

2008

# Vietnamese women's critical reflections on their adaptation to living in the United States

Mai Le Ho Del Buono

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The University of San Francisco

VIETNAMESE WOMEN'S CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON THEIR  
ADAPTATION TO LIVING IN THE UNITED STATES

A Dissertation Presented  
to  
The Faculty of the School of Education  
International and Multicultural Education Department

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Education

by  
Mai Le Ho Del Buono  
San Francisco, California  
December 2008

This dissertation, written under the direction of the candidate's dissertation committee and approved by the members of the committee, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of the School of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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## CHAPTER 1

### THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

“Conflicts arose in my family because women adapt, or desire to adapt, more quickly than men do. The fact that men do not want to change, culturally, and women do, creates an imbalance in the family system. This imbalance creates an imbalance in the Vietnamese community.”

-Hyacinth.

#### Statement of the Problem

In a recent article on Vietnamese refugee women’s identity, the authors point out that “every person is a cultural being...and culture influences behaviors, thinking, feelings, attitudes, values, and beliefs” (Phan, Rivera, & Roberts-Wilbur, 2005, p. 306). While all people experience some complications in life, ethnic immigrants and refugees tend to experience magnified complications due to sexism, racism, and dominant cultural oppression (Parham, 1999; Phan et al., 2005). For ethnic immigrant and refugee women, the prospect of living in a new culture such as the United States, on one hand, may bring new freedoms. On the other hand, in addition to the cultural stereotypes and norms from the “old country,” these immigrant and refugee women may face additional issues such as gender role conflict, work discrimination, and racial discrimination. Researchers and theorists have noted that very little is known about the adaptation of Vietnamese refugee and immigrant women (Parham, 1999; Phan et al., 2005). Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the experiences of Vietnamese refugee and immigrant women in order to understand the nature of their adaptation to the U.S. culture.

The new wave of Southeast Asian immigration to the United States has been ongoing for more than three decades. Approximately 18,000 Vietnamese migrated to the

United States between 1955 and 1974, primarily the wives of U.S. service members, and some students (Gordon, 1989). The first significant wave of Vietnamese refugees, numbering 125,000, arrived after the fall of Saigon in April 1975. A second large wave occurring between 1979–82 added an additional 270,000 Vietnamese refugees, a disproportionate number of whom were female (Hein & Beger, 1993). Beginning with the fall of Saigon, between two and three million Vietnamese men, women, and children—including this writer, who was then 13—escaped from their homeland, and eventually 1.7 million of them settled in the United States, of which at least 600,000 now reside in California (Banerjee, 2001; Freeman, 1989; U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). With this resettlement came a shift in cultural values and assumptions, which led many women, including this writer, to develop a dual identity, partly accepting, and partly rejecting the old order.

Throughout Vietnamese history, as power changed hands from one ruler to the next, the challenges that Vietnamese women faced also changed—arguably for the worse (Marr, 1981). This was especially true during the Vietnam War, when the women had to be the breadwinners, in addition to their other responsibilities, because their husbands were away fighting (Chung, 1991; Englemann, 1990; Espiritu, 1997). They may also have had to take care of their husbands' parents (Hayslip & Wurts, 1989).

Vietnamese society is one in which women have been and still are relegated to a subservient role to the males in their lives. Based on the three submissions that are thought to have derived from Confucian teachings, women are supposed to follow thusly: First, as girls at home, they must obey their fathers. When they get married, they must obey their husbands. If they survive their husbands, they must obey their eldest sons

(Sully, 1971). This arrangement has been upheld for centuries, not only by men but also by women themselves, who have been conditioned to accept it by their parents, and who in turn pass it on uncritically to their sons and daughters (Chung, Bemak, & Wong, 2000). As Chung et al. note, psychologically, many Vietnamese women have internalized and built personal identities based on gender role oppression.

Despite Vietnamese emigration to the U.S. reportedly having resulted in greater gender parity (Chung & Bemak, 1998; Kibria, 1993) and some indication that there have been gender role changes (Chung et al., 2000; Zhou & Bankston, 2001) among Vietnamese immigrants, Vietnamese women may be at risk for double oppression. There are clear signs that Vietnamese women are a particularly at risk population. According to the National Institute of Health, Vietnamese-American women have the highest cervical cancer rate of any ethnic group in the U.S. (NIH, 2005) and are younger at diagnosis with breast cancer with the poorest prognosis than other ethnic groups (Lee, Lin, Wrensch, Adler, & Eisenberg, 2002). Health professionals speculate that such high rates are due to cultural norms that reinforce oppression. Recent research also indicates that Vietnamese women experience a high rate of discrimination in employment making them particularly vulnerable to economic oppression (Espiritu, 1999).

Vietnamese women in the U.S. experience a high rate of domestic violence (Bui & Morash, 1999; Nguyen, 2004) and are less likely to seek help compared to other ethnic women. Studies have shown that while Vietnamese women are more likely to embrace American culture than their male counterparts (Bui & Morash, 1999; Nguyen, 2004), they are less likely to benefit from assimilation into the American culture due to the domination by male family members (Bui & Morash, 1999; Nguyen, 2002). The research

on post-immigration adaptation of Vietnamese women is sparse in terms of illuminating what adaptation strategies are helping this population to mitigate oppression.

In summary, although the current wave of Vietnamese immigrants has now been in the U.S. for three decades, and some research exists in the literature on health (Edmonds & Brady, 2003; Glanz, Croyle, Chollette, & Pinn, 2003), law (Hein & Beger, 2001), migration (Foner, 1997; Kibria, 1993; Pike, 1999), mental health (Gellis, 2003), and education (Zhou & Bankston, 2001), there is a scarcity of research specifically about how Vietnamese women have adapted to the American culture. These women's voices deserve to be heard.

#### Purpose of the Study

This qualitative, participatory study explored the experiences of a group of Vietnamese women with a focus on their perception of their individual adaptation experiences. The purpose of this research was to ascertain whether Vietnamese women's adaptation strategies have been helpful and what their recommendations are to other Vietnamese women in the United States. Using the participatory action-oriented research methods of Paulo Freire (1970, 1981, 1982, 1994, 1998), which have given voice to the "unheard," this researcher engaged in dialogues with six Vietnamese women who immigrated to the United States from Vietnam between 1975 and 2004.

#### Research Questions

The central research question is how have Vietnamese women adapted to living in the U.S.? Specifically, the study addressed three areas related to adaptation:

1. What challenges do Vietnamese immigrant women face in adapting to life in the United States?

2. What strategies do Vietnamese women use to overcome the challenges they face in adapting to the United States? How helpful are these strategies in adapting to the United States?
3. What recommendations would they offer to other Vietnamese women as they attempt to adapt to life in the United States?

### Theoretical Framework

The study draws on the theoretical framework related to adaptation and intersectionality. Prominent in the psychological adaptation literature is the model of acculturation strategies proposed by Berry and others (Berry, 1980, 1985, 1990, 1997; Berry & Sam, 1997; Berry, Kim, Minde, & Mok, 1987; Berry, Kim, Power, Young, & Bujaki, 1989). Acculturation strategies refer to the planned methods that individuals use in responding to new stress-inducing cultural contexts. Berry and others propose a four-fold classification, which includes the following: assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization. They suggest that the assimilation strategy occurs when the individuals decide not to maintain their cultural identities by seeking contact in their daily interactions with the dominant group. When the individuals from the non-dominant group “place a value on holding on to their original culture” (Berry & Sam, 1997, p. 297) and seek no contact with the dominant group, then these individuals are pursuing a separation strategy. When individuals express an interest in maintaining strong ties in their everyday life both with their ethnic group as well as with the dominant group, the strategy used is referred to as integration. The fourth strategy is marginalization, in which individuals “lose cultural and psychological contact with both their traditional culture and the larger society” (Berry, 1998, p. 119).

Integration implies both the preservation of the home culture and an active involvement with the host culture. Central to the theory of integration strategy is the assumption of universality. Berry and his colleagues (1997) assume the argument that although there are substantial variations in the life circumstances of the cultural groups that experience acculturation, the psychological processes that operate during acculturation are essentially the same for all the groups. This constitutes a universalist perspective on acculturation (Berry & Sam, 1997). In other words, immigrants' acculturation strategies reveal the underlying psychological processes that unfold during their adaptation to new cultural contexts. Developing their previous research, Berry and Sam (1998) maintain that other psychological processes such as "behavioral shifts" (changing behavior), "culture shedding" (eliminating traditions), "culture shock" (sudden exposure to an unfamiliar culture), and "acculturative stress" (stress related to adapting to different cultural expectations) are also experienced in varying degrees by an individual undergoing acculturation.

While the integration position dominates current psychological research on acculturation, another adaptation theory from the sociological field also provides an important theoretical basis for research and anchors this study. Sociologist Portes and his colleagues (Portes & Zhou, 1993; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996) coined the term "segmented assimilation" to describe three contrasting acculturation patterns characteristic of the new wave of immigrants. The first is the traditional model of linear acculturation and assimilation whereby the immigrant group advances economically and is integrated socially, culturally, and politically into the middle class. The second pattern is selective assimilation where immigrants develop a robust ethnic enclave along with a deliberate

preservation of the native culture. Ostensibly, the Vietnamese communities in New Orleans and southern California are prominent examples of this pattern because in both of these cases, the Vietnamese choose to live in purposefully segregated areas (Bhatia, 2000). Conversely, the third pattern is descending assimilation where entire ethnic segments spiral into poverty as typified by Mexican immigrants in southern California (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996).

Portes and Rumbaut (1996, 2001) identify several conditions that distinguish the adaptation and acculturation patterns of recent immigrant groups from those arriving earlier. These conditions include the transformation in the U.S. labor market, the ethnicity of the immigrants, and the geographic location where they settle. Obviously, economic conditions in general and in particular, the labor market, will affect new entrants into the labor market. The ethnicity of immigrants to some degree affects how they are perceived and received by the dominant culture. Related to the labor market and economic conditions, is the location where the immigrants settle. The economic climate of any particular location also factors into the success of immigrants in their adaptation.

Although compelling, these theories and examples by themselves do not adequately explain the experiences of women, particularly Vietnamese women. To assist with the objective of understanding Vietnamese women's adaptation experiences as immigrants/refugees in the United States, the study drew on feminist theory, specifically intersectionality theory (Baca & Thornton, 1996; Lorber, 1998; Mohanty, 1991).

According to Browne and Misra (2003) in their annual review of the field of sociology, the current feminist theory states that in order to understand women's experiences, one must take into consideration the intersection of race, class, and gender. Intersectional

approaches maintain that gender and race are not discrete analytic categories that simply can be added together (Weber, 2001). Rather, feminist sociologists call for an alternative theorizing that captures the combination of gender and race. Race is “gendered” and gender is “racialized,” so that race and gender fuse to create unique experiences and opportunities for all groups—not just women of color (Amott & Matthaei, 1991; Collins 1999; Glenn, 1999; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Kibria, 1990; Weber & Higginbotham, 1997). Of particular importance to the present study are three central interests: the underlying explanation for race and gender oppression; assumptions of whether race and gender intersections are ubiquitous or contingent; and the concern that women of color face compound jeopardy of being oppressed because of these intersections.

