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Surviving to thrive: The Experiences of Second Generation Cambodian Americans Students in the University

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts

in Education

by

Rachel Kim

2017

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Surviving to thrive: The Experiences of Second Generation

Cambodian Americans Students in the University

By

Rachel Kim

Master of Arts in Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2017

Professor Richard Desjardins, Chair

Research on second generation Cambodian Americans in the university setting remains scarce in terms of determining the motivators and barriers of practicing resilience at the university level. Factors which pervade the Cambodian American community at large such as the intergenerational transmission of trauma, the push-pull dynamic felt largely by the second generation, and the aggregated data under the model minority myth for Asian Americans which largely ignores the poverty levels of specific Southeast Asian ethnic populations must be addressed. This qualitative study seeks to examine the experiences of three second generation Cambodian American university students. The implications of this research will help shed light on a specific group often overlooked in lieu of aggregated data of Asian Americans and the specific motivators and barriers they face in the university setting. This study will also help contribute to the Cambodian American experience of students' progress toward their undergraduate degree.

The thesis of Rachel Kim is approved.

Edith S. Omwami

Teresa L. McCarty

Richard Desjardins, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2017

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And all glory always goes to my God, in whom I put my trust.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Asian Americans are among the fastest growing ethnic groups in the United States, with Asians now making up the largest share of recent immigrants as of 2010 (Pew Research Center, 2010). Asian Americans made up a total of 5.8% of the total U.S. population. The group's exponential growth, from 1.4 million in 1970 to 18.2 million in 2010, within the span of 40 years could be primarily attributed to post-1965 immigration, as well as the historic resettlement of Southeast Asian refugees after the Vietnam War in 1975 (Zhou, M. & Xiong, Y.S., 2005). While some may reason the comparatively high socio-economic status (SES) of Asian Americans upon arrival, or because of the public perception as a model minority, relatively little concern exists whether children of Asian immigrants can make it into the American mainstream (Zhou, M. & Xiong, Y., 2005). However, the homogenized image of Asian Americans as the 'model minority' with little regard to the diverse distinctions between ethnic groups, poses a problem of troubling trajectories. Specific Asian ethnic groups, often Southeast Asians—including Cambodians, Hmongs, Laotians, and Vietnamese—are obscured in comparison to the overall grouping of Asian Americans, and may be largely disadvantaged by being overlooked into the positive statistics of Asians as a whole (Sakamoto, A. & Woo, H, 2007). For example, higher levels of dispersion for Southeast Asian Americans should be noted. Sakamoto, A. & Woo, H. (2007) observed socioeconomic attainment among second-generation Southeast Asian Americans, and concluded that Southeast Asian Americans appear to have greater diversity than whites and African Americans in terms of years of schooling completed, as well as considerable differences in the average socioeconomic attainments of these second-generation groups. The importance of noting inter-group and intra-group diversity between different ethnic groups are important when noting how Cambodian women and Laotians, in particular, were found at the bottom end of the

spectrum. Census data reveal that Cambodian Americans are disproportionately poor compared to most other groups in the United States (Chhuon, V. & Hudson, C, 2010). In 2004, 29.5% of Cambodian Americans reportedly lived below the federal poverty level with a per capita annual income of $10,215 (Niedzwieckie & Duong, 2004). Nationally, the Cambodian American poverty rate of 21.6% is among the highest of all Asian groups regardless of nativity and age (SEARAC, 2011; Takei & Sakamoto, 2011).

The identity of Cambodian Americans has often been embedded within the broader category of "Asian Americans," which makes their experience invisible to educators, scholars, and the general public (Pon, Nikum, 2013). A term deemed the "Model Minority Myth" has coined the positive stereotype of achievement of Asian American students at high scholastic levels. Implications rooted in this myth present a misleading depiction of the educational experiences through a generalized illustration of Asian American students, by assuming all Asian Americans can succeed academically. This stereotype is compounded by the fact that statistical data on Asian Americans are aggregated into a monolithic category, overlooking salient differences and unique characteristics of each Asian American ethnic group. This stereotype on students has detrimental consequences for Southeast Asian immigrant students, particularly Southeast Asian immigrant students—including feelings of invisibility and inaccessibility to academic support and services (Weinberg, 1997). While the 4-year college graduation rate for Cambodian Americans (6.9%) remains far below the national average (24%; Niedzwiecki & Duong, 2004), Cambodian Americans are often aggregated within the larger Asian American category that has a college graduation rate (42.7%) greater than most other groups (Ngo, 2006; Nidzwiecki & Duong, 2004). These numbers fail to reflect the acute underrepresentation of Cambodian-American students in higher education. Cambodian-American's college graduation

rate of 6.9% falls below that of African Americans (9.6%), Hispanics (7.4%), and native Americans (9.2%) (Um, 2000). While the limited amount of research on Cambodian American students in the university setting is growing, much of the literature on Cambodian-Americans focuses its lens on low academic achievement (Kim, 2002), high dropout rates, delinquency (Chang & Le, 2005), and language barriers (Wright, 2004). This qualitative study follows along Vichet Chhuon's (2006) model of reporting on the experiences of Cambodian-American college students at a selective public university and examines those values and motivators that support their academic achievements, while also simultaneously observing the barriers they have faced in their academic and social experiences in the university.

The way in which I hope to explain this study begins with the historical background of Cambodian Americans, the theoretical background behind this study, and the research questions which emerged within such a framework. The third chapter explains the methodology of the nature of this study, including information about the participants and observations taken, as well as the findings and data analysis. The proceeding chapter then explains the emerging themes which emerged from data analysis, and the final chapter concludes by discussing the significance of the needed research for second generation Cambodian Americans, particularly in higher education. The following chapter, then, leads us into the context of the Cambodian American history and factors still prevalent in Cambodian American communities, especially in educational attainment opportunities.

CHAPTER 2: BACKGROUND- CAMBODIAN AMERICAN HISTORY

Cambodian Americans are a fairly recent language minority group in the United States. Tens of thousands of Cambodian Americans arrived in the United States as refugees during the 1980s after the Vietnam invasion after an internal genocide by the Khmer Rouge in 1975 to 1979. Over the course of four years, an estimated number of more than one million Cambodians were decimated through executions, starvation, diseases, and torture, while the overall total remains unknown and may be up to three million (Chaou, S.T., 2013). Many Cambodians fled to neighboring countries with over 100,000 immigrating to the United States as refugees (Kinzie, Sack, Angell, & Clarke, 1989). Many refugees that came to the States included Khmer (the ethnic word for 'Cambodian') speakers, and those of mixed descent (ethnic Chinese Cambodians, Thai Cambodians, etc.) while primarily identifying as Cambodian.

Over the past 30 years, concerns in the community regarding the maintenance loss of their native Khmer language, poverty, public health issues, and mental health problems have become prevalent issues in the Cambodian American community (Adebiyi et al, 2013). Research indicates that Cambodian refugees suffer from high rates of posttraumatic stress syndrome and depression are still long-lasting effects from genocide survivors, especially the first generation (Carlson & Rosser-Hogan, 1991; Marshall, 2005; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). The increase in mental health limitations within the Cambodian American community might be exacerbated with factors such as an entrance into the States as refugees, loss of homeland, lack of socioeconomic status and financial security, remnants of memories of torture and trauma without proper redress, and language barriers. Particularly alarming is that in recent years, studies have shown the consequence of parental trauma in the Cambodian community motorizes the transmission of intergenerational trauma onto their offspring—such as

anxiety, fears, nightmares, depression, and guilt, which remains a problem if not addressed within the Cambodian community (Rowland-Klein & Dunlop, 1997; Choau, S. T., 2013). While research remains limited for Cambodian American families amongst the framework of refugees' experiences (Taisng, 2008a), Cambodian families notably have the highest levels of parent-child conflict among Southeast Asian immigrant families (Choi, He & Harachi 2008; Ying & Akutsu, 1997). Exploring the impact of trauma from the Cambodian genocide in the parent-child relationship, even after immigration to the United States, is imperative in exploring the unique factors which are markedly prevalent amongst Cambodian youth.

Cambodian youth have a greater high school dropout rate, higher than any other Southeast Asian group, which is associated with behavioral problems or gang involvements and mental health (Kim, 2002; Portes and Rumbaut, 2006). Sophorn Theam Choau (2013) confirmed in his study that trauma and anxiety were related; they both affected family dynamics, which affected communication, thus affecting academic achievement of students. While trauma does not directly predict communication, trauma does directly affect perceptions of family flexibility and cohesion, which can cause disengagement or discord in families. Cohesion and flexibility are also significant predictors of communication (Choau, 2013), and communication in the Choau's model had a direct effect on academic achievement, while anxiety, trauma, cohesion and flexibility entertain more indirect outcomes. Additionally, the cultural and structural barriers that contribute to Cambodian American student underachievement reveals high drop-out rates and low levels of achievement among Cambodian students.

