptation in a strange environment, exacerbated by inadequate policy, compounded the 'stress' or in extreme cases, trauma, which refugees had endured fleeing Vietnam. Consequently, common emotions and experiences can be identified, most prominently, alienation, isolation, defeat, guilt, grief and challenges to sense of identity and purpose. Moreover, certain groups experienced different extents of such emotions due to their circumstances, dependent on amount of company, age and gender, differences which often devolved into self-destructive behaviour, or breakdowns in family relationships.

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<sup>129</sup> Kushner and Knox, p. 329.

<sup>130</sup> RCA/EV/QU60 RCA/Box 1, Mougne, pp. 19-20.

<sup>131</sup> 7155/7/7/4, Edholm, Roberts and Sayer, p. 27.

## Conclusion

Vietnamese refugees' experiences of resettlement in Britain were defined by relationships with the three spheres interrogated by this research. Relationships in the public sphere were characterised by the government and refugee agencies' cultural insensitivity to Vietnamese identity and culture when designing and conducting the programme. This led to inappropriate provision and failures in suitably preparing Vietnamese refugees for cultural adaptation, which refugee agencies eventually recognised and adapted. Relationships with the British public featured compassion stunted by language and cultural incompatibility as well as hostility, resulting in isolation which along with the dispersal policy caused secondary migration of Vietnamese refugees to urban centres.

Remigrating was an act in defiance of government plans, demonstrating Vietnamese agency during resettlement, which also characterised relationships in the community sphere. Community networks established by 1989 drastically overhauled the trajectory of resettlement, by using community relationships to innovate and resolve resettlement problems. Furthermore, community organisations became spaces for the expression and reaffirmation of Vietnamese agency, identity, culture and community.

Despite the significance of community relationships, the impact of resettlement on relationships in the domestic sphere was inevitable. The early difficulties experienced during resettlement exacerbated the traumatic impact fleeing Vietnam had on individuals' mental health and family relationships. Moreover, the effect of cultural adaptation to Britain had inevitable consequences for Vietnamese refugees' sense of purpose and identity, felt more severely by certain groups.

Popular and political narratives surrounding UK refugee resettlement history, particularly according to government, for example from Home Secretary Priti Patel, have stressed themes of success, positivity and generosity about UK refugee resettlement, often centred around The Kindertransport.<sup>132</sup> Such narratives obscure refugee agency and nuanced realities about UK refugee resettlement, which are highlighted by the case of Vietnamese refugees. Recent

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<sup>132</sup> 'Dissecting Britain's 'proud' history of welcoming refugees', *Our World Too*, June 2021 <<https://ourworldtoo.org.uk/2021/06/15/dissecting-britains-proud-history-of-welcoming-refugees/>> [Accessed 14<sup>th</sup> April 2022] and Becky Taylor, 'Don't just look for a new pet', *Patterns of Prejudice*, 52 (2018), p. 196.

hostility surrounding immigration and refugee reception, for example the Syrian Refugee Crisis, has been excused by a rhetoric of British overcapacity, demanding other countries, most recently Rwanda, share the load.<sup>133</sup> Furthermore, the Brexit referendum's focus on border control has made Britain's complicated relationship with refugee resettlement increasingly prominent. However, historic inadequacies of government policy and difficult dynamics of resettlement experienced by refugees concerning identity, community, cultural adaptation, agency, family and mental health are revealed by this research. Therefore, undermining the claim that 21<sup>st</sup> Century refugee resettlement problems are modern phenomenon, and demonstrating the advantages of researching resettlement dynamics. Moreover, recent crises following US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, and the 2022 Ukraine crisis, highlight the pertinence of interrogating dynamics of refugee resettlement through historical analysis.

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<sup>133</sup> 'UK to send asylum seekers to Rwanda for processing', *The Guardian*, 13<sup>th</sup> April 2022 <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/apr/13/priti-patel-finalises-plan-to-send-asylum-seekers-to-rwanda>> [Accessed 14<sup>th</sup> April 2022]

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