#### Scope and Delimitation of the Study

The participants in the study were limited to ethnic Vietnamese women, some of whom emigrated from Vietnam, while others may have been born as first-generation Americans of Vietnamese parentage living in the San Jose area of California within the United States. The participants were selected from the membership of the Vietnamese Catholic Church and Buddhist Temple of Santa Clara County, California. Eight Vietnamese women were invited and six chose to participate. This study focused on adaptation, family, relationships, work, and economic issues.

Since this study was not meant to validate previous research, nor concerned with generalizing to the larger Vietnamese-American community, the researcher did not focus particular attention on each woman’s experience vis-à-vis the particular wave of immigrants to which she belonged. Rather, the focus was on each woman’s experience, as an individual, and on creating a group experience and esprit de corps. While their

immigration experiences are both similar and dissimilar, the act of telling their stories had the effect of creating an amazing level of agreement and validation as a group about their individual experiences. What follows is a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of the women’s stories relative to their lives in the Vietnamese community of San Jose, California, beginning with some demographic information, case studies, followed by a discussion of the common, shared themes which arose from the group interaction, and concluding with the unique themes.

The results and findings of the research are presented in two sections based on whether a finding was a common or unique theme. Common themes were those mentioned by three or more participants. Likewise, unique themes were those mentioned by only one or two participants. For readability purposes, the researcher refers to participants by the flower name given to each for anonymity.

#### Definitions

*Acculturation:* In the context of this study, acculturation is the modification of the culture of a group or individual as a result of contact with a different culture.

Acculturation occurs when a “newcomer absorbs the cultural norms, values, beliefs, and behavior patterns of the ‘host’ society.” (Le, 2008)

*Intersectionality:* Intersectionality theory applies to the way categories such as race/ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation, and other categories of identity can intersect to form a different kind of oppression. (Warner, 2008)

*Double oppression:* The term “double oppression” is used when there are two factors oppressing someone, for example, a black woman (Sanders, T. 2001). In the context of this dissertation, double oppression refers to Vietnamese woman who has no control over

decision making (she is subservient to her father, husband, and eldest), yet is expected to earn money for the family. This is the first oppression. The second is that she must still perform all the duties of a wife—clean, prepare meals, have sex with the husband on his terms, and receives the blame for inadequacies of her children.

*Unique themes:* In the context of this study, the unique themes are those not commonly shared by all six participants. Only a few participants expressed unique themes and those were in the areas of challenges and recommendations.

*Common themes:* Common themes are those shared by more than two participants. These common themes were found in all three categories: challenges, strategies, and recommendations.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### Introduction

According to statistics published by the U.S. Census Bureau in 2000, the U.S. population was 281,421,906 and nearly 4% of that total was Asian. From 1990 to the year 2000, the Vietnamese segment of the Asian population increased by 90% and the overall Asian population is expected to increase to 18.5 million by 2020. The largest percentage of the Vietnamese population is distributed in five states, with the highest number in California. Nearly all Asians live in metropolitan areas, mostly in the Western region. Interestingly, of all of the Asian ethnicities, the Vietnamese population was the least likely to have identified themselves as both Asian and Vietnamese. Despite the growing numbers in the overall Asian population, very little is written about their experience as immigrants, particularly the Vietnamese immigrants. The literature and research on post-immigration adaptation of Vietnamese women, in particular, is sparse.

This chapter provides relevant literature and is organized in six sections. The first section reviews literature on immigrant adaptation and acculturation. The second section addresses the sociological perspectives of gender oppression and the third discusses the women's place in Vietnamese history. The fourth section briefly addresses Vietnamese emigration to the United States. The fifth section reviews the literature related to Vietnamese adaptation to life in the United States. The sixth section discusses Vietnamese women's adaptation to life in the United States. The chapter concludes with a summary.

## Adaptation and Acculturation of Immigrants

Some theorists (Bhatia & Ram, 2001; Gibson, 2001) now urge that we reconsider certain previously held sociological assumptions about how acculturation is experienced by immigrants living in the United States. Drawing from postcolonial and diaspora theories, these theorists call for more situated analyses to reveal the variability of the immigrant experience and, in particular, how differences in status and power shape both acculturation strategies and acculturation outcomes. Their central points are that there is no universal psychological process of acculturation experienced by all immigrants, that previously developed sociological models have not adequately accounted for the experiences of non-Western immigrants, and that a fuller understanding of the acculturation process requires more careful attention to the historical, political, and social forces that shape the migratory experience (Bhatia & Ram, 2001).

Acculturation is the process of culture change and adaptation that occurs when individuals with different cultures come into contact (Bhatia & Ram, 2001; Gibson, 2001). Thus, to understand the acculturation process of immigrants settling in the United States, we must look closely at which cultures are coming into contact and with what effect. Although in much of the literature on immigrant acculturation, there is a presumption that the newly acquired culture is a homogeneous form of the American culture, Gibson (2001) found that the reality is often quite different.

Bhatia and Ram (2001) argue that the nature of the acculturation process is shaped by many factors including the following: where immigrants settle; the gender, ethnic, and social class composition of the communities in which they settle; and whether or not they are surrounded by co-ethnics or are more isolated from their ethnic culture.

To understand the acculturation experience, we must also, as Bhatia and Ram (2001) note, know about the immigrants' situation in their homelands prior to emigration—including such factors as their social standing, their educational levels, occupational skills, and even their previous exposure to urban and Western cultures and the reasons that led them to leave their homelands. For example, those who come primarily for economic gain may be more willing than political refugees to take up the ways of their American neighbors and to encourage their offspring to do so as well.

Refugees, on the other hand, especially if they believe that their stay in the new country will be temporary, are generally less driven by economics and job aspirations and frequently have less incentive to adopt the ways of the new country (Gibson, 2001). Unlike economic immigrants, they may see little need to become proficient in the ways of their hosts, anticipating a speedy return to the home country. Learning English may be a low priority. Similarly, those who are surrounded by co-ethnics in both their neighborhoods and job situations may have little exposure to the dominant American culture, or even if they have such exposure, they may be able to operate quite successfully by adopting only selective aspects of the dominant culture (Bhatia & Ram, 2001; Gibson, 2001).

Ostensibly, the acculturation process is highly influenced by structural and contextual factors in the receiving country. Bhatia and Ram (2001) found that a majority of the current post-1965 wave of immigrants to the United States is non-European and non-White and further, that many encounter racial discrimination and exclusion as they try to adapt to their new environment. For some this discrimination can be severe and therefore can have a major impact on how they and their children experience life in

America. As Gibson (2001) points out, the social class background of the immigrant also influences the acculturation process; middle class immigrants generally encounter a very different America due to the neighborhoods where they settle than those who have few economic resources. Allegedly, immigrants who arrive poor are less likely to benefit from economic mobility and integration into the mainstream of American society (Bhatia & Ram, 2001).

Three contrasting patterns of adaptation have been identified (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996; Portes & Zhou, 1993): 1) linear acculturation and assimilation, 2) selective acculturation or selective assimilation, and 3) downward assimilation. The first is the traditional model of linear acculturation and assimilation whereby the immigrant group advances economically and is integrated socially, culturally, and politically into the middle class. Many Cuban exiles in Miami exemplify this pattern (Portes & Stepick, 1993). The second pattern is referred to as selective acculturation or selective assimilation. Primary features of this type are a strong ethnic enclave coupled with the deliberate preservation of the homeland culture, albeit in an adapted form more suitable to life in the host country. A pattern of selective acculturation can lead, as in the first type, to rapid mobility into the middle class. The Punjabi Sikhs in both Britain and the United States provide examples of this type (Gibson, 2001; Gibson & Bhachu, 1991); the Vietnamese in New Orleans and Southern California are other examples (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996; Zhou & Bankston, 1998). In contrast to the first two patterns, the third (downward assimilation) keeps immigrants trapped at the bottom of the economic ladder. Some Haitians in Miami risk this fate, as do some Mexican immigrants in Southern California (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996).

Portes and Rumbaut (1996) identify several circumstances that differentiate the adaptation and acculturation patterns of today's immigrants from those arriving in earlier waves and that place many newcomers at risk of assimilation into an underclass. These include changes in the U.S. labor market, the ethnicity of the new immigrants, and the geographic location where they settle. As in the past, many immigrants arrive with few marketable job skills and little formal education; however, because of today's reduction in manufacturing, unskilled workers can no longer move readily into factory jobs, receive on-the-job training, and move ahead economically. Second, unlike in earlier periods of U.S. history, a majority of today's immigrants are non-White and at risk of racial discrimination. Third, many of today's newcomers are compelled to settle in the most depressed sections of large cities where they are surrounded by crime, poverty, and high unemployment rates. Opportunities for upward mobility are severely limited.

These three factors influence the mode of acculturation adopted by recent immigrants and their children, in turn shaping not only relations between the generations within immigrant families, but also the nature of social relations between the children of immigrants and the other youth with whom they come into contact at school and in their neighborhoods (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996). Whereas some immigrants and their offspring continue to follow the "traditional" path of upward mobility and integration into the middle class, many others are stuck on the bottom rungs of the economic ladder limiting successive generations. The children who are the most vulnerable are generally those who live in poor neighborhoods, especially in urban areas, who come into daily contact with alienated native youths, and whose parents and ethnic community lack the cultural and social resources needed to guide their educational progress and to steer them away

from a deviant path. Wishing to be identified as “American” (and not foreign) and to be accepted by their American peers, these young people are frequently drawn into the oppositional subcultures of marginalized peers (Portes & Zhou, 1993, p. 83). Such is the case for some Haitian children in Miami. They may feel they have to choose between remaining “Haitian” and, consequently, being looked down on by their African American peers or adopting an African American identity, which in inner-city Miami frequently carries with it antisocial and counter-school attitudes and behaviors (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996). Similar patterns have been documented in some Mexican American communities in California, where immigrant students who wish to be accepted by native-born Mexican peers reportedly adopt a “cholo” (Mexican youth gang) identity and the anti-school behaviors characteristic of many such youths (Matute-Bianchi, 1991; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996; Vigil 1997).

Immigrant youth who have the support of a strong ethnic enclave, as in the Punjabi and Vietnamese examples cited earlier, or who have the support of parents who are themselves acculturating to their new surroundings at a pace similar to their children, which occurs most often among middle class immigrants, are often protected to some degree from the deleterious effects of discrimination and pressures to reject the traditional culture of their parents. Many of these children employ a strategy termed additive acculturation (Gibson, 2000). Gibson found that acquisition of knowledge of and skills in the new culture and language are viewed as an additional set of tools to be incorporated into the child's cultural repertoire rather than as a rejection or replacement of old traits. In his ethnography, Gibson suggests that an additive strategy of acculturation or an

environment that encourages additive acculturation can aid immigrant youth in navigating across cultural borders and increase their likelihood of success in school.

Frequently, however, the children of immigrants encounter forces for subtractive rather than additive acculturation, heightening the risk of dissonant acculturation (Gibson, 2000; Valenzuela, 1999). Dissonant acculturation occurs when acculturation among second-generation youth is neither guided nor accompanied by changes in the first generation. Such a situation may also lead to intergenerational conflict and estrangement between parents and children (Porter & Rumbaut, 1996; Zhou, 1997). Children most at risk of generational dissonance are those who live in poor neighborhoods, generally in urban areas, and who come into daily contact with marginalized native youths and often have trouble in school.