Vicchen Chhuon's (2010) research on Cambodian high school students in an urban school also integrates the intersection and reconstruction of multiple identities, that although Cambodian viewed themselves as both Cambodian and Asian American, students attached

different meanings and usages to these ethnic categories. Ethnic and panethnic identities were not just descriptive labels but represented differing expectations and behaviors. (Wright 2007, 2010; Chhuon, 2010). Sociological and educational researchers Portes and Rumbaut (2006) support the notion that immigrant students who retain their bilingual skills and their ties to their parents' culture of origin are more academically successful and socially well-adapted in the long term than their peers who become monolingual in English (Mora, 2009). The need for research on the experiences of 2nd generation Cambodian Americans specifically is necessary in today's literature, particularly when noting the acculturative stresses that have created difficulty within the Cambodian community in the United States. Cambodian American students may have distinct and unique experiences as a result of society's "prevailing dual perception" of the group (Ngo, 2006, p. 60), in which they must navigate different roles and attached expectations with belonging as an "American" or "Cambodian".

The background of Cambodian communities is notably important for Cambodian youth recognizing how Cambodian American students and their school trajectories are critically underrepresented in institutions of higher education (Chhuon, V. & Hudley, C., 2010). The 4-year college graduation rate for Cambodian Americans (6.9%) remains far below the national average (24%; Niedzwiecki & Duong, 2004). However, Cambodian Americans are often aggregated within a larger Asian American category that has a college graduation rate (42.7%) greater than most other groups (Ngo, 2006; Niedzwiecki & Duong, 2004). Explanations for the group's underperformance academically in higher institutions are often overlooked by educators, policymakers, and researchers, in lieu of larger aggregate Asian American data. While the overall U.S population of people 25 and over with less than a high school education was 19.6%, Cambodian Americans ranged much higher at 52% (U.S. Census, 2000). Moreover, the problems

facing Cambodian American students fall under the radar when grouped in the general Asian Americans statistic of 19.4% (U.S. Census, 2000). The differences in educational attainment also translate into economic disparities (Ngo and Lee, 2007). When the incomes of Southeast Asian families are disaggregated into average per capita (per-person) income, Cambodian Americans earned well below the overall U.S. population of $21,000 at $10,215 (U.S. Census, 200).

Thus, the examination of further research of the Cambodian American population, the experiences of the second generation, which navigate as agents simultaneously balancing multiple worlds as they traverse the American education system is highly critical. As literature on the experiences on specific narratives of ethnic Southeast Asian groups remains limited, the second generation with their own set of unique and significant understandings are largely ignored in lieu of collecting aggregate data on the Asian American collective. Observations and further research on the experiences of this dynamic population can help shed light on the public health, socioeconomic, psychological, and educational problems which persist in haunting the Cambodian American community. In large part, its genocidal history of the first generation which immigrated to the United States without adequate communal care, remains a concern when considering how it could continue to transgress into its future generations, and indirectly affect their outcomes, including educational. The many layers which interconnect in the experiences of second generation Cambodian Americans are important for educators and policymakers, particularly in higher education, when also considering how the low numbers of Cambodian Americans in educational attainment translate into economic disparities and socioeconomic outcomes.

2.1 Theoretical Perspectives

This study was moderately grounded by Tinto's (1993) interactional model of student persistence and departure. Tinto (1993) asserted that students enter an institution with certain background characteristics that have shaped their levels of commitment for completing their degrees. He also believed that students' levels of commitment were continually shaped by their interactions within the various academic and social systems of the college. According to Tinto, the more students are academically and socially integrated into college, the more likely they will thrive in the institution and persist in their studies toward graduation. Students who feel socially integrated are more likely to perceive their coursework more positively and earn higher grades (Mayo, Murguia, & Padilla, 1995), while students who feel socially isolated are more likely to leave college early (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993). Tinto's assertion was the more that students are academically and/or socially integrated into the university, the greater their commitment to completing their degrees. However, much of the criticisms Tinto's theory faced was the lack of cross-cultural sensitivity and recognizing the different experiences and values of minority students within the university. Douglas Guiffrida's (2006) theory builds on Tinto's theory with the addition of cross-cultural perspectives by recognizing cultural and familial connections more prominently, as well as psychological theories (Rendon, Jaloma, and Nora, 2002; Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson, 1997) as a venue of providing a more thorough description of minority students. Critics have contended that Tinto's theory (1993), which is rooted in the Western, assimilation/ enculturation paradigm, ignores bicultural integration, or the ability of minority students to succeed at college while being part of both the majority and minority cultures (Kuh & Love, 2000; Guiffrida, 2006). Literature from the fields of social and cross-cultural psychology provides potential for an additional multicultural critique and refinement of Tinto's theory by examining relationships between cultural norms, motivational

orientation, and college academic achievement and persistence (Guiffrida, 2006). Guiffrida (2006) uses a critical review of two salient theories of human motivation: self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1991) and job involvement theory (Kanungo, 1982), then integrates key components of each theory to create a framework for explaining how cultural norms and motivational orientation impact college student academic achievement and persistence.

According to self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1991), people are motivated to behave, or in educational motivation, to learn, by either intrinsic motivation or extrinsic motivation. SDT posits that the absence of intrinsic or extrinsic motivation results in a lack of motivation to learn, and that the most meaningful and successful learning occurs when students are motivated intrinsically (Reeve, Deci, & Ryan, 2004). Guiffrida (2006) incorporates cross-cultural considerations of SDT and the criticisms that theories of motivation are culturally bound and not universal (Berman, 1989). One of the most important behavioral distinctions observed among various cultures of the world is the differences between collectivism and individualism (Triandis, Chen, &Chan, 1998). Individualism tend to value independence, competition, and emotional detachment from the group; they also place personal goals over goals of the group the individual is affiliated with (Phinney, 1996). Collectivism values interdependence, group harmony, and emotional attachment within the group, especially familial (Triandis, Chen, & Chun, 1998). Chhuon, Hudley, and Macias's (2006) research on the cultural values of second generation Cambodian Americans yielded conflicting results on how Cambodian American students' perceive traditional cultural values in relation to their past and present school experiences. Their research investigated the multiple contexts students' transverse in their daily lives, at times balancing conflicting values such as individualism when identifying more with their American values or collectivism tied more closely with their family connections (Chhuon,

Hudley, and Macias, 2006). This study sought to examine then to continue in line with the intrinsic and external motivations of successful second generation Cambodian American students at a university, while examining the barriers they faced amongst the different contexts in the university. Based off Tinto's interactional model of student persistence and departure (1993) with Guiffrida's addition of recognizing cultural and familial connections (2006), this study seeks to examine the ways in which a particular group of second generation Cambodian Americans practiced resilience and the meanings they made from what they perceived as motivations and barriers in their experiences as students working towards their college graduation.

2.2 Research Questions

This study observed the experiences of second generation Cambodian Americans in a Khmer student-run club at large university in Southern California. The perspectives of these students of learning and engaging in an organization pertaining to their heritage illustrated moments of meaning-making processes, in relation to their perceptions of culture. The point of interest in this study then, was how participants' involvement in this cultural club relates to how they perceive their experiences and themselves in higher education as well as what they perceived as motivators and constrainers throughout their time as students. While the few who have employed in researching the limited scope of the experiences of Cambodian-Americans have urged the need of a greater voice for the second generation, perhaps it would not be a trivial matter to steer these questions directly from the voices of the subjects themselves in better understanding the myriad of ways in which second-generation Cambodian American students perceive their educational journeys towards their college degree.

Drawing from a similar study by Vichet Chhuon (2010) that explored factors in which Cambodian American students perceived supported their successes and persistence at the university, I build upon a similar framework of Tinto's (1993) interactional model of student persistence and departure aforementioned. Tinto's (1993) model claims that successful integration necessitates students separating themselves from their past communities (family, the local high school, and local areas of residence) as such departure would allow for the adoption of values and norms of college life and facilitation of increased social and academic engagement. Ultimately, this would be significant for student's graduation goals. While Tinto acknowledged ethnic minority students may find it more difficult than White students, critiques of Tinto's theory have been revised to more accurately account for minority students' cultural characteristics and the need to maintain connections with prior communities in more recent studies (Guifrrida, 2003; Hurtado & Carter; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1998). Guiffrida (2006) argued for the increased significance the maintenance of cultural and family connections of persistence theory. "Cultural connections play a foundational role for ethnic minority students throughout their college careers rather than serving as a bridge to integrate students into the larger college community" (Chhuon, V. & Hudley, C., 2010, pg. 17). Campus institutions that aid students in affirming their ethnic and cultural heritage and meeting peers of similar backgrounds may help provide critical emotional, social, and academic resources for minority students who often experience a sense of isolation and marginalization (Guifrrida, 2003; Hurtado & Carter; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1998). These led to the research questions I hoped to address in this study:

- 1) How does a select sample of 2nd generation Cambodian-American undergraduate students navigate the expectations they face in higher education: personal, interpersonal, communal, and organizational?
- 2) What factors aid participants on how they navigate the experiences they face in education?
    - What are the different kinds of **enablers/motivators** for Cambodian American students for their social and academic well-being in the university?
    - What are the **barriers/constrainers** Cambodian American students face in making decisions for their social and academic well-being in the university?

What is culture? The view of culture as a complex and interrelational concept is essential, particularly, when interpreting its meanings and significance in an ethnic club. This study takes the stance of Eisenhart (2001) of going beyond bounded, definitive notions of culture and accepts "that we can no longer conceive of social groups of people with a culture that is clearly bounded and determined, internally coherent, and uniformly meaningful" (p.17). Kathryn Anderson-Levitt's (2006) view of ethnography 's focus on culture as a meaning-making process is also important for this pilot study in acknowledging culture as a process, and not as a fixed constant, as culture is an abstraction from multiple occurrences where people act in complex social and physical contexts simultaneously.

Considering the historical background of this community and the context of this study, the methodology used in this study focused on the experiences of second generation Cambodian American college students in a university setting from their own voices about the enablers and motivators they would express on their journey for educational attainment.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This study used an ethnographic approach—using multiple semi-structured interviews (Seidman, 2013) with three participants and participant observation. The site of observations was on a four-year university in California, and took place at a Cambodian club called Cambodian Students United (CSU) [pseudonym used]. This site was used for two primary reasons. First, California is home to 41% of the total Cambodian-American population (Barnes & Bennett, 2002). Second, this campus belongs to the states' most selective higher education system. In California, high school seniors in the top 4%of their graduating class are eligible for admission to a UC campus (UCOP, 2006). Cambodian-American students experience under-representation in higher education statewide, but are particularly absent in this system (Um, 2003). CSU was selected initially as an easy contact point but ended up as a pivotal point of the study. This club is open to all university students but consists primarily of students of Khmer heritage. CSU was started in 1997 and has evolved to include subgroup and volunteer opportunities such as Khmer Retention, Outreach & Education (KROE) [pseudonym used], available for ten years, which reaches out to Cambodian youth and the larger Cambodian community. One of the biggest events of the year for the club is Culture Night, which involves intense planning for the student-run event, featuring self-produced plays, traditional Khmer dances, and modern dances. This study observed three meetings during the time of data collection, with an additional initial observation as a site visit to build rapport with students. All meetings were general meetings open to the student body, taking place every week, and are pre-planned by staff members to address a certain theme that they wish the club to focus on that particular meeting. The themes at the time of observation were the following: Khmer dramas, Bridging the Gap (partnered with

another Southeast Asian club on campus), and Khmer food. A total of seven interviews were conducted with three female participants, all club members on staff of the club, with each interview ranging 60-95 minutes each.

3.1 Participants

A total of seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with three female participants whose names were coded for confidentiality reasons: Linda, Cathy, and Maxine. All three participants were staff members of the club. Two interviews each were conducted for Linda and Cathy, while Maxine proceeded to have three due to the rich data emerging from her interviews. Each interview ranged from 60-95 minutes within a timeline of ten weeks. The themes of interviews dealt with the temporal and transitory nature of human experience, the participants' subjective reconstruction of their experience, and the lived experiences as a 2nd generation Cambodian American (Seidman, 2013). Interviews focused on experiences as college students as well as their responsibilities and perceptions as staff members of the Khmer club. Many of the interviews varied in terms of the responsibilities they faced due to their differing staff positions, however similarities that arose from the interviews were themes of the changes in perceptions of cultural identity after joining the club and the feeling of belonging to a "family" by being involved with the club. Table 1 provides the profiles of participants.

Participant	Age	Gender	Year at university	Major	Time in CSU	1st language	Fluent in Khmer?	Position in CSU
Linda	19	Female	3	Psychobiology	2	Khmer	No	External vice president
Cathy	20	Female	3	Mechanical Engineering	2	English	No	Internal vice president

Maxine	21	Female	4	English	2	Englis h	Yes	Culture Night Director

Table 1—Participants were all female, were upperclassmen, and staff members of Cambodian Students United organization. They had all been in the club for at least 2 years.

3.2 Participant-Observation:

Observation took place three times during the quarter for 60-70 minutes at a time at general meetings for the club, open to all members, every other week of the quarter. The purpose of participant-observation was to examine the students as they interact with peers in a club that centers on their heritage and their explicit actions, as well as the themes general meetings focused on. Observations on students' explicit interactions with peers in the club, connections with the cultural content and materials dispersed during club meetings, and students' interactions and experiences were further triangulated by in-depth interviews and literature reviews. Table 2 shows the field observations that took place at CSU general meetings, times, and themes. As staff members decided the themes for each general meeting in staff meetings beforehand, interview protocols were drafted to ask about specific reasons for selecting these themes. The three themes at the time of observation were Khmer dramas, Bridging the Gap (discussing differences between the older generation and the current generation), and Khmer food. Interviews with staff members yielded the intentionality of abetting members with what staff members deemed Cambodian cultural information, while retaining a feeling of inclusion for all members who might not be as accustomed to these customs. All general meetings included an allotted spot for announcements where staff members would switch per meeting on who would make announcements on upcoming events in the larger Cambodian community—such as a Cambodian cook-off or KORE, a mentorship program with Cambodian high schoolers, with other Cambodian clubs off campus, and other Cambodian-related events and groups off-campus.

Each meeting also included a short time for learning the Word of the Week, where a staff member, regardless of whether they were fluent or not, would teach the group a Khmer phrase. The number of members present excluding the researcher for field observations ranged from 17-28 people.

Name	Number of People present	Duration of Visit	Theme
Site Visit	12 people	1 Hr. 15 Min	CSU Bingo and General Announcements
CSUFO1	17 people	72 minutes	Khmer dramas
CSUFO2	28 people	72 minutes	Bridging the Gap with Southeast partner organization on campus
CSUFO3	19 people	70 minutes	Khmer food

Table 2. Field observations which took place during the time of data collection. Themes at CSU general meetings included Khmer Dramas, Bridging the Gap with SEA CLEAR, and Khmer food.

Field observations were triangulated in interviews, analytic memos, and background research with the organization's website about particular events or occurrences. Certain themes noticed in field observations and first set of semi-structured interviews were added to the second interview protocol. For example, the reactions to Culture Night in field observations led to more in-depth questions about membership in the club and as a motivating factor for their time in the university as an expression of cultural identity in interviews. Culture Night proved to be an important facet of the club, but also the personal journeys of the participants in getting involved with the club. One participant, Cathy, noted how Culture Night, "can expose us more to our culture." For Linda, Culture Night became a "chance for us to show our culture, and then show our parents that we know our culture to some extent" as an outward expression of Cambodian pride, to the university community but also to her family. Being able to support findings in field

observations through interviews helped to support arising themes in the coding process and more in-depth meanings participants make of such events.

3.3 Positionality:

Research diary entries and analytic memos contained the most entries on positionality. The journey of meaning-making was not relegated solely to participants but an interactional process in specific moments of time. Feeling at times the push-pull of a researcher in the emic vs. etic perspective spoke volumes about the different layers of identities we hold as researchers. As a participant-observer, at times I felt as if my experiences living in Cambodia for six months, understanding basic Khmer terms or certain living experiences, and studying the national history allowed access into the emic perspective. Sometimes, these experiences provided more experiential knowledge of the Cambodia than some of the Cambodian non-speakers in the club. Understanding also the Asian values of collectivism from our families or certain behaviors that pertain to Asian culture also aided connecting with certain values of participants. Participants would share certain things they would attach to being "Cambodian" vs. American, and I would internally relate that to my own upbringing of being an Asian American, as a Korean. However, more regularly, I came from the etic perspective, unaware of not only the full Cambodian experience and the knowledge that comes from a Cambodian upbringing, but the Cambodian American experience, a subculture, which felt unfamiliar and completely separated from whatever I had experienced in Cambodia. The 2nd generation Cambodian American experience for my participants had layers of identities intermixed, overlapping, and intersecting at once—the Asian American experience, the Cambodian American experience, the 2nd generation experience, and gender, age, background, and more. While participants spoke of navigating a balance between clashes of being both Cambodian and American, similar to the push-pull effect Norma

Gonzalez (2001) mentions for bicultural children of Mexican American children in the Borderlands, I found myself having a push-pull effect in terms of my identity as a researcher and friend, as well as an outsider and insider. Interviews were conducted in English, all of the participants' primary language of choice. However, in moments Khmer values or Cambodian beliefs or phrases were expressed by students, I was unable to understand or unfamiliar, and the participant would explain and clarify at times. However, being unable to understand Cambodian values and certain kinds of nuances from being raised in a traditional Cambodian household was a point of unfamiliarity for myself as a researcher.