As Bhatia and Ram (2001) note, the way acculturation pressures are experienced may be gender specific. Recent studies of immigrant youth indicate, for example, that boys may have more difficulties in accommodating themselves to school rules while simultaneously seeking to resist the forces of assimilation and to secure and maintain their reputation within peer networks (Gibson, 2000). While girls may find the boundaries between their different cultural worlds more permeable than boys (Waters, 1996), they may face additional struggle with gender role confusion and double oppression due to a discriminatory dominant culture (Phan, Rivera, & Roberts-Wilbur, 2005). More research is needed in this area; but it appears that the acculturation experiences of young immigrant males may be qualitatively different from those of young immigrant females.

## Feminist Perspectives of Gender Oppression

That women are oppressed is a fundamental assertion of the feminist theory. To understand the feminist perspective of oppression, this review now turns to how feminist theorists define the term. The word oppression is defined as “unjust or cruel exercise of authority or power; something that oppresses, especially in being an unjust or excessive exercise of power; a sense of being weighed down in body or mind” (Merriam-Webster, 2008).

It is also instructive to look at the ordinary experiences of those who are oppressed. A classic feature of life for those who are oppressed is the double bind; situations in which options are reduced to few and all of the choices expose one to some type of penalty, censure, or deprivation (Flannery, 2000; Frye, 1983; Tisdell, 2000). For example, Vietnamese women are taught that, in addition to their subservient role, they are to remain pleasant and cheerful (Jameison, 1993).

According to one school of feminist thought, in her compliance the Vietnamese woman participates in her own censure. Not to comply subjects the woman to actions on the part of the dominator to insure future compliance. In her ground-breaking work, *The Second Sex*, (1946) de Beauvoir states,

Thus, humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being....She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other. (p. 42)

In this conceptualization, de Beauvoir provides a theoretical, psychological, and sociological construction of the relationship between a man and a woman in terms of a subject-object model, which in man’s Subjectivity—his self-assertion as autonomous—is

established only through opposition to and dependence upon woman's Objectiveness of Otherness. However, other feminist thinkers offer different perspectives. Psychological feminist theories build on Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Traule (1986), which argued that women's social learning and identity formation differs from men's learning both in terms of its developmental sequence and in terms of its underlying epistemology.

### *Structural Feminist Theory*

Structural feminist theory focuses on social structures, notably patriarchy and capitalism that oppress women. Theorists in this tradition emphasize the dominating influence of these social structures, but by doing so they also tend to construe women as passive (Tisdell, 2000). Despite their somewhat deterministic view of women's circumstances, structural feminists nevertheless call for resistance toward the mechanisms in families, schools, and workplaces that serve to reproduce oppressive relations of power (Flannery, 2000).

### *Post-structural Feminist Theory*

Post-structural feminist theory construes power relations in a more complex way, focusing on multiple systems of oppression, possibilities for resistance, and ways in which relations of power work to shape women's identities (Tisdell, 2000). Theorists argue that this theoretical approach is productive because it draws attention to the complexity of women's "lived experiences" while at the same time revealing opportunities for women to renegotiate gender-based relations of power (Flannery, 2000). Yet this theoretical perspective can become overly abstract, making it less useful in drawing implications for practice or policy (Tisdell, 2000).

In part, self-determination depends on self-esteem. According to Flannery (2000), identity formation constitutes an important type of learning, although it is not always regarded as such. In the conventional view, identities are shaped by internal psychological forces and by external social forces. Women's experiences in the home, at school, and in the workplace are typically viewed as the conditions that determine their identities. By seeing identity formation as a type of learning, however, one comes to realize that women do have some conscious control over their own identities. As Flannery (2000) argues, "women are not just passive recipients of...societal prescriptions; rather, they are often very proactive, choosing change" (pp. 67-68). Women have opportunities to learn, unlearn, and relearn who they are. Shaping their own identities through active processes of learning, women come to develop the self-esteem necessary to accomplish what they want to accomplish in the world.

Being oneself in the world has a great deal to do with "voice." As Hayes and colleagues (2001) explain, "voice" connotes both the ability to make connections with other people and the skill to express thoughts in ways that can be understood by others. She explores voice along three dimensions: as *talk*, as an expression of *identity*, and as collective *power* and *influence*. In considering voice as talk, Hayes identifies two modes: (a) *rapport talk*, a communication style (favored by women) that relies on personal narrative to establish and maintain relationships and (b) *report talk*, a communication style (often favored by men) that establishes power within relationships. Rapport talk is conversational, with the participants actively listening, exchanging experiences, and strengthening relationships.

A similar perspective was presented in the research of Belenky et al. (2000) who discussed women's capacity for *subjective knowing*, that is, for "knowing from within, or from one's inner voice" (p. 116). When they come to know something in this way, women rely upon their own sense or feeling of what is true. Women, however, often find their inner voice at odds with the types of knowledge-construction privileged in certain settings.

According to Tisdell (2000), four of the five themes commonly discussed in contemporary feminist pedagogy draw upon Belenky and associates' early work: women's construction of knowledge, their development of voice, their quest for authority, and their ever-evolving identity. The psychological approach focuses on individual experience—primarily the experience of white middle-class women—and seeks evidence of similarities among women. Subsequent work has investigated a fifth theme in feminist pedagogy, the experiences of "marginalized groups" such as working class women, women of color, and lesbian and bisexual women.

Structural feminist pedagogy developed along a parallel track during the same period as the psychological approach, inspired primarily by the work of Brazilian critical educator, Paulo Freire (1994) who was concerned with structural sources of oppression and privilege. He, bell hooks, and others examined the appropriate uses of authority, urging the sharing of authority while at the same time acknowledging that authority cannot be abandoned entirely in an educational setting.

Post-structural feminist pedagogy draws on psychological and structural models, but extends beyond them. In particular, post-structural feminist pedagogy highlights the positionality of learners and engages them in a quest for emancipation (Flannery, 2000).

Tisdell (2000) argues that all versions of feminist pedagogy engage in deconstruction of the ways individuals have been socialized to construct various features of their identities, especially features related to class, race, and gender. She draws a further distinction between “ludic” postmodernism—generally the domain of elite academics who focus almost entirely on deconstructing language—and “resistance” postmodernism, which focuses on “the resistance of particular marginalized groups while remaining mindful of the danger of *absolutizing* any particular category” (p. 170).

Feminist theory informs the present study by focusing the research lens on particular questions relating to the centrality of gender in the shaping of human consciousness. The aim of a feminist approach, ideologically, is to correct both the invisibility and the distortion of female experience in ways relevant to ending women’s unequal social position (Lather, 1991).

In a theoretical examination of women’s rights, Bonds (2003) observes that politics of identity seem to dominate in a world caught up in globalization and struggling with the dilemma of national rights versus human rights. Bonds cites Afghanistan as a prime example of the dilemma the international community faces in the struggle to overcome Taliban rule, as it attempts to help rebuild a nation torn apart by violent ethnic clashes. In this case, and many more, women’s bodies became a location for contested national identity. In Afghanistan, the struggle for nationalist identity violated women’s international human rights through extreme forms of seclusion, isolation, and violence. Bonds goes on to observe that, in addition to the violence experienced by women because of extreme nationalism around the world, women in such situations are typically compelled to choose between nationalist struggles and struggles to achieve gender

equality. Bonds concluded that identity politics, as popularly conceived, leave no room for women to situate themselves at the crossroads of both struggles and lead to oversimplified notions of women's identity.

According to Bonds, the international human rights community until quite recently has relied on its own variation of a unified identity for women, which has led to a prejudiced approach to women's human rights that fails to address the complexity of human rights. Now, with increased pressure from global feminist activists, the international human rights community has expanded its definition of human rights violations to include many of the human rights abuses commonly perpetrated against women under the thin veil of national rights. Although this expansion represents significant progress for women globally, the movement still consistently relies on a rigid, unitary category of "woman" (Bonds, 2003).

### *Intersectionality*

Since the 1990s, many scholars have explored the concept of intersectionality within U.S. discourse and discourse originating from feminists in the global South (Hutchinson, 2001). More recently, some domestic and international scholars have begun to discuss intersectionality theory in the context of international human rights. There remains, however, a dearth of analysis in the application of intersectionality to human rights and specifically to immigrants (Bonds, 2003).

In the examination of the origins of intersectionality theory, various theorists (Hutchinson, 2001; McCall, 2005) place its germination from U.S.-based anti-subordination and anti-essentialist (feminist) theories, which refute the view that identity or the human "self" is reducible to a natural or socially constructed "essence." By relying

on “essence” in defining race or gender, essentialism precludes a complex analysis of the self that recognizes the intersection of racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism in people’s lives. Anti-essentialism and the notion of the intersectionality of racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism must inform the way we conceptualize women’s human rights. According to this view, individuals do not experience neatly compartmentalized types of discrimination based on mutually exclusive forms of, for example, racism, and sexism. Rather, individuals experience the complex interplay of multiple systems of oppression operating simultaneously in the world (Hutchinson, 2001; McCall, 2005).

Individualism is a fundamental aspect of Western notions of the self (McCall, 2005). Modernism conceives the self as unitary and static (Bond, 2003). Western postmodernist and poststructuralist theory, including most feminist and critical race theorists, dispute the validity of this conceptualization of the self as stable and fixed (Bonds, 2003; McCall, 2005).

In the global community, some theorists (Coomaraswamy, 1999; Stivens, 2000) understandably, criticize the Western emphasis on individualism within human rights discourse to the exclusion of group. Rather they posit the concept of “communitarianism” to frame the self and their conceptualization of human rights. Although some critiques maintain an essentialist framework (Bonds, 2003), many seem to assume an anti-essentialist approach that emphasizes multiple systems of oppression operating along the axes of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, class, and sexual orientation (Stivens, 2000).

Proponents of anti-essentialist theory—whether articulated by critical race theorists (Coomaraswamy, 1999; Hutchinson, 2001) or feminist theorists (McCall, 2005; Stivens, 2000) in the U.S. or by studies in the global South—all posit that identity cannot

be reduced to an essence that is so central to an individual's being that it precludes other categories of analysis along the axes of race, ethnicity, gender, class, religion, and sexual orientation. Intersectionality teaches that these subjectivities intersect in multiple systems of oppression that collectively affect women's lives. To illustrate the point, a woman may suffer discrimination based on race and gender but enjoy privilege according to her heterosexual orientation. Anti-essentialism and intersectionality envision a complex, fluid notion of the self, in which the individual is simultaneously the oppressed and the oppressor (Hutchinson, 2001; McCall, 2005).

Central to the theory of anti-essentialism is the notion that race, gender, and sexual orientation are not fixed, biological characteristics. Rather, these identity categories are socially constructed. Based on these socially constructed categories, individuals—including immigrants—experience concrete, real consequences of privilege, hierarchy, and prejudice around the globe (McCall, 2005).