It was also essential to note the power dynamics Seidman (2013) and Erickson (2008) make in terms of researcher's relationships with participants. As the only graduate student participating in the club, as well as a researcher participating in clubs, I was aware of my presence in the club when members would comment on my note-taking or particularly marked me as an observer. I found easy rapport with my participants and budding friendships where it would be easy to sidetrack conversations to topics about funny instances or their love lives. As a researcher and friend with fellow females, it felt like a lesson-in-training navigating the balance between friendly professionalism in conducting interviews, but learning immensely from my participants with the information they had provided me as well through professional friendliness. When participants mentioned their gratitude in social media posts or personal messages, I was surprised. The time and openness they had benevolently given, as well as sharing information about their lives that were special to them, had been precious gifts to me. I realized that as much as they were sharing their lives with me, these interviews were having an impact on their perceptions as well and we were both growing simultaneously fellow learners: as a researcher-participant and concurrently, as friends.

3.4 Data Analysis and Findings

Data was analyzed through multiple coding cycles on a computer-generated program. Analytic memos were consistently written during data collection and throughout the analysis process. While the first interview protocol did not originally include questions about the genocide, a common topic that arose in semi-structured interviews and eventually became a major theme was the effects of the genocide on participants' families, thus into the concept of the intergenerational transmission of trauma. The themes that arose were difficult to distinguish, particularly when mapping out emerging codes from the data about ethnic identity. While a question might be directed towards cultural identification and the meanings participants might make, responses ranged from topics of their family's involvement in the genocide, personal lived experiences, heritage language skills, experiences at the university, or within the club. Being a second generation Cambodian American was held within multiple contexts for participants and intermixable at any time. Additionally, codes based on ethnic identity would also be interconnected between multiple contexts such as family beliefs about the value of educational attainment with possible indirect genocide effects. Or familial affection and values intermixing with genocide effects into personal motivations.

Multiple coding cycles included continuously using analytic memos and reviewing different connections between first cycle coding into second and then third. Difficult to distinguish at times were the indirect effects of the genocide that might be insinuated with educational values as a family pressure and then how that act both as a personal motivator and barrier, but considered as a collective effort. The incessant pendulum between collectivism and individualism, between differing values within participants and balancing between multiple contexts, emerged in coding (Saldaña, 2013). First and second cycles of coding included

simultaneous coding the application of two or more different codes to a single qualitative datum, was a major part of the coding process as the data's content suggested multiple meanings that necessitated and justified more than one code (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For example, the code "familial expectations" often tied in with "academic success" but also at times "genocidal recovery". "Silence", "sacrifice", "family affection" were often coded multiple times alongside "genocide effects" and "Academic motivators". Structural coding also aided the first two cycles (Saldaña, 2013) due to the large segments of text from semi-structured interviews by also determining frequencies on the basis of certain codes that arose and later subcoding to extract data related to research questions. Values Coding (Gable & Wolf, 1993) which helps subsumes a participant's values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing his or her perspectives or worldview supported the first cycle study, particularly in terms of exploring the cultural values, identity, intrapersonal and interpersonal participant experiences and actions of participants (Saldaña, 2013) and drawing from the meanings participants would make at that particular point. Second cycle coding also included pattern coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994) amidst analytic memos and emerging themes that were often mixing multiple times during simultaneous coding. Categories were rearranged after the first cycle of coding with simultaneous coding and then regrouped more categorically to descriptive coding, and alongside structural coding, and then ultimately, through post-cycle analysis. Certain themes which emerged also were constantly triangulated with analytic memos and also even in finding intermixing codes from supposedly different categories in simultaneous coding.

General findings showed the club plays a dynamic role in participants' perceptions about their experiences in the university personally and socially. Participants also elaborated upon several factors that aided their transition to college, usually alluding to the social support from

the Cambodian club, as well as specific organizational events conducted within the club. Participation in the club had influenced all three students at different intersections of multilayered, ethnic identities—at a personal, intrapersonal, communal, and societal level. Findings from both field observations and interviews supported how participants simply did not hold to one concrete form of ethnic identity, but felt that as second-generation Cambodian Americans, their identities were multilayered and multiple facets of identities were present at the same time.

Within these different layers, the genocide was a common theme in each part of ethnic identity of participants—whether it be as individuals, intrapersonal, or communal. Findings from interviews and observations showed how participants noted that while they could not distinctly pinpoint the effects of the genocide, the they still deemed the genocide an important factor in their familial relations, their perceptions, and their educational aspirations, and even personal responsibility they felt. Overall, findings from interviews and field observations will be explained through the social ecological model (Brofenbrenner, 1977) as the illustrative backdrop of how the different facets of participants' experiences of the organization—personally, interpersonally, communally, organizationally and at the policy level. However, for this study, the policy level will be left to implications while the aforesaid four levels are where analysis took place, and the most focus lies in the personal and interpersonal due to the context of the study and the number of participants and individual experiences. Overall, the findings also illustrated how culture and language are not distinct structures influencing students' experiences at the university, but their stance on how they identify with the Khmer culture and language affects their experiences within each level.

The emerging themes from the data showed three findings from the participant's positionality in identifying with Cambodian culture: (1) The ethnic identities of participants were transversal, multilayered, and complex, rather than simply at one individual layer; (2) The effects of the Khmer Rouge genocide, direct or indirect, were prevalent in every layer (individual, interpersonal, organizational, communal); and mainly, (3) the club provides opportunities to participate and appreciate Khmer history, language, and culture, which affected participants' experiences at every level, depending on their perceptions, but acted as the primary motivator in their university experience. Figure 1 displays the emerging themes found at different levels. It is necessary to state that not all layers are inherently distinct, but are interrelated and fluid, as the meaning a participant makes of a facet of their cultural identity could extend to at the same time to different layers at that same moment. Due to the limited nature of this study with the number of students, this model will focus more on the interpersonal section, but also recognizes the fluidity in the nature of identifying themes between these levels.

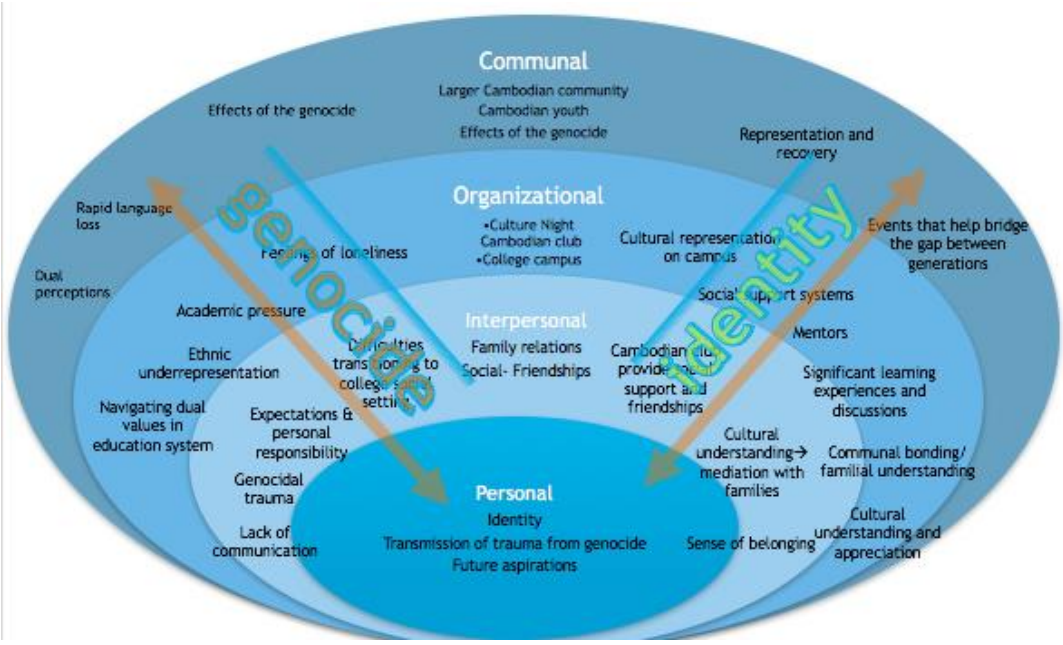


Figure 1 depicts the emerging codes and themes across different levels of the social cultural model (Bronfenbrenner, 1977): personal, interpersonal, organizational, and communal. The identities of participants are not solely in the individual level, but are multilayered. Similarly, the effects of the genocide were present across all levels.

CHAPTER 4: EMERGING THEMES AT DIFFERENT LEVELS

Three emerging themes from general findings and after multiple coding cycles were the following: (1) The ethnic identities of participants were transversal, multilayered, and complex, rather than simply at one individual layer; (2) The effects of the Khmer Rouge genocide, direct or indirect, were prevalent in every layer (individual, interpersonal, organizational, communal); and mainly, (3) the club provides opportunities to participate and appreciate Khmer history, language, and culture, which affected participants' experiences at every level, depending on their perceptions, but acted as the primary motivator in their university experience. These themes will be further examined in the social ecological model mostly in the personal and interpersonal level due to the nature of this study, as well as directly addressing the motivators and barriers facing individuals and that which they attributed to the interpersonal level within the university setting.

The importance of these themes rests on the various ways in which participants choose to navigate their experiences in the university at different levels of the social economic model and their ethnic identification within the institution. Their abilities to discern particular constrainers or motivators includes the ways in which they also find social and academic support, which then affect their academic well-being. These nuances are explained further at themes emerging at different layers.

4.1 Personal

The personal layer in this study dealt with personal motivations and distinct experiences of the participant. An important part of this study was recognizing that each participant was not simply an immediate fit within the mold of second-generation Cambodian American

generalizations, but each person had their own motivations, aspirations, and aspects of their educational experience which they considered as hardships or helpful at the given moment. Thus the ethnic identities of participants, and the meanings they made from such identities, were transversal, multilayered, and complex, rather than purely at one individual layer. For example, the role of heritage language capability on perception of cultural identification as Cambodian, fluctuated across different levels and diversely per participant simultaneously.

Linda is short and stout, at a height of around 4'11" and shoulder-length black hair. She had big, soulful brown almond-shaped eyes which at times looked out at you firmly under deep creases in her eyelids as she listened, but mostly look downwards when she shared. From our first meeting, she had shown that she was extremely friendly and talkative, but also watchful in consideration of the other person's feelings. During our interviews, she jumped between her thoughts often mid-sentences with a constant flurry of "ums" and "likes", while emphatically moving her hands. Linda was a third-year student who identified more as Cambodian, though she stated ethnically she was Cambodian-Chinese. Linda's household was a mix of Cambodian and Chinese speakers and often intermixed the language in her childhood growing up on the outskirts of Las Vegas, Nevada. For Linda, one theme that constantly emerged was juggling the many facets of her cultural identity, particularly intertwined with language capability—as a Cambodian, Cambodian-Chinese, and American—between her peers, her extended family, and her immediate family.

From our first interview, Linda was hesitant to say "Khmer"—the Cambodian word for "Cambodian" which is generally used to pertain to the language and the people, which she stated would be an "insecurity" she held from the reactions of her parents growing up. As she shared,

she would flush slightly and imitate her parents' reactions in her attempts of saying "Khmer" by putting her hands on her hips and slightly pouting her lips as she copied them:

> *"My dad would always say, 'You sound too American, that's not how you say the word.' So just a side note, if you wanted to know that I prefer not saying that because I'm afraid of messing up the word…I still want to learn… to prove them wrong."*

Linda also noted how her extended family had often teased her for her inability to speak fluent Khmer on her visits to Cambodia. The inability to speak the language or pronounce certain words related to feelings of embarrassment and hesitancy to continue attempting in front of them, albeit a deep desire to learn. Additionally, Linda perceived how amongst her peers in college, there was a certain kind of "shame" in identifying as Cambodian due to certain stereotypes associated with it. However, she had always felt proud of being Cambodian growing up. While Linda was pleased to identify and proud of her cultural ancestry, she noted how her Cambodian peers in school had denied her such access:

> *Linda: They would always be like "Yeah, you're basically like just Chinese" and that conflicted me…but I always identified more with Cambodian…But with my group of friends who I've known since I was a toddler…they'd always be like, 'Oh, she's the Chinese one and it's like 'No I'm not, I mean, yeah I am. But no I'm not.' I identify more with Cambodian even if I can't speak it as well as they do.*

For Linda, cultural identification was to some degree, tied with language capability, as questions about her cultural heritage would usually be interspersed with her feelings about her ability to speak the Khmer language. While culturally, she felt proud to identify as Cambodian in any social setting—whether it be amongst her peers or with her family—she felt at different layers never fully integrated or accepted in different sectors due to two reasons—being of mixed

ethnic descent, common amongst many cultural Cambodians who are often intermixed with many different ethnic backgrounds and predominantly identify as Cambodians, and her feelings of heritage language loss. Linda, a fluent speaker as a young child, often expressed a feeling of loss of her language in her interviews.

> *"When I started school, apparently I refused to learn [Cambodian] because I wanted to learn English and.. that's what my friends were speaking…And I guess maybe this is going off how important education is because if they're speaking English, then I have to speak English. And this is where I regret…whenever I'm in situations, and there are people talking I would laugh because I could understand what they're saying but I realized that when that happens now, I'm more lost than being able to follow…But now, because I'm less around family and people that do speak it, I'm losing it, I'm losing like understanding at least, the very least, you know? And then now, when I do try to speak, I get embarrassed…"*

Linda's feelings over language loss and the social settings and levels of ethnic acceptance which conflict with her feelings of cultural belonging can be recognized in multiple Cambodian youth of the second generation. Over the past 30 years, concern in the community regarding the maintenance loss of their native Khmer language has been persistent and growing (Wright, 2010). Wright (2010) claims, "Members of the second generation have not been afforded opportunities to fully develop their Khmer language skills in the first place given the lack of bilingual programs and the emphasis on English-only instruction in schools" (p. 135). Parents often associate their children's' loss of Khmer as tantamount with losing their Khmer identity and culture. While many Khmer parents and community leaders emphasize their children study English, they express dismay at their children's loss of native language ability and the desire for

their youth to learn to read and write Khmer (Smith-Hefner, 1990). Language acquisition and socialization research claims that the process of acquiring language is deeply affected by the process of becoming a competent member of society (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1986). Norma González (2006 quotes poet Gloria Anzaldúa, "I am my language" in her own research, as she argues that language and cultural background should be used as a basis for building academic capabilities. In a similar fashion, the need to examine Cambodian- American education within the context of language and culture and the overlay of language in experiential knowledge is fundamental. This extends to the sense of self with language socialization as well, as teens reportedly "subscribe to the belief that to be Khmer is to speak Khmer, thus one's proficiency in Khmer may be used as a marker of one's degree of Khmerness" (Wright, 2010, p. 136).

Cathy, a 3rd year mechanical engineering major, who was one of the loudest and bubbliest members of the club meetings, interspersed her interviews with rapid and lively chuckles. Her role as the internal vice president of the club comprised of considerable collaboration with other Asian and Southeast Asian organizations on campus. Cathy's sentiment on the importance of retaining heritage language as a means of connections with the former generations and Cambodian culture spoke volumes about the idea of language as communal. For Cathy, belonging through language access extends far beyond the interpersonal but as a way of retaining cultural belonging and information:

> *Okay so most of us have refugee parents and grandparents and et cetera so I think that the language barrier is a big deal, in it's a big wall in trying to understand people, especially our grandparents who don't speak English as well. I think that it's just.. it just makes it a lot harder for people to understand each other and for youth to be able to understand where their elders are coming from and stuff like that. And then also like*

culture-wise with the music and the television shows and the games and stuff like that. It's a lot harder to understand if you don't know Khmer.

Maxine, on the other hand, spoke fluent Khmer and with crescent-shaped smiling eyes communicates richly of her journey traversing multiple educational milestones while also discovering her cultural identity. Maxine attributed her Khmer language proficiency primarily to growing up under the care of her Cambodian grandmother in a socioeconomically low neighborhood in San Diego, California. Maxine was a small, petite senior at the university with long, black hair which reaches the bottom of her waist, which she occasionally tied up into a tight bun and had her bangs swept to the side of her forehead. She sat upright in her seat, gracefully exhibiting the impeccable posture from her years of training in Cambodian cultural dance. She spoke eloquently in a melodic voice, which might have stemmed from her English major and her singing hobby. Maxine was the Culture Night director of the Cambodian club; She wrote the student-produced full-fledged play, coordinated/choreographed all the dances and cultural performances, and taught club members Cambodian cultural dances and songs. She dressed casually in tight blue jeans and a t-shirt which reads the name of her Cambodian club and a navy-blue university sweater when we met for our first interview. She has a gold necklace with a little gold elephant, gold earrings shaped like wings, and a silver ring as a cartilage piercing during our first interview.