The issue of “bicultural identities”—when individuals feel shaped by and loyal to at least two different cultures—is receiving considerable empirical attention in the field of psychology (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993; Smith et al., 2004). Individuals experiencing this are often immigrants from one culture to another, and include second- and third-generation descendants who remain identified with a “home” culture they may have only experienced while living continuously within a “different” and dominant culture (Stewart & McDermott, 2004). Theorists have articulated alternative types of bicultural identities (e.g., assimilating, accommodating, alternating, etc.), and researchers have explored the prominence of different kinds of bicultural identities in immigrant groups (Smith et al. 2004), as well as the ways in which bicultural persons experience

different situations in terms of identity (Rose, Morris, Chiu, & Chiu, 2000). Although some researchers (Howard, 2000) do not specifically focus on gender identities, and do not explicitly relate their research to feminist theories, others do (Deaux & Stewart, 2001). Ostensibly, the developments in the domains of psychology and sociology are parallel, compatible, and mutually informing (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). Explicitly linking them would facilitate an interdisciplinary dialogue on identity—including gender identity—both contributing from empirical knowledge and drawing from the empirical and theoretical resources in other fields.

Three central tenets of intersectionality are especially useful to the study of gender, race, and immigrant experience: (a) no social group is homogenous; (b) people must be located in terms of social structures that capture the power relations implied by those structures; and (c) there are unique effects of identifying with more than one social group (Misra, 2003). These three tenets inform and bring theoretical and methodological focus to the present research.

The first tenet, the recognition that women are not a homogenous group, may seem obvious; however, there has been a tendency to neglect identifying individual differences in prior research. In other words, by taking group categories as given and focusing only on individual-level variance within those groups, researchers may circumvent addressing how we have constructed these group categories themselves (Collins, 1999). For example, Hurtado (1996) illustrates how statistical analyses of pay and education parity data misrepresent women of color by assuming to describe “women.” By averaging the overall lower pay and education status of women of color (here black, Hispanic, and Native American) with that of white women’s, researchers

produce a group average much higher than the average for women of color. A more complex pattern emerges when one considers that black women have educational attainment at a level comparable to white women's average education level and higher than black men's, yet they are paid less than both of these other groups (Hurtado, 1996).

By analyzing pay and education parity data in terms of either gender (women versus men) or race (blacks versus whites), the unique pattern of black women's experience is lost along with critical knowledge of how both race and gender work to have behavioral consequences. Cole and Stewart (2001) examined how the study of differences such as these can lead to invidiously discriminating comparisons. Methods that rely on invidious comparisons and seek to legitimate popular stereotypes are "more likely to cause harm and produce distorted and partial findings" (Cole & Stewart, 2001, p. 95). In contrast to these examples, research that accounts for people's multidimensional experience of the world is more likely to produce new knowledge that presents a complex representation of difference instead of oversimplifying it. Using intersectionality as a research lens can facilitate construction of clearer group categories and disaggregation when appropriate (Misra, 2003).

The second integral tenet of intersectionality is the view that people must be understood as located within social structures (Lorber, 1998; Misra, 2003). Locating a person socially demands consideration of her material reality and the social forces that shape that reality, particularly social disparities and power dynamics. Considering these contexts, we not only find "new" population segments previously overlooked but also a fuller picture of the social influences on any person's life. Access to power, in particular, is a frequently neglected but highly influential aspect of social structure; and pertinent to

any research conducted on immigrant women (Collins, 1999; Lorber, 1998). From studies of discrimination, we understand that a critical factor shaping experiences and consequences of oppression is the victim's access to power. While white women may be excluded from various forms of power, their usually close proximity to white men (as brothers, fathers, lovers, husbands) gives them greater access to the dominant holders of power than an Asian immigrant would have who does not regularly interact with white men outside of possibly rare public situations (Hurtado, 1996). These unequal relations to privilege create differences, differences that often are, but should not be, attributed to culture or personality.

The third tenet of intersectionality—that individuals identify with more than one social group simultaneously and this identification produces unique consequences for the individual—requires a shift to acknowledging the ways social systems work together to affect gender identities (Collins, 1999; Crenshaw, 1997; Misra, 2003). As Crenshaw (1997) observes, when we stop seeing “race and gender as exclusive or separable categories,” we create more complex categories with richer pictures of gender within them (p. 551). Theoretically and practically, intersectionality theorists posit that this should be true for all social categories. An individual may share identification with one or more categories with another person, but those identities in combination with the social contexts they do not hold in common create a diverse range of experiences, worldviews, and psychological mechanisms for dealing with the world (Misra, 2003).

As Crenshaw (1997) observed for example, a professional-class Latina lesbian mother may share the same social categories and hold similar identities to a woman with a demographic background almost mirroring hers but who identifies as straight.

However, because of this difference, their gender identities, roles, and interactions with the broader social world are likely to be dissimilar in several crucial ways. Looking specifically at their mothering experiences, Crenshaw posits that they will likely employ different strategies to handle issues of stigma, access to money and credit, transmission of values to their children, and interaction with the legal system. In general, the psychological consequences of everyday interactions will be qualitatively different, despite their shared identity as a mother. For example, the role of co-mother is a unique aspect of lesbian families, creating a new parenting model that Wilson (2001) found emphasizes equality in parental responsibility and caretaking burden in a way that differs from that negotiated in heterosexual couples. Mothering strategies also vary along other social dimensions such as ethnic backgrounds, economic and social classes, or national origins, to name a few (Wilson, 2001).

Hill-Collins (1994) centered her analysis of mothering on women identified with marginalized ethnic groups and observed three themes key to their sense of motherhood not shared by white women: survival, power, and cultural identity. Hill-Collins asserts that many Native American, African American, Hispanic, and Asian American mothers need to work to ensure their children's physical survival, structure their mothering patterns based on a dominant group's perception of them as lacking power as mothers, and emphasize development of their children's cultural identity in ways that most white women do not because of their greater social and economic privilege (Hill-Collins, 1994).

### *Identity*

Identifying with specific social categories not only shapes attitudes but affects behavior as well. Examining the primary significance of an ethnic or gender identity,

Shih, Pittinsky, & Ambady (1999) found Asian American women's performance on tasks shifted depending on which identity, Asian or female, was more salient. When an Asian identity was made salient, women scored higher on quantitative tests and lower on verbal tests than when their female identity was made salient. In that second scenario, the reverse outcomes were produced (Shih et al., 1999). By considering individuals' multiple identities, and focusing on how they can play different roles, the researchers uncovered an important aspect of stereotypes that might have been missed if the intersection of ethnicity and gender were ignored.

Waters' (1996) research on identity development in adolescents also shows how culture and specifically relations to power from one's position within a culture can determine the very definition and value judgment of a stereotype. She interviewed girls and boys of Caribbean descent, either second generation of immigrants or those who immigrated when they were young. The researcher sought to find out whether they identified as black American, ethnic American, or as an immigrant. Waters reports that class, but not gender, confounded their choices. Poor and working-class young people identified more often as black or immigrant. Middle-class teens identified more frequently as ethnic. Waters found that while gender did not influence the choice of these identities, the ramifications of these choices varied greatly along gender lines. Boys' identities were more rigid than girls' identities. According to Waters, girls were able to move between identities more easily and were less stigmatized by their peers than their male counterparts who faced stricter enforcement of their identities from peers. Waters' study (1996) indicates there are multiple possibilities for identity development, and not a single possibility generalizable to all of society or even the entirety of this particular

group. Gender, class, immigrant status, parental attitudes, and peer relationships all appear to have influenced these teens' identity development.

### Vietnamese Women's Place in History

In the early history of Vietnamese culture and continuing through the periods of Chinese colonization, women's position in the societal fabric was one of subordination to men (Bergman-Eisen, 1974). Although women, still, visibly undertake the arduous labor of tilling fields, building roads, and working in crafts professions, they are also fulfilling roles as wives, mothers, and daughters, and as cooks, housekeepers, and servants.

Authority and power resides with the male gender in the Vietnamese culture, a factor that did not change with external influences, such as those imposed by the Chinese or French (Jamieson, 1993). "In a world in which material resources and power are unequally and unjustly divided, knowledge has been appropriated by the few to control and profit from the many" (Ada & Beutel, 1993 p. 3).

Throughout Vietnamese history, perceived male superiority was reinforced, despite there being plentiful cultural myths that tell stories of strong, decisive, and intelligent women (Bergman-Eisen, 1974). However, there seems to have been a discrepancy between myth and the realities of daily life in terms of authority and power. In short, while the myths project an ideal of strength, men contain it within the perimeters of domination; women are not in charge of their own destinies (Jamieson, 1993; SarDesai, 1998). In *Understanding Vietnam*, Jameison (1993) wrote that in Vietnam, a woman was taught, "to be submissive to her father when young, to her husband when married, and to her oldest son when widowed" (p. 18). All preferences were granted to the male first, and sometimes never to the female members of the family unit. For

example, males were educated first, and if a family had limited funds, only the male was educated, regardless of native intelligence and motivation.

The attitude and practice of subordination and oppression of women are clearly illustrated in the Vietnamese literature. In one admired proverb, it is stated, “One hundred women are not worth a single testicle” (Eisen-Bergman, 1994, pp. 16-17). Among other common proverbs, one states, “Even though you sleep intimately on the same bed and use the same cover with him, you must treat your husband as if he were your king or your father” (Eisen-Bergman, 1984, p. 18). Because, according to Vietnamese culture, men are charged with being the teachers, women are taught “compliance toward their male superior” (Jameison, 1993, p.18). Proverbs like these reflect the inequality between Vietnamese women and men. As power changed hands from one ruler to the next, the problems Vietnamese women faced also changed; however, oppressive conditions were maintained (Eisen-Bergman, 1984; Jameison, 1993).

A recent study by the United Nations (2004), shows that 80% of Vietnamese women in Vietnam suffered from some form of domestic violence whether from a boyfriend or a spouse, the degree of severity ranging from a slap to her death. Examples of the unjust treatment of Vietnamese women date back to the earliest times and although their treatment is less severe now, oppression of women still dominate current Vietnamese life. Ta Van Tai (1981) wrote extensively on women and the law in traditional Vietnam and addressed the severity of punishment. For example, if a woman was caught committing adultery, her punishment ranged from public beatings to the most severe punishment, death by strangulation. However, as an example of the inequality between the genders, it is acceptable for a man to have more than one wife. Moreover, if

a man commits adultery, he is punished only if he sleeps with another man's wife and the punishment is rarely death, and is usually admonishment (Ta, 1981, pp. 97–105).

Although the focus of this study is Vietnamese women immigrants, and oppression is addressed as an attribute of Vietnamese culture, it would be unbalanced to not address the effects of cultural norms on Vietnamese men. In other words, when one group in any culture is oppressed, an oppressor group must endure the restrictions placed upon them as social agents assuming the role of oppressor. In a recent article, counseling theorists Nghe, Mahalik, and Lowe (2003) discuss the strict socialization of Asian males, and specifically Vietnamese males. These authors note that messages to males in the Vietnamese socialization include appropriate family role as head of household, emotional suppression, control, proper assertive behavior, and behaving in ways that do not reflect negatively on the family. As many observers of Vietnamese culture note, men and women are subjected to cultural scripts stipulating gender appropriate behavior at an early age (Nghe et al., 2003; Sue & Sue, 1999).