Although Maxine spoke fluent Khmer, she recalled feeling ashamed as she grew up in fully identifying as Cambodian. Although ethnically she was Chinese, Thai and Cambodian, and she assuredly spoke Khmer, as well as being surrounded primarily by a Cambodian community, she distinctly remembered avoiding identification ethnically as Cambodian. She grew under the primary care of her grandmother until she was six, up in a small community where majority of

the population was made up of refugees, which also made up much of her student population growing up. The high school she attended was under-resourced and lacked many extracurricular programs, although she had participated in sports such as golf and badminton, she noted. Although Maxine was a high-achieving student, she recalls a stigma for Cambodian students:

> *I used to say I'd never date a Cambodian, which is funny 'cause I do now. And I think that idea just stems from the fact that I feel like…there weren't many Cambodian students that were being educated or seeking anything further than the high school degree or seeking higher-anything better for themselves in that teeny little neighborhood.*

Maxine also shared about her shame of identifying as a Cambodian in her neighborhood:

> *It's different now, but I was once really ashamed to be Cambodian. I think there was just a lot of stigma with being Cambodian because most of the Cambodian kids at my school were kind of troublemakers. What my grandma would call 'bad.' And so when people would ask me, 'What are you?' I would kind of keep Khmer for last. So I'd say 'Oh, I'm Thai, Chinese (slight pause) and I'm also Khmer.'*

Maxine's experiences in her neighborhood is not unfamiliar to previous research on Southeast Asian American students' ethnic options in negotiating ethnic identities in public education (Chhuon & Hudley, 2010). Although Maxine struggled amongst her peers to identify ethnically as Cambodian, she felt exposed to much of the Khmer language, surrounding Cambodian community members, and even to "Khmer karaoke". Whereas Linda's meaning of being fully identified as Cambodian was interconnected with heritage language capability as an opportunity for bonding with other Cambodian students, Maxine saw ethnically identifying as Cambodian in her high school years as accepting the negative stereotypes directed toward

Cambodians in her community as low-achieving, or as her grandmother would call "naughty". Maxine and Linda both reconstructed multiple expectations, where they would attach different meanings and usages to their ethnic categories of Cambodian, Southeast Asian, and American, and the communities which they interacted would apply different meanings to be Cambodian at different levels simultaneously. Vichet Chhuon & Cynthia Hudley's (2010) research in a U.S. urban high school also integrates the intersection and reconstruction of multiple identities, that although Cambodians viewed themselves as both Cambodian and Asian American, students attached different meanings and usages to these ethnic categories. For Maxine and Linda, ethnically identifying as Cambodian and the meanings they made cannot be clearly conceived as within rigid boundaries of a social group, whereas culture is an abstraction from multiple occurrences where people act in complex social and physical contexts simultaneously. The different ways in which Linda and Maxine navigate their ethnic identities is not inhibited to one context alone, but recognize the constant juggling of multiple identities simultaneously across different spheres. Thus, the ethnic identities of participants were transversal and complex and multilayered per participant at a given layer.

4.2 Interpersonal

Participants generally perceived little social support or negative experiences entering the university and linked their social struggles to an inability to access adequate support on campus. Similar to the findings of Chhuon & Hudley's study on Cambodian American college students (2010), students sometimes felt as if personnel at the university could not understand the problems they experienced, or felt extremely helpless and lonely through social and academic difficulties. Coding yielded two main themes for main barriers participants faced when adjusting

to the university: 1) a lack of adequate support from personnel on campus, and 2) social difficulties entering university and extreme feelings of loneliness. Participants also elaborated upon several factors that moderated their transition to college. These have been organized into three themes: 1) social support from the Cambodian club, b) participation in organized events from this club, 3) understanding of heritage culture and recognition of effects of the genocide aid awareness and connection with prior communities.

4.2.1 Constrainers

Maxine shared her difficulty her first year adjusting to the university before she chose to transfer out for a year. Interpersonally, she was struggling with numerous issues. Her extended family was struggling socially and she would return home weekly to tend to her sick grandmother on a 2-3 hour commute. She had difficulty socially adjusting with her roommates her first year of university and felt extreme loneliness. She longed to go home on the weekends to reconnect with high school friends as she struggled to find deepening friendships at university. Maxine struggled concurrently with her academic situation in her astrophysics major. She recalled the impression of a lack of understanding or support from faculty, which ultimately led to her decision of switching out of the university to a local university and community college for a year to better support her family:

> "*I went to talk to the physics counselor here, which by the way, are like probably the worst people to interact with. I stood there for five minutes once, waiting for her to acknowledge me and when she finally did she's like 'what'. … I was struggling with physics. It was hard. And she's just like 'You know, basically, you have to be really smart and dedicated to be an astrophysics major. People don't just do this without putting like being really, really motivated to have a career in astro- who are really*

passionate about it. And I thought that was kind of unfair because I was. I was really interested in astronomy. I just didn't have a strong background in physics at all. Um, and so at that point, I almost cried in her office because (chuckles) I was like, 'Well, I am doing bad. But what else do I do?"

All three participants as well as members of the clubs in meetings mentioned the difficulties in acclimating to the university setting due to discomfort socially adjusting with their peers and their environment. Cathy recalled while chuckling:

"*Before joining the club, I actually really hated college. I was pretty miserable…I take a long time to make friends if I'm not already in my comfort zone or in the space where I'm already comfortable because I tend to come off as really polite and ordinary and um- I don't really put myself out there much unless I have people with me that I feel comfortable enough doing that with."*

The first year of college is generally a stressful life period (Compas, Wagner, Slavin & Vannatta, 1986) and most freshman college students experience some degree of acute loneliness and isolation (Berman & Sperling, 1991). Research found that 75% of new freshman college students reported feeling lonely during their first two weeks in college (Cutrona, 1982) and that college student loneliness is positively associated with depression (Joiner, 1997). Social self-efficacy, individual's beliefs that they are capable of initiating social contact and developing new friendships (Gecas, 1989), has been studied in relation to freshman adjustment to mediate the association between attachment anxiety (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters & Wall, 1978) and feelings of loneliness and subsequent depression (Wei, M., Russell, D.W., and Zakalik, R.A, 2005). Social support from friends predicts improved adjustment for first-year undergraduate students and decreased stress predicted improved overall, academic, personal, emotional, and social

adjustment (Friedlander, Reid, Shupak, Cribbie, 2007). Findings on a study on the environmental, social, and psychological experiences of Asian American undergraduate students in six different ethnic groups entering into the university found that an increased sense of cultural congruity and positive perception of the university environment were strongly associated with an increased perception of social support from family and friends (Gloria, A.M., & Ho, T.A., 2003).Given that substantial research has validated to retain and nurture their connections to their cultural heritage (Gonzalez, 2000; Guiffrida, 2006), participants recalled how joining the Cambodian club allowed a platform of cultural familiarity. Moreover, the smaller size of the club, added a more "family-like" feel and helped them to feel easily integrated, and essentially aided the improvement of their social and academic well-being of these students interpersonally.

4.2.2 The Cambodian Club

The Cambodian club was a form of informal support that students perceived as most significant for their integration into the university. Though the university provided the formal context for ethnic organizations on the organizational level, the Cambodian Club can also be considered as informal because it was initiated and sustained by students. Most formally organized activities were executed together with the larger Cambodian community and could also be extended at the community level. The importance of the Cambodian Club in each of the participants' experiences integrating to the university as a robust, core theme. Students perceived that their participation in the Cambodian Club as a pivotal point for their social and academic well-being in college.

The initial reason for all participants joining as members of Cambodian Students United (CSU) was for social reasons. Linda mentions that although she had attended other club meetings and welcome week events, CSU was the first place "people cared what I had to say." Cathy calls

CSU “a cultural club that’s also very much a social club.” Initially joined at the interpersonal level as a means of social support, CSU provides different avenues of building friendships. All three participants mentioned how CSU has become its main form of finding social support—including finding housemates, “lifelong friends”, mentors, fellow classmates in similar majors, and “lifelong friends”. Maxine attributes that the benefit of participating in a cultural club is in part that “There’s the connections of realizing there’s more to being Cambodian than what I had thought…Just being able to have that opportunity to your community…there’s just this kind of commonality you share with everyone.”

A shared theme, however, that also arose amongst the participants was that while the initial reason for participating in the club was for social reasons and provided a “home away from home”, active participation ultimately led to a greater appreciation of the Cambodian culture. Informally, this club can be observed as a student-run setting for academic and social support from their peers and alumni. Formally, as a cultural organization recognized by the university and campus, as well as the Cambodian community, it can be recognized through its planned events and meeting structure as a place where students discover further cultural information about their heritage. One specific organized event of the club was especially significant to club members and acted as a primary motivator to participate further in the club and caused a paradigm shift in members’ perceptions of their Cambodian roots—Culture Night.