The observation that the Vietnamese culture, as a culture, is conflicted is not new (e.g. Bergman-Eisen, 1974; Freeman, 1989; Kibria, 1993). Vietnam has a long history of colonization by outsiders. The origins of Vietnamese cultural traditions governing family systems, marital obligations, and law in Vietnam are Confucian, derived from the Chinese, who invaded and conquered Vietnam around 111 B.C. The truth is the Vietnamese culture has undergone several waves of wars and oppression by other cultures, including the Chinese and the French. The years of colonization and war have had a large impact on the Vietnamese culture and in particular, on gender roles. Women have had to be soldiers and breadwinners; men have felt the sting and emasculation of

being conquered (Nash, Nguyen 1995), (Marr, 1981). The present study, while recognizing the effects of the rich Vietnamese cultural traditions on both genders, concerns itself with Vietnamese women and their social position as the oppressed.

### Vietnamese Emigration to the United States

Vietnamese emigration to the United States is recent. Prior to 1975, most Vietnamese residing in the United States were spouses and children of American service members in Vietnam. On April 30, 1975, “the fall of Saigon” ended the Vietnam War and prompted the first of two waves of emigration from Vietnam to the United States. Vietnamese who had worked closely with Americans during the Vietnam War feared reprisals by the Communist party. One hundred twenty-five thousand Vietnamese citizens departed from their native country in the spring of 1975. The U.S. government airlifted these refugees from Vietnam on U.S. military cargo ships and transferred them to the United States government bases in Guam, Thailand, Wake Island, Hawaii, California, and the Philippines, as part of “Operation New Life.” Subsequently, they were transferred to four refugee centers throughout the United States: Camp Pendleton in California, Fort Chaffee in Arkansas, Eglin Air Force Base in Florida, and Fort Indiantown Gap in Pennsylvania (Chung, Bemak, and Wong, 2000).

Although the Ford Administration supported the arrival of Vietnamese immigrants and passed the Indochina Migration and Refugee Act of 1975, initially the American population did not welcome Vietnamese immigrants. A poll conducted in 1975 showed only 36% of Americans were in favor of Vietnamese immigration (Chung et al., 2000).

In 1977, a second wave of Vietnamese refugees began fleeing Vietnam. This wave of emigration lasted until the mid 1980s. The second wave began because of the new Communist government's implementation of economic, political, and agricultural policies based on Communist ideology. These policies included "reeducation" and torture of former South Vietnamese military personnel and those presumed friendly to the South Vietnamese cause, the closing of businesses owned by ethnic Chinese Vietnamese, the seizing of farmland and redistribution of it, and the mass forced relocation of citizens from urban to rural areas that were previously uncultivated or ruined during the war (Chung et al., 2000).

During this time, approximately two million Vietnamese fled Vietnam in small, overcrowded boats. This group of refugees, infamously known as the "boat people" fled to asylum camps in Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, or Hong Kong and awaited acceptance by foreign countries. To assist Vietnamese refugees, Congress passed the Refugee Act of 1980, which reduced restrictions on entry to the United States. It also provided a definition of a refugee, created the Office of Refugee Resettlement, set the number of refugee admissions at 50,000 per year, and allowed a refugee to adjust his or her status after one year to become a permanent resident and after four more years, to become a United States citizen. In addition, the U.S. government passed laws to allow children of American service members and former political prisoners to enter the United States. In total, the United States accepted 531,310 refugees and asylum seekers from Vietnam between 1981 and 2000 (Sue & Sue, 1999).

Several factors influenced the history and evolution of the Vietnamese culture; a culture which began tens of thousands of years ago in what is now North Vietnam. Over

time, inhabitants of the Southeast Asian islands migrated to the area, and eventually people from China migrated to the area. These peoples commingled their genes, culture, and language and a unique culture emerged about two thousand years ago, creating what is now known as the Vietnamese culture (O'Harrow, 1995; SarDesai, 1998). The Kingdom of Van Lang emerged in the seventh century B.C., ruled by the Hung kings, and lasted for two thousand years. The influence of this first kingdom, according to historians, is still a major factor in the experience of Vietnamese people (O'Harrow, 1995; SarDesai, 1998). This early historical influence prevails as a basis for the cultural characteristics as ethnic identity. After this period, the Chinese, the French, as well as the American influence via the Vietnam War subjected Vietnamese to colonization.

In 111 B.C., Vietnam became a colony of China, and although the cultural patterns of the indigenous Vietnamese prevailed, the Chinese inflicted rigid structures of conformity, owing to Confucianism. With their hard-fought independence from the Chinese in 936 A.D., the Vietnamese found stability through Buddhism. Vietnamese culture has commingled the philosophies of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, blending into a Vietnamese way of life. Later, a Western influence became part of the fabric of Vietnamese culture first because of French colonization in the mid 1800s and then through American intervention in the struggle with communism. All of these influences shaped not only Vietnam as a culture and a way of life, but also the individual identities of the Vietnamese people. Moreover, before one can enter into a discussion about the experiences of Vietnamese women, one must first examine how the above-mentioned influences affected Vietnamese women's experience.

One of the factors that influences the adjustment and adaptation of Vietnamese persons in the U.S. is their experience as refugees. Each wave of refugees has had a unique circumstance (Chung et al., 2000; Sue & Sue, 1999). To begin to conceptualize Vietnamese experience in the U.S., one must know in which wave of refugees a person or family arrived and the circumstances that were endemic to that group of people. Whereas the first refugee wave came from Vietnam after the fall of Saigon and were familiar with Western culture, the second wave included not only Vietnamese, but also Cambodians, Laotians, and Hmongs, who were less educated, had less contact with Western culture, were less English proficient, and spent longer periods of time in relocation camps (Sue & Sue, 1999). Refugees in the third wave arrived after 1985, and many were Chinese-Vietnamese and tended to be uneducated, did not speak English, and did not have marketable skills (Long, 1996; Sue & Sue, 1999).

Although the first wave of refugees fled under hurried and horrific circumstances leaving family members and possessions behind, persons in the second wave tended to experience even greater hardship because they were literally packed into small boats. Many drowned, starved to death, or watched their loved ones starve, be murdered, and be raped by pirates (Sue & Sue, 1999). This only begins to tell the complex story of Vietnamese immigrants. In order to understand who the Vietnamese are, as a people, one must not assume that their adaptive experiences are alike.

#### Vietnamese Women's Adaptation to Life in the United States

There is plentiful literature on Asian emigration to the U.S. (Lee, 2005; Ong Bonacich, & Cheng, 1994; Peffer, 2005). Some studies focus on Vietnamese emigration to the U.S. (Haines, 2002; Phan et al., 2005; Zhou & Bankston, 2001) and some focus on

acculturation experience related to specific life domains, such as college education (Caplan et al., 1991; Zhou & Bankston, 2001) and health-related problems (Liem, R., Lim, & Lien, 2000; Mackinnon, Gien, & Durst, 1996; Treas, 2002). However, a scarcity of literature exists which examines the unique experiences of Vietnamese women—in particular the effect of their adaptation experience on oppression.

In 1993, Kibria published a groundbreaking study examining family structure in Vietnamese immigrants' families in Philadelphia. While Kibria's structuralistic study demonstrated that there was no longer a traditionally practiced Vietnamese family structure, and that there is variability in classic acculturation theory, it only provided a glimpse in to the oppression of Vietnamese immigrant women. In general, most analyses of immigrant adaptation examine background variables like education level, language competence, and marketable skills. A few have also examined the familial social arrangements in the U.S. in comparison to those in Vietnam and between second and third wave refugees (Haines, 2002; Treas, 2002; Zhou & Bankston, 2001).

A few studies have also examined educational success of Vietnamese immigrants, specifically of the second wave of immigrants and their children (Caplan, Choy, & Whitmore, 1991; Zhou, 1998). In a more recent study, Zhou and Bankston (2001) examined family pressure and the educational experience of young Vietnamese women and concluded that it is not because young Vietnamese women are liberated that they have achieved superior education success. Rather, it is because in the U.S., as immigrants, both young men and women find themselves under increased economic pressure to succeed academically. Moreover, because immigrant families, still led by men, place a higher degree of pressure on their daughters to be productive, gender roles

have shifted; however, women are no less controlled than in traditional Vietnamese families in their homeland (Zhou, 2001).

In another recent study, researchers examined the acculturation of Vietnamese men and found that this immigrant population segment experiences a high level of distress because of pressures they assume as “heads of households” in a predominately white and racist culture in the U.S. (Nghe, Mahalik, and Lowe, 2003). In an update of their previous research, Chung et al. (2000) discovered a similar level of distress and depression in Vietnamese immigrant men. Moreover, because the males traditionally are socialized to be superior and to be the bearers of cultural tradition, they experience more difficulty in assimilating into the U.S. culture. In other words, the research findings from the psychotherapeutic literature suggest that Vietnamese male immigrants seem resistant to acculturation to life in the U.S. because they perceive themselves as the culture bearers.

In a pertinent recent study, Phan, Rivera, and Roberts-Wilbur (2005) address the scarcity of research and information about the identity development of Vietnamese refugee/immigrant women in the U.S. These authors illuminate a serious gap in the body of knowledge concerning identity development and the observation that traditional models of identity development simply do not provide an understanding of the identity development of ethnic minorities in the U.S. This gap has been identified by other writers as well (e.g. Helms, & Cook, 1999; Sue & Sue, 2003), and only recently has there been an offering of development models that attempt to fill the gap (Sue & Sue, 2003). However, the problem is not yet solved, because all of these new attempts at pinpointing identity development models have, themselves, another problem—a monolithic

perspective which assumes that all Asian persons are the same (Phan, Rivera, Roberts-Wilbur, 2005). Further, these new models recreate a similar mistake made in the dominant culture identity development models, which assume that the genders develop identically, which many theorists contest (Conales, 2000; Sue & Sue, 2003; Phan et al, 2005). What is missing in all of this research is the multifaceted nature of real life—the intersection and interconnectedness of gender, race, class, and orientation (Boisnier, 2003).

Phan, Rivera, and Roberts-Wilbur (2005) propose that to understand a Vietnamese woman's identity development, one must take into account a multitude of factors including Vietnamese history, individual and group immigration history, ethnicity, race, gender, role conflict, orientation, age (generational), class, and education—and that all of these factors are inextricably connected. These theorists, among others, illustrate a similar gap to what the present research sought to fill, in this case related to Vietnamese women: their adaptation to U.S. culture, and their progress in mitigating oppressive conditions.

### Summary

This literature review has illustrated that Vietnamese immigrant and refugee women are not a single stratum of a population—they are multi-faceted individuals who must be considered in a different way than has been the tendency in the past. Moreover, Vietnamese women as immigrants or refugees like other minority women must be understood in terms of their unique individual experiences within their social context and in relationship to particular gender and familial structures.

Although a handful of studies were conducted from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s on Vietnamese immigrants and their experiences adapting to the U.S. (Espiritu, 1997; Kibria, 1993; Strand & Jones, 1985), very little has been done specifically to examine the multiple dimensions of adaptation experiences of Vietnamese immigrant women and what effects adaptation has had on their multiple levels of oppression.