4.3 Culture Night (Organizational)

Culture Night was a student-run organized event where the local Cambodian community, alumni members, Cambodian clubs from other campuses, high school students, members’ family, and the university campus were invited to attend. This special evening held an organized

event where members honed their performance skills and shared traditional Cambodian songs and dances. Maxine, the Culture Night director, wrote and produced the play for this year. Last year, the theme of the night was about the Cambodian genocide, the Khmer Rouge, and its atrocities. This year, the play was about the effects of intergenerational transmission of trauma on the offspring of survivors. Students utilized the university campus for countless hours every weeknight, honing their traditional Cambodian dance technique, making their own costumes in the traditional Cambodian garb, singing or recording songs in Khmer, or rehearsing scenes from the play while constructing stage props. While practice initially starts in the first quarter of the school year (out of three), the annual event of Culture Night usually takes place at the beginning of the third quarter of the school year. While this formal event might be found at the organizational level, it can also be found lapsing the interpersonal level and communal level as well. The level of involvement and emotional investment affected participants' relationships with their peers and families, while also engaging with the larger community. Most funds and sponsorships came from the larger Cambodian community and Cambodian businesses to financially support the play and the larger community attends the event. This event led to opportunities to perform for the Cambodian high consulate and other political Cambodian events in the state, even Cambodian television. Organizationally, it became a venue for other Cambodian clubs from other campuses to network, or ethnic Asian organizations on campus to support in solidarity. CSU was also associated with the Asian Pacific Coalition, a collective grouping of different Asian ethnic groups on campus, and the support of other groups was clearly palpable the night of the event.

The significance of Culture Night at the university was not simply for its reach in the Cambodian community, but usually with the content it dealt with: the Cambodian genocidal

history. It becomes as Linda called it, a "learning tool to Cambodian culture." Cathy shares her sentiment on the significance of Culture Night*:*

> *"I think it's important a lot for, I don't want to say mostly, but for me, I feel like for our parents and grandparents and stuff like that. A lot of them love coming to see us because they're like, 'Oh the younger generation is putting a lot of effort into learning about and spreading our culture.' I think it helps with the community 'cause all the different schools or a lot of them to see...It's a lot of spreading awareness of different aspects of our culture. People learn a lot."*

Culture Night was an organized event that was not simply a performance of sorts, but an event to spread awareness and unite the Cambodian community at large through its historical tragedy which still affects many families. It gave a stage for students to connect with their families from home and demonstrate that their cultural communities are not forgotten while they are studying at the university, but through culture, they felt motivated to connect with prior communities through their heritage.

Culture Night signified a safe space during preparation for club members to learn about their Khmer heritage and participate as they engage with fellow students during practices for months. Maxine explained her role as a teacher of traditional dance for the past two years. After teaching classical dance last year, she realized traditional dance consisted of something beyond technique, and began to take extra classes at Khmer Arts Academy to learn the proper form. Maxine illustrated how she taught the choreography to club members, who often forget the significance of traditional Cambodian dance in lieu of their busy schedules:

> *She would say, 'As dancers, you are the bridge between heaven and earth.' And she'd bring in the actual belief systems that coincided with the dance so I brought that back*

here. I'd sit my dancers down once in a while and tell them, because you know we're not as patients as the students there…so I have to push them to think about how this art nearly perished with the genocide. And only because of the select few that's banded together in Thai refugee camps to cultivate it and bring it here, it was once reserved for royalty only. You could only watch it if you were the king. But now, we get to not only see it everywhere but we get to partake in it.

For members of the club who had voluntarily chosen to participate multiple times in learning the significance of the Cambodian arts, as a way of recovery, Culture Night also became a meaningful way of raising awareness. The impact of engaging the second generation in taking on this mantle of recovery and remediation after the genocide gives a deep sense of motivation for those who feel the responsibility personally. Particularly noting her usually stoic father's tears during one of the scenes from the play about the Khmer Rouge. All three participants shared a "personal responsibility" they felt after actively engaging in Culture Night as a motivation for better engaging in genocidal awareness in their time at university. This event acted as a motivator for students in college, to explore their cultural heritage, bond with fellow peers, but also begins to alter their appreciation for their cultural background and perhaps even alter their relationships with their prior communities by building bridges of understanding.

4.4 Family: Listening to the Silence- Genocidal Recovery

Intergenerational Cambodian families living in the United States experience high parent-child conflict over cultural dissonance (Choi et. al., 2008). Research has shown that communication for Cambodians to discuss personal and emotional positions are not always culturally acceptable (Choau, S.T., 2010), thus, a lack of communication about the Khmer Rouge

in Cambodian American homes. Only half of Cambodian adolescents in Kinzie, Sack, Angell, Manson and Ben (1986) study reported parents talking about the Khmer Rouge, and usually if discussed, in the context of scolding the children for not using the opportunity parents provided for them by immigrating to the United States (Lin et al., 2009). This may create parent-child dissonance in communications in the home. Studies have shown that trauma and anxiety were related; both affected family dynamics, which then affected communication and directly affected the child's GPA (Choau, S.T., 2010). Asian American parent-child relationships can lack communication because first generation parents tend to avoid negative or stressful situations (Lin et al., 2009) whereas their children also learn to avoid negative emotions and conflict in the family. Additionally, a significant historical marker of trauma in the Khmer Rouge was breeding mistrust amongst families that were separated (Savin et al., 1996; Choau, S.T., 2010). Family communication was the only variable in Choau's (2010) study that had a direct effect on academic achievement, whereas, anxiety, trauma, cohesion, and flexibility held indirect effects on academic achievements. Recognizing Guiffrida's (2006) assertions positively maintaining connections with prior communities, interviews all voiced difficulties in clear familial communication and affection growing up. However, participants all noted how after learning in the club and on their personal time more about their cultural history and the genocide, they then began to attribute the lack of parental communication, in large part to effects of the genocide and further identify its possible effects on their familial relationships. All three participants had emotional responses in interviews when discussing communication barriers with family members and sharing their familial history in the genocide before immigrating to the States. A field observation focused on club members sharing the ways in which their parents communicated affection, and often times, in the silence. One student shares in a club meeting:

"I think the way my parents' past affects the way they show love to me is probably that during the Khmer Rouge, people learned that they need to be silent in order to survive. So that affects sometimes the amount of things that they share or how much they talk about the war and their experiences and things like that. So there's this kind of gap in what they decide I should know."

Another girl in the club shares in a meeting about how her parents have sacrificed "they struggle so much but they never told us about it."

The intergenerational transmission of trauma stemming from genocide contains extensive literature on the psychological effects due to the precedent set by examining the psychological effects on the offspring of Holocaust survivors (Danieli, 1998). The Cambodian experience from the Khmer Rouge regime markedly had specific factors identified by van IJzendoorn et al. (2003) that apply expressly to Cambodians. One factor of the Khmer Rouge regime was the attempt to dismantle the traditional Cambodian family unit by separating children from their parents and housing them in communal settings run by strangers in an attempt to foster allegiance to the state rather than the family, an encouragement to denounce relatives and friends (Miles & Thomas, 2007), which was an assault on attachment that may have deprived them of good parental role models for their own later parenting (Field, N.P., Om, C., Kim, T., & Vorn, S., 2011). The effects, direct and indirect, of the Khmer Rouge genocide are still prevalent amongst Cambodian communities**.** In a recent national probability sample data collection conducted by Sonis et al. (2009), 14% of Cambodians who went through the genocide were shown to currently have PTSD: almost five times higher than the prevalence rate of PTSD in the United States (Kessler, Sonnego, Bromet, Hughes, & Nelson, 1995). The effects of the genocide affect family relations at the interpersonal level including communication, and act as the

unspoken barrier for survivors at the organizational and communal levels as well as their offspring that still suffer from PTSD, public health issues, language barriers, educationally and socioeconomically (Adebiyi et al., 2013). Many club members conveyed feelings of responsibility for the unspoken struggles and sacrifices their parents had made for them, as their motivation in their academic pursuits. However, they also often felt the burden to succeed academically because of the pressure from their families, who could not communicate the 'whys'. Most students in the club expressed a desire to succeed as a way of collectively honoring their parents' sacrifices. Others, however, including Maxine, also reminded these students that to succeed for the collective gain of their parents could not be the only motive—encouraged others to fight pressures from their families to also do what they personally desired. The effects of the Khmer Rouge genocide, direct or indirect, were prevalent in every layer but at the personal level, came from students' feelings of needing to succeed because of their parents' sacrifices. Another way in which students' perceptions shifted also came from a better understanding of the more stoic ways their parents showed affection. Maxine called it, "listening to the silence."

Participation in the club, and organized events which partner with other Southeast Asian groups on campus or retreats designated for times of sharing about family, also has increased, amidst an appreciation of Cambodian culture, a heightened awareness of the effects of the genocide in the Cambodian community. At the individual level, participants and club members noted a growing awareness for the need of genocidal recovery, as well as feeling a deeper sense of personal understanding as well, as with their prior communities, as a motivation to further success and progress in their academic pursuits. Appreciation for Cambodian culture as well as genocidal awareness have also motivated new academic aspirations for participants.