CHAPTER 3  
METHODOLOGY  
Research Design

To examine the adaptation experiences of Vietnamese immigrant and refugee women coming to the U.S., this researcher employed a similar approach to that formulated by Paulo Freire (1982), namely, participatory action-research. Participatory research (AKA Participatory Action Research, PAR)—originally developed by researchers, theorists, and educators eager to balance the traditional positivism of western social research—is a methodology for involving oppressed people in the research process, as co-researchers in pursuit of remedies for their plight (Brown, 1978; Freire, 1970, 1998; Hall, 1981; hooks, 1989, 1994; Tandon, 1981). People raising questions about and desiring to improve their conditions and that of their community is an old story. Recently though, researchers explore the actions of oppressed people as research that can be executed as organized and transformative collective activity (Park, 1993). The vision behind the PAR approach is for a framework of empowerment to promote research as collective action in the struggle to overcome the limitation and felt powerlessness of oppression.

Knowledge and activism are vital elements in enabling people to create and enact their own future vision for how their lives should manifest (Gaventa, 1988). Participatory research is a way of putting capabilities in the hands of disenfranchised people so that they can identify themselves as knowing, active agents of change through defining their reality, shaping their new identity, claiming their history and transforming their lives for themselves (Callaway, 1981; Fernandes & Tandon, 1981; Frere, 170, 1998; Gaventa,

1993; hooks, 1994; Horton, 1990; Humphries & Truman, 1994; Maguire, 1987; Stanley & Wise, 1983). For disenfranchised people, participatory research is a therapy, which promotes self-determination. As some theorists posit, it is a research approach, which enables participants in their construction of new realities (Fisher, 1994; Kling, 1995; Kieffer, 1984). As Finn (1994) observed, three constituents distinguish participatory research from traditional approaches to social science: people, power, and praxis.

Participatory research is people-centered (Brown, 1985) in that the route of inquiry is informed by the experiences of oppressed people. Power and a confidence of one's own power, is crucial to an individual's construction of reality, and the meaning made of the world (Foucault, 1973). Participatory research fosters individual and group empowerment as participants develop common knowledge and critical awareness, which had been previously suppressed by the dominant group. Participatory research involves praxis (Finn, 1994; Kling, 1995). In its execution, researchers recognize the inextricability of theory and practice.

A core feature of the participatory research approach is the development and articulation of a collective reality that challenges the dominant expert knowledge, which, typically, does not reflect the true experiences and realities of the "researched" populations (Finn, 1994). Participatory research is grounded in an explicit political attitude of social justice and a value for transformation of former socio-cultural structures that supported an erosion of equality (Freire, 1974). In its execution, researchers and participants can reshape their awareness of the personal-political dialectic. Both researcher and participant as contributors in the exploratory endeavor, influence the course, interpret the situation, and share opportunities for action.

The advantages of a collaborative research method are many and revolve around the focal point of empowerment. First, it brings isolated people together around common problems and needs. Second, through critical reflection and building understanding, participants validate their experiences. Third, the researchers' neutrality and compassion opens the door of communication so that their knowledge and experience adds information upon which participants can critically reflect. Fourth, it allows participants to contextualize what may have previously felt like individual problems or weakness. Lastly, participants can connect personal experiences to political realities. The result of such a participatory experience is a co-created "living knowledge" that can be translated into action (Freire, 1974; Shor, 1992).

Freire describes the participatory action research approach as consisting of three parts: (a) the researcher and the participants explore a problem together; (b) during their dialogue, the researcher and the participants are transformed by what they learn about the world and themselves; and (c) through this transformation, the researcher and the participants are prepared to take action to resolve the problem (1982). Ada and Beutel (1993) described participatory action research as follows:

More than a methodology, participatory research is a committed dialogue for service and action among researchers and their communities. Researchers and participants come together in a mutual and rigorous exploration of their lives, deeply respecting each other's ability to truly know and believing that through the act of knowing we can transform our reality. (p. 7)

The participatory action-research methodology has been used for gathering data in populations of oppressed people (Ada & Beutel, 1993; Morris, 2000; Patton, 2002). The results of a participatory study are useful and appropriate when the objective is social action and/or transformative education (Ada & Beutel, 1993; Patton, 2002). In a study that uses this methodology, the researcher invites a group of participants to engage

together in a process of inquiry about an issue affecting the community with the goal of transformation (Ada & Beutel, 1993; Patton, 2002).

Creswell (2003) suggested that the development of methodologies and their subsequent legitimization in qualitative methods have resulted in a better-formed research practice. However, most methodologists also concede that each qualitative tradition has its own set of criteria with which research is judged (Creswell, 2003; Patton, 2002). Despite the differences in the various qualitative traditions, methodologists have recommended a standard set of five criteria to evaluate the effectiveness of all qualitative research (Creswell, 2003; Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). First, it is recommended that the researcher ensure that the research questions drive the data collection and analysis and not the reverse. Second, data collection and analysis procedures must be competently applied. Third, the researcher's subjectivity must be stated explicitly. Fourth, there must be rigor with which the researcher engages the research. Fifth, the study must have merit in contributing to the field and the community it serves.

According to Creswell (2005), participatory action-research has a long history in social research involving communities and organizations when the goal is advocacy and positive transformation, or both. The primary reason for using qualitative designs in social research is that it subjectifies rather than objectifies people: the human participants (Patton, 2002). The phenomenon that was studied is lived experience related to adaptation strategies of an oppressed group, namely, Vietnamese women immigrants. This research sought to understand the experiences of Vietnamese refugee and immigrant women (Park, 1989). As with similar qualitative methods, such as ethnography, the personal nature of participatory research comes from the openness and close contact

between the researcher and the researched (Ada & Beutel; Freire, 1982; Park, 1989; Patton, 2002; van Maanen, 1989).

The researcher chose participatory research because, as hooks (1994) noted, it serves as a way to validate the participants' own life experiences. In other words, the researcher can see and feel that their lives have meaning—to themselves, to their families, and to society in general (Patton, 2002). Moreover, participatory research methodology enables the in-depth examination of social phenomena and social experience (Park, 1989). Accordingly, this researcher's goal was to ensure that participation is genuine and authentic, not token or rhetorical, and that no individual participant's agenda, or the researcher's agenda supersedes the goal of informed research. Underlying the above agenda, the researcher's objective was to improve the quality of people's lives.

The use of qualitative data, collected through participatory dialogues, allows for serendipitous findings and new theoretical integration. It also allows for the collection and understanding of the participant's experience and perspective within the natural setting of a current societal context (Creswell, 2005; Park, 1899). The richness of data and information collected through dialogues will provide a detailed view into the experiences of the Vietnamese women immigrants who participate in the study.

The researcher developed open-ended dialogue questions based on the researcher's lived experience as well as on relevant feminist literature that will be used to engage participants in dialogues. The dialogue process permits freedom to form new lines of inquiry as areas of interest emerge from the dialogues (Ada & Beutel, 1993). An

iterative approach was adopted and ideas were extracted from data as it emerged throughout the study (Creswell, 2005; Freire, 1982; Patton, 2002).

As discussed in the previous chapter, there is scarce literature about the adaptation strategies of Vietnamese immigrant and refugee women in the context explored in this study. Participatory research methodology allows for insights regarding adaptation to emerge from the data and is therefore useful for understanding the individual experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2005; Freire, 1994; Patton, 2002). Additionally, participatory research methodology was selected because one goal of the research was transformative education (Ada & Beutel, 1993).

#### Research Questions That Guided the Initial Dialogues

The central research problem for exploration in this study was: How have Vietnamese women adapted to living in the United States? The present research addressed these research areas related to Vietnamese women's adaptation:

*Research Question 1: What challenges do Vietnamese women immigrants face in adapting to life in the United States?*

- a. When did you arrive? What age were you?
- b. Did you speak English?
- c. What (if anything) did you know about American culture before you arrived?
- d. With whom did you enter the United States? (family?)
- e. Were you in school in Vietnam? Or did you work in Vietnam?
- f. How and where did you enter the United States?
- g. What was the biggest challenge for you? Tell me about it.

- h. How would you describe your life in the United States? Did you have to adjust, or not? Tell me about that experience.
- i. How would you compare life in the United States to life in Vietnam?
- j. In what ways is life similar and/or different between Vietnam and the United States?

*Research Question 2: What strategies do Vietnamese women use to overcome the challenges they face in adapting to life in the United States? How helpful do they think their strategies have been in adapting to life in the United States?*

- a. How do you deal with the differences in the life here versus the life you led in Vietnam?
- b. Whom do you turn to for support? Who has been helpful to you and in what ways have they been helpful?
- c. Can you give some examples of strategies you used to cope with the challenges?
- a. What strategies helped you the most? Which ones worked and which did not?

*Research Question 3: What advice or recommendations would they offer to other Vietnamese women as they attempt to adapt to life in the United States?*

- a. Do you have Vietnamese women immigrant friends?
- b. Do you talk about your experiences in adapting to life in the United States?
- c. What recommendations would you offer so that they can adapt to life in the United States?

### Research Setting

The setting for this research study was the Vietnamese community within the city of San Jose, in the San Francisco Bay Area of California. Specifically, the study drew from the membership of the Vietnamese Catholic Church and the Vietnamese Buddhist Temple where the researcher is a member and because the majority of Vietnamese residents belong to either or both of these organizations. The dialogues between the researcher and the study participants took place in the private homes of the participants, or other mutually agreed upon locations such as restaurants and parks.

### Research Participants

The researcher recruited six women from the population of 14,000 that makes up the membership of the Vietnamese Catholic Church and the Buddhist Temple of Santa Clara County, California. As a member of the San Jose Vietnamese community, including the Vietnamese Church and Vietnamese Temple, the researcher has had the opportunity to interact with many Vietnamese women. The researcher has been a member of the San Jose Vietnamese community since emigrating from Vietnam in the 1970s and as an adult has served the community as a teacher and counselor. The age range of participants was from 28 to 61, with the majority born in Vietnam, and some old enough to have worked in Vietnam prior to their arrival in the United States. The researcher had informally mentioned the research topic to some of her acquaintances who had expressed their willingness to share names of individuals potentially interested in participating. The researcher contacted these individuals to assess their interest and when a person was found to be suitable, the researcher provided all necessary information and consent documentation.

A sampling method used in qualitative research designs is purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002). In purposeful sampling, the researcher intentionally selects the participants and the sites to learn about the central phenomena under study (Creswell, 2003; Patton, 2002). The researcher's interest is in understanding the adaptation of Vietnamese women residing in the United States and therefore selected participants who are part of the San Jose area ethnic Vietnamese community. Since the researcher does not have access to the entire membership of the Vietnamese Church and Temple residing in Santa Clara County, the researcher used a combination of sampling procedures to draw participants. There are many types of purposeful sampling procedures, including "confirming-disconfirming cases," "convenience sampling," "chain sampling," "criterion sampling," "opportunistic sampling," etc. (Creswell, 2003, 2005; Patton, 2002).

The present study used a combination of convenience sampling (selecting individuals with whom the researcher is familiar) and chain sampling (initial participants identifying other potential participants) (Patton, 2002). Given the large size of the San Jose Vietnamese Church and Temple, it has the potential to yield an adequate number of participants. The researcher recruited the same numbers of participants who perceive that they have adapted well and those who perceive that they have not adapted well to life in the U.S. The criteria established to assess adaptability is the person's English language level, since those who have not sufficiently learned English, probably will have a lower level of acculturation. Another factor contributing to the person's level of acculturation and adaptation is age and time in the U.S. The length of time in the U.S. also indicates from which wave of emigration that each participant arrived. The present study is not

focused particularly on comparing adaptation experiences and strategies of the participants (Creswell 2003; Patton, 2002).