4.5 Future Aspirations

The greater level of cultural appreciation and understanding of Cambodian culture aids participants to more likely identify with their ethnic heritage and find it helpful for integration as students to the university setting. Participants all adjusted or clarified their future aspirations to include future remediation for effects of the genocide. Cathy changed her major from chemical engineering and mechanical engineering once she decided she wanted to pursue a career in building medical devices, prosthetic limbs, and rehabilitation services for Cambodian bomb victims who had lost limbs from the Vietnam War and the Khmer Rouge regime. Maxine's focus as an English major interconnects her Cambodian heritage and her immediate academic pursuits. She recently has prepared a seminar which connects Frankenstein and duality of man, by incorporating the idea of the dichotomy of Cambodian American identities in handling multiple identities as Americans and Cambodians. She continues to teach the traditional Cambodian arts to youth as a way of forming a bridge between generations. Linda desires to create a Cambodian collegiate branch or organization where Cambodian youth can learn more about the Cambodian culture. All three have expressed a desire to invest in the Cambodian youth through mentoring or furthering their involvement with the Cambodian community in the future, as well as teaching their children about Cambodian culture and history. The changes in their perceptions at the organizational level, socially and academically, have inspired their academic motivations for a larger investment into the communal aspect.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The findings of this study yielded three themes for students identifying with the Cambodian culture in their time at university: (1) The ethnic identities of participants were transversal, multilayered, and complex, rather than simply at one individual layer; (2) The effects of the Khmer Rouge genocide, direct or indirect, were prevalent in every layer (individual, interpersonal, organizational, communal); and mainly, (3) the club provides opportunities to participate and appreciate Khmer history, language, and culture, which affects participants' experiences at every level, depending on their perceptions, but acted as the primary motivator in their university experience. At the personal level, the ethnic identities of participants were transversal, multilayered, and complex, as participants often travailed multiple identities at simultaneous times—to be Cambodian and American held different values, as well as the meanings they made from each group. Language ideology was found to be an important facet of ethnic identification in the level of access participants felt to their families and prior communities. Students' self-perceptions and values are important for their adjustment into the university environment, as well as for their social and academic well-being. Social support was also highly important for participants' well-being in the university club, which primarily was found in the Cambodian club they participated in and essentially provided access to motivators by better understanding their heritage culture amongst peers. The club provided opportunities to engage in formal organized events that opened students' opportunities to engage in discussions about interpersonal relations, learn Cambodian culture, and get connected to the larger Cambodian community. Concurrently, the club also acted informally as a student-run organization to socialize, explore new activities, and find academic support amongst peers, as well as connecting with alumni in similar fields from

the university. One theme that arose in field observations and all interviews that would be helpful to observe in the future, was the interrelation between appreciation of ethnic heritage and participation in the Cambodian club shaping future aspirations for participants at the communal level. By discovering more about themselves at the personal and interpersonal level through cultural history, especially at the effects of the genocide, students were shaping their motivations as agents, not simply as receptors at the organizational and communal level.

5.1 Back to the Research Questions

We must return to the original research questions and how they have been answered in this particular study through the emerging themes and data analysis that has taken place:

1) How does a select sample of 2nd generation Cambodian-American undergraduate students navigate the expectations they face in higher education: personal, interpersonal, communal, and organizational? Through Brofenbrenner's social ecological model (1977), participants navigated the expectations they faced in the university setting to graduate within the scheme of engaging in a cultural club which allowed them at the personal level a place to explore their heritage culture and interpersonal level to find friendships and social support amongst their peers. They also were able to find academic support through social systems and peer communal sharing in the club. Through cultural heritage learning with peers in the university setting, participants also discovered new personal passions and endeavors for their futures and hobbies, as well as being able to connect further with prior communities and better understand their interpersonal relationships with their families. The club could be observed at the interpersonal level by being student-run, but also organizational by the events which formally engaged students in Khmer culture and was formally recognized within the Cambodian community and the university as an organization. The effects of

these layers as students navigate through the university setting are double-sided as the genocide and its effects on students and their communities are present in the communal level, certain changes as participants engage in cultural awareness and where they stand in cultural identification effects every level as well as their hopes for genocidal awareness and recovery at the communal level.

2) What factors aid participants on how they navigate the experiences they face in education? The **barriers/constrainers** Cambodian American students face in making decisions for their social and academic well-being in the university often came from feelings of a lack of support from faculty members academically. Constrainers participants usually faced were extreme feelings of loneliness upon entering the university and finding a place to feel understood socially. The different kinds of **enablers/motivators** for Cambodian American students for their social and academic well-being in the university? Students could find academic and social support through participation in the Cambodian club which aided their adjustment to the university setting, especially through loneliness. Their participation in the club and learning cultural heritage information allowed them to better identify with their families and understand the genocidal history and its effects still prevalent in Cambodian American universities. Much of their academic goals changed as they learned more about their Cambodian history and were actively engaged in learning and participating in learning Cambodian culture amongst peers and finding a "home away from home" through this club, but also through mentorship from alumni and better understanding their families, which they were not fully able to do before college. Motivators also were intertwined with genocidal awareness and recovery, as well as having a deeper, richer feeling of gratitude for their families' sacrifices.

5.2 Limitations

Due to the limited number of literature and the complicated and nuanced effects of intergenerational transmission of trauma from the genocide, further research on the journeys of second generation Cambodian Americans is needed, especially in the university setting. While graduation rates for second generation Cambodian Americans are increasing, the overall low numbers are still relatively low. This study provides a pilot study to hopefully encourage further research on the experiences of second generation Cambodian Americans and the effects of learning Cambodian history and culture on their academic and social well-being in higher education to better aid their adjustment into the university towards their graduation. Perhaps rather than students involved in a Cambodian club, future studies on students who have dropped out and their reasoning, or students outside of the Cambodian club would better shed light on the wide range of experiences second generation Cambodian American students face and barriers or motivators that could have been absent due to the context of this study focusing on few participants and their rich experiences within one university. Future studies, however, can be encouraged to draw richly from the many complex yet much needed experiences of second generation Cambodian Americans to further understand those pursuing academic completion at the university level.

5.3 Significance

The direct effects of the genocide cannot be fully measured across all levels due to the scope of this study. However, further research on the intergenerational effects of trauma on the second generation can shed light on the still pervasive effects on the Cambodian community and the social and academic well-being through further qualitative studies. Current research has been emerging in terms of anxiety, depression, and PTSD for second generation Cambodian Americans

in recent years but still remains limited. This study adds to the growing literature and need for remediation for not only survivors of the Khmer Rouge regime, but their offspring. The high rates of PTSD and the effects on victims' children, public health, socioeconomic issues, parent-child dissonance, and educational outcomes are all barriers at the communal level specifically pertaining to the Cambodian community that still need to be addressed by policymakers and school faculty. However, an interesting finding, was as Cambodian students came to appreciate and understand their cultural heritage, they shifted their academic trajectories and goals to aid remediation at the communal level. They also felt that as they grew in appreciation their cultural heritage, they experienced a better understanding and security at the interpersonal level with their family and found the social support amongst fellow peers. This study sheds light on the inimitable experiences of second generation Cambodian American students in the university setting, but also concedes that a small qualitative study, like the club, is a place to invite further research across all levels to further understand the diverse and plethora of factors that still are amongst second generation Cambodian American students as they seek a college degree.

5.3 Conclusion

Research on the second generation Cambodian American population is still scarce and limited, yet hold crucial and dynamic implications for school administrators and policymakers. The problems that largely face the Cambodian American population, especially the second generation, are critical for the academic and social well-being of students, often go widely overlooked in lieu of aggregate data of Asian American educational outcomes. By utilizing research pertaining to specific ethnic groups within the Asian American grouping, it would better elucidate the barriers that often contribute to the low educational outcomes and low graduation

rates of Cambodian American students in college. The aims of collecting further research on the second-generation Cambodian American student population separately from the collective, aggregate data of the Asian American whole, is precisely because of the many factors that are distinct and multilayered to this group. Policymakers and educational administration can seek to better implement programs that might help students also integrate cultural understanding and increase social support for students at the college level. The title of a scene from Maxine's play in Culture Night this past year portrays a likely depiction of the attitudes of the participants of this study, who after growing in appreciation and participation in what they deem their Cambodian culture have also utilized such cultural knowledge as their motivation for success at different levels--"Surviving to Thrive." The academic hopes of participants of this study were beyond themselves at the personal level, but contributed to a collective dream for the Cambodian community to not only survive, but in all levels to thrive.

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