In using a chain sampling procedure, the researcher identified prospective participants with the help of Temple members who know which women are “information-rich” (Creswell, 2003; Patton, 2002); in other words those women who may be good participants for the study. The researcher asked personal acquaintances who served this role of identifying potential participants. The researcher asked participants to help in referring other individuals. To ensure that participants did not refer only individuals that hold similar perspectives, the researcher encouraged every participant to refer individuals that she thought might have different perspectives.

#### Data Collection

Previous sections detailed the rationale for the research design choice, the setting and participants, and the dialogue format. In this section, the researcher discusses the data collection procedures and why they were chosen.

Data collection and analysis procedures followed a narrative inquiry process in the qualitative analysis tradition (Creswell, 2003; Freire, 1970, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Park, 1989; Patton, 2002) or, dialogic retrospection (Keiffer, 1981; Humm, 1989) in the critical pedagogy tradition. Several studies have used a similar process. For example, in studying the development of teacher identity, Friesen, Finney, and Krentz (1999) used narrative histories and theme analysis in the participatory tradition. Additionally, Black (1999) used dialogic retrospection to examine the case for the ordination women in the Catholic Church. Furthermore, Pitot (1996) utilized critical

pedagogy to explore the perceived alienation and oppression of gay and lesbian youth in educational settings.

The methodology used in this study was dialogic retrospection. Participants were engaged in dialogues grounded in the critical pedagogy tradition and included a three-stage process (Ada & Beutel, 1993). Stage one involved a dialogic retrospection interview process to elicit the participant's experience. Stage two involved reflection about cue questions to elicit knowledge and self-regulatory processes, for example monitoring progress in naming and overcoming difficulties or barriers to adaptation. Stage three involved constructing narratives that represent a phenomenological interpretation of the participant-researcher dialogues.

The researcher developed a data collection procedure based on the above 3-stage process and began the process by selecting a safe, secure, and quiet location in which to dialogue with the participants. All dialogues were audiotaped and transcribed by the researcher. The researcher used a notebook in each dialogue for recording pertinent information and questions.

The data collection procedures included the facilitation of individual dialogues (Humm, 1989; Keifer, 1981; Patton, 2002) with six ethnic Vietnamese women immigrants currently residing in San Jose, California. The dialogues were conducted in either English or Vietnamese, depending on the language fluency of each individual participant. The researcher met with the participants twice as part of the reflection and interpretive process between the group and the individual, where each interpretation is layered and dependent on previous and subsequent interpretations (Creswell, 2005; Patton, 2002).

The researcher engaged each participant in dialogue for approximately two hours in a safe, secure location in order to observe her in physical, social, and psychological surroundings within the community. The dialogues were audiotaped for later transcription. The dialogue questions were open-ended to ensure flexibility so that participants could collaborate with the researcher in the process.

In beginning dialogue sessions with the participants, the researcher first re-introduced herself, reiterated the purpose of the study, and then described participatory research methodology in plain language. The researcher then described the questions proposed for their dialogue for the purpose of engaging the participant in the co-development of the dialogue. As Ada and Beutel (1993) remind researchers, engaging the participant in the development of the dialogue—the act of co-creation—opens the potential of realizing new knowledge for both the participant and the researcher. Reflective dialogue is a spiral of discovery; moreover, it is meant to be an empowering experience for the participant where the participants can trust that they have control in the process. Practically, this means the researcher strove for equal participation in such a way that the participant was not in the place of merely following the researcher's lead (Ada & Beutel, 1993).

### Data Analysis

In many qualitative methods, including the participatory research methodology chosen for the study, data analysis is an ongoing activity of obtaining and organizing emerging themes from the data during the collection process (Patton, 2002). Using inductive analysis, the researcher reviewed dialogue transcripts to discover developing

themes and patterns (Patton: 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1994). As with several qualitative approaches, the data collection and analysis are woven inextricably into one process.

The data analysis began at the stage of data collection when the researcher facilitated the participant dialogues. This process involved the continual reflection and inquiry of responses during the dialogues. The researcher made decisions in the moment about what areas of interest were most valuable to pursue during the dialogue sessions. Additionally, analysis included the review, examination, and interpretation of the transcripts from the participant dialogues, both individually and collectively (Creswell, 2003; Patton, 2002). Specifically, the researcher analyzed the dialogue transcripts by coding the dialogues with a framework developed at the inception of the study as well as generative coding involving the participants' creation of their own categories (Patton, 2002). As mentioned above, the data analysis involved a reflective and interpretive process whereby understanding evolves through relating parts to wholes and wholes to parts (Patton, 2002). In other words, the researcher made interpretations of individual participant responses as well as interpreted the collective responses of the participant group.

#### Protection of Human Participants

The researcher complied with the protection of human participants procedures required by the University of San Francisco. After receiving permission to conduct the study in the San Jose Vietnamese community, the researcher approached potential participants to ascertain whether they met the selection criteria. The researcher presented a consent letter written in English and translated into Vietnamese to ensure understanding (See Appendix B & C.) The consent letters clearly stated that participation in the study

was strictly voluntary and that participant responses would be anonymous. Further, it stated that dialogues and the identity of participants were confidential by using pseudonyms of their choice. No one, except the researcher, is able to identify those who consented to participate. In addition, the researcher informed the participants of the minimal risks involved in participating in the study and that they could choose to discontinue participation at any time. Participants were advised that if they experienced discomfort or anxiety, they had the right to change, add, or delete their information.

### Background of the Researcher

The researcher brings her own experience with the research topic as a Vietnamese woman who immigrated to the United States at the age of 14 among the first wave of refugees. She is currently a faculty member at San José City College and previously at San José State University teaching courses in women's studies and Asian American studies. The researcher is actively involved in her community and especially in the Vietnamese Community within Santa Clara County, California. Because of her involvement with her community, her teaching activities, and her experience as an immigrant, she brings a special knowledge and perspective to research concerning Vietnamese women's immigration and adaptation experience. In a sense, she is both the researcher and the researched. As Ada and Beutel (1993) note, the researcher is "an active speaker with...participants" (p. 89) thus preparing the researcher as an informed social actor.

### Summary

Since the construct of adaptation is multi-faceted (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996) and there is scarce literature about the adaptation strategies of Vietnamese immigrant women,

the present research study was best suited to a qualitative, participatory approach using rich description (Ada & Beutel, 1993; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Park, 1989; Patton, 2002). In the study, the researcher employed a participatory research design to engage in dialogues with six participants drawn from the Vietnamese population of San Jose, California by convenience and chain sampling. Dialogues were analyzed using thematic coding and the reflective, interpretive process.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

#### Introduction

Participatory action research was chosen as the method for the present study to discover the adaptation strategies of Vietnamese women immigrants coming to the U.S. This chapter presents the findings of the research undertaken by the researcher reflecting the experiences of the study participants and as a reflection of the researcher's experience both as a researcher and as an immigrant Vietnamese woman.

The central inquiry addressed by the study concerned how Vietnamese women have adapted to living in the U.S. Specifically, the study addressed three questions related to adaptation from the perspective of Vietnamese women:

1. What challenges do Vietnamese immigrant women face in adapting to life in the United States?
2. What strategies do Vietnamese women use to overcome the challenges they face in adapting to the United States? How helpful are these strategies in adapting to the United States?
3. What recommendations would they offer to other Vietnamese women as they attempt to adapt to life in the United States?

In chapters one and two, the researcher discussed current theories of adaptation and acculturation strategy, as well as, a sociological theory of intersectionality. The term adaptation refers to international migrants' responses to a new social environment.

Acculturation is the process an individual undertakes to integrate into a new culture.

Acculturation strategies refer to the planned methods that individuals use in responding to new stress-inducing cultural contexts.

Much of the psychological literature focused on acculturation describes a four-fold classification: assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization. While the integration position dominates current psychological research on acculturation, the segmented assimilation theory from the sociological field provides an illustrative basis for understanding immigrant adaptation. Segmented assimilation theory describes three contrasting acculturation patterns characteristic of more recent immigrants. Linear acculturation and assimilation describes the behavior when the immigrant group advances economically and is integrated socially, culturally, and politically into the middle class. The second pattern is selective assimilation where immigrants develop a robust ethnic enclave along with a deliberate preservation of the native culture. The third pattern is descending assimilation where entire ethnic segments spiral into poverty. As compelling as these adaptation theories are, current feminist theory states that in order to understand women's experiences, one must take into consideration the intersection of race, class, and gender.

To assist with the objective of understanding Vietnamese women's adaptation experiences as immigrants/refugees in the United States, the researcher turned to feminist theory, specifically intersectionality. The intersectionality theory maintains that gender and race are not discrete analytic categories. Rather, feminists theorize that there is an interaction between factors such as gender and race. Race is "gendered" and gender is "racialized," so that race and gender fuse to create unique experiences and opportunities. Significant to the present study are three central interests: the underlying explanation for

race and gender oppression; assumptions of whether race and gender intersections are ubiquitous or contingent; and the concern that women of color face compound jeopardy of being oppressed because of these intersections. Adjunctive to the theoretical frameworks and supportive of the participatory research method used in the present study is the ethnographic approach of “thick description” proposed by Geertz (1973), whereby behavior and experience are understood within and across contexts by both the researcher and the researched.

### Demographic Information

This study is about Vietnamese women immigrants, which means that all six of the participants were born outside the U.S. in their home country of Vietnam. Each of the six participants has her own unique immigration experience.

#### *Orchid*

Orchid is a 28-year-old Vietnamese immigrant woman. She presents as a creative, intelligent, vibrant woman with a lively sense of humor. She is a college graduate who earned her bachelor’s degree in Sociology with honors. She currently works as a manager for a dental office in San Jose, California. She was quite open in her responses to questions and expressed her hope that giving voice to her experience will enable other women to feel empowered to speak and to be counted as Asian/Vietnamese women in the U.S.

#### *Daisy*

Daisy had an even more interesting migration than the other women in the study. When she was 20 years old, she and her family escaped Vietnam by boat. The Japanese government rescued and resettled the family. Daisy thought her life was set and that

Japan would be her new home and her new country. However, that all changed when she met her husband and moved to the U.S. Daisy is 46 years old, is currently attending the local community college and rearing her two children, ages 7 and 3.

### *Violet*

Violet is also a 46-year-old single woman. She worked as a medical assistant in a medical clinic in San Jose. She was still living with her parents. She tried to go to school part-time, mostly at night because she worked full time in the day. She was witty and had much to say about Vietnamese men. She jokingly said, “That is why I am still single.”

### *Lilly*

Lily is 50 years old, the youngest in a family of 10 siblings. She came to the United States in 1974 as a high school exchange student. She won a presidential essay contest writing about the role of women in Vietnam, and she was selected by the presidential scholarship committee to spend a year in the U.S. Filled with honor, she was proudly departed her homeland for her senior year in high school. Little did she know that this was her last time she would set foot on Vietnamese soil as a Vietnamese citizen. She called herself an “accidental refugee” because she could not return to Vietnam after South Vietnam collapsed in April 1975. She was expected to return home in May of 1975, after a year of exchange in the U.S.

### *Hyacinth*

Hyacinth is a 50-year-old women. She is a wife, a mother of two and works part-time outside the home. She attends a local community college. She graduated from college in Vietnam and was working as a teacher prior to coming to the United States. She stated she is proud of her education because very few women of her generation were

able to attend and complete a college education in Vietnam after the Vietnam-American war. Besides being proud of her educational background, she also is proud of the fact that she was able to support herself financially. Hyacinth is articulate, mature and forthright with her responses during the interview. She expressed feeling good about participating in the research study because she believes that her participation contributes to the growth and development of the future of the Vietnamese community.

*Rose*

Rose is a 61-year-old woman. She came to the U.S. when she was in her forties, with her mother and her siblings. She is the oldest daughter in her family with five younger siblings and she felt that in many ways, she is like a mother to her younger brothers and sisters because she had to work and help her mother to raise her siblings after her father passed away when the children were still quite young. She was an accountant in Vietnam. When arrived in United States she started to work right away because she has to support her family. She started working in the electronic industry, then married—her mother's dying wish. Rose is a model of the traditional daughter, sister, and mother to her siblings. She went back to school after she divorced, and is currently working as a teacher's aid for the San Jose school district as well as trying to finish her child development degree from a local university.

Table 1: Summary of Participants' Backgrounds

Name	Age	Year of Arrival to U.S.	Profession	Highest Degree	Marital Status/Race of Spouse	Maternal Status
Orchid	28	1987	Office Manager	B.A. in USA	Single	No children
Daisy	41	1992	Student/ Housewife	High School Diploma in VN	Married VN Spouse	2 children
Violet	46	1998	Medical Assistant/ Part-time student	B.A. in VN	Single	No children
Lily	50	1974	CEO High-Tech	MBA in USA	Married Caucasian Spouse	1 child
Hyacinth	50	2000	Student/ Housewife	BS in VN	Married VN Spouse	2 children
Rose	61	1997	Teacher-Aide	A.S. and Teaching Credential in VN	Divorced	No

Six Vietnamese immigrant women participated in this study, ranging in age from the youngest at 28, to the oldest at 61. Two women are in their forties and two more are in their fifties. Of the six women, two had experiences of immigrating to other countries prior to coming to the U.S.; one came to the U.S. after spending ten years in Japan, and a second lived in Poland and Hungary prior to entering the U.S. One of the women came to the U.S. as a child, one as an adolescent, and four entered the U.S. as adults.

Theoretically, one of the women came to the U.S. during, what is referred to as the “first wave” of immigrants before 1975 (Sue & Sue, 1999). The other five immigrated to the U.S. during the “second wave” after 1975.

Of the six women, only two spoke English prior to coming to the U.S., both of whom learned English as children and both came to the U.S. as minors. Of the four women who entered the U.S. as adults, all acquired some education in Vietnam prior to coming to the U.S. and two of those women had career potential in Vietnam. All six of the women continued their formal education once they arrived in the U.S. Five of the six women have worked outside the home since immigrating to the U.S. Four of the six worked outside the home, either in Vietnam or in another country prior to entering the U.S. Four of the six Vietnamese women immigrants are or were married at one time, three of whom have children. All six of the women had siblings, some of whom immigrated to the U.S.

### The Common Shared Themes

This section is organized by the major, common themes that emerged from the data across the participants related to each research question. The central topic of the three research questions were the challenges faced by the women, the strategies they used, and the recommendations they make to other Vietnamese women. The section following will focus on the unique themes that came up during the interviews.

#### Challenges

Four challenges were mentioned by three or more participants during the dialogues: a) gender role identity, b) marital and family conflict, c) language barriers, and d) being and feeling different. Gender and role identity proved to be a common challenge for five of the participants, indeed all six participants mentioned gender and role identity during their dialogues. One participant reported that it was not so much a challenge as an opportunity. Marital and family conflict also proved challenging for five participants.

During the dialogues, it became clear to the researcher and was confirmed by the participants, that the challenges of gender roles, identity, and marital and family conflict were not always easy to understand separately. For the participants, one related to the other. Language barrier was a challenge for four participants simply because at the time of their immigration, they did not speak English. Being and feeling different was expressed as a challenge by three of the participants; although one other participant did confirm that she did, in fact, feel very different from the dominant American culture, but did not perceive that as being a particularly salient issue.

### *Gender Roles and Identity*

Most participants reported that expectations of gender roles became more of a challenge in entering a new culture that has very different norms. All the participants reported that gender roles were a prominent factor in Vietnamese culture to begin with, which added strength to the challenge. As a Vietnamese woman immigrant, the researcher confirms the challenge. In the following example, one participant expresses the expansion of gender obligation.

Women have to play a greater role in the family here. Already the Vietnamese woman is bound to extremely controlled gender norms. Once in the U.S., she must also take up more duties...now she has to go out and work...to earn money to support her family.

In Lily's dialogue, she focused some attention on the issue of identity and the challenges associated with different age groups and different immigration circumstances.

Now we're not talking so much about freshly immigrated women. We're talking about after thirty years of adjusting for Vietnamese women. The issues are really about identity...who they are, what they represent, what their heritage is about, the yearning to understand their roots, the Vietnamese culture, and also the desire to reconcile the American culture of a lot more choices and independence and

peer pressures like how at school to be more “western” and to be more open, about how women and men operate here.

Daisy talked passionately about relationships between Vietnamese men and women. She perceives a gender imbalance between men and women and that this imbalance has been “imported” here to the United States.

Man is the king and the wife is the slave. The wife does not have the right to her husband’s business such as the husband’s letters, finances, work, money etc. On the other hand, he has the right to know everything about her. He possesses her; he owns her and has all the right to you. The Vietnamese man believes he has the same rights here.

Violet felt that Vietnamese men hold and continue to keep a double standard in the U.S. Most of the participants perceive Vietnamese men as enjoying the accomplishment of more educated wives. They enjoy a wife with status but at the same time, they still want the traditional wife who will obey them and listen to them whether they are right or wrong. The women, as a group, suggested that Vietnamese men once in the U.S. enjoy having their wives bring home income, yet the men do not accept women as their equal partner. Violet stated:

Roles are especially difficult for Vietnamese immigrant women, because we want to assimilate, and men do not want to change from old ways. The thing is that even in Vietnam, things are changing and the men do not want to change there either. The men are still “king” in the family and want to do things here as they did in Vietnam. Now, here, when women do fight to get their freedom and get some education and language knowledge and go out to work, they contribute to the family, but still the men control the family and the women.

Hyacinth’s perspective confirms older research (Takaki, 1989) about changing family roles in the transition of coming to the U.S. In Vietnam, women usually are dependent on their husbands. When they immigrated, some Vietnamese women took jobs. Orchid reports that women working have made Vietnamese men feel “insecure.” She spoke about her own mother and discussed how her mother’s love and sacrifice are

the elements that held her family together. However, she felt that the Vietnamese women in the U.S. are expected to play a more vital role. Family finance was a major factor in Orchid's having sought employment, as well as helping her children and extended family to adjust and survive.

Women have to play greater role in the family here. Vietnamese society has changed both in Vietnam and here in the United States. Yet the Vietnamese have not changed in some ways, especially Vietnamese men who are forty years and older. Even though they are here in the states, they wanted to apply their ancient custom on their wife and family even though they might already have adapted to the American life such as adapting to the American educational and professional systems.

Orchid expressed a feeling of bearing a heavy responsibility for caretaking of others in addition to her own adjustment. Rose stated that she has been a good daughter and a good sister all of her life. By duty, in her perspective, she sacrificed her dream in order to work at an early age to help her mother support the family.

The problem in adapting is its contradiction. Based on upbringing of family responsibility...here women have opportunity, so they have to balance within themselves...they are in internal conflict, because of the fight between family and personal ambition and desire. This is a contradiction in roles...it feels like a temptation here, because here women can, if they wish, not sacrifice themselves to the family. It becomes a tug of war.

A constant "tug of war" is what Rose and the other Vietnamese women immigrants reported they had to deal with when they come to the U.S. In Vietnam their roles are clearly defined and programmed. In the U.S., having choices posed a significant challenge for Vietnamese women of this study. Rose referred to these choices as "temptation" because in the Vietnamese society—where culture norms are influenced by Confucianism and Catholicism—women living their desires is a sin (Kibria, 1993). Vietnamese culture prescribes that women must always sacrifice for the family; the woman's dreams must be for the common good of the family (Jamieson, 1993).

Rose felt that with double, sometimes triple, obligations, Vietnamese women in the U.S. have even greater challenges than in Vietnam. She stated that even though in Vietnam women are “oppressed,” they have a “clear role and a clear path.” In the U.S. more demands are made on them and all these expectations cause the women to be “completely worn out.”

Society in America creates further pressure, because here you have to continue all your life to improve yourself. You cannot stop as a woman. In U.S. woman comes first, pets second, third children, and men last, by Vietnam perspective of the U.S. culture. Now Vietnamese women here, they want more, they have greater desire. With this struggle, the mental struggle, the demand is also on physical capability, so we become exhausted.

Rose also expressed in the dialogues that she is not sure if the Vietnamese women are better off here in the U.S. or in Vietnam. She stated that she often feels ambivalent about the Vietnamese woman’s identity in the U.S. as it presents such complex and multi-faceted issues. Orchid discussed with the researcher what could be interpreted as having to cope with “patriarchy” and the differences in gender roles in Vietnam and the U.S. Orchid said that Vietnamese women face particular difficulty dealing with patriarchal norms that Vietnamese men cling to from Vietnam.

Women have no freedom at all on arrival. We have to gain it. Here, Vietnamese women face double patriarchy, first from Vietnamese culture, which is deep, and then America has its own patriarchal culture, just not as deep and oppressive as Vietnamese. But for Vietnamese women, it is much more oppressive because we have the Vietnamese men holding to Vietnamese culture and then American patriarchy on top of it.

In her interview, Orchid seems to be in a dual process of cultural adjustment and identity creation. With some aspects of her life Orchid appears to be reluctant to change her values, even though keeping them may cause her pain. Her description of the internal dilemma in choosing a mate reflects a potential cultural conflict; she has reservations

about Vietnamese men, but is unwilling to consider white men due to what she perceives as undesirable cultural traits. Orchid's apprehension reveals the cognitive and emotional tumult some immigrants face as they construct identities as Vietnamese American

Women.

Challenge as a young woman is figuring out things about a mate. So, we have to decide whether to date only Vietnamese, which is difficult, because if they are like our father's generation, we've still got to deal some with the shadow of the Vietnamese culture. If the Vietnamese man is very adapted to American culture, you may have a better time. If you marry a white man, then there is the differences between the culture. And there are some things about Vietnamese culture I do not want to lose and things about American culture that I don't want to have. For example, in U.S. culture they let go of their families and their elders; they put them in "homes." Love in Vietnamese culture is all about loyalty. In American culture, love is commercial, or fickle. American culture is obsessed with love they cannot have (grass is greener). Here, it is difficult to express love. Americans seem superficial.

As some recent research indicates (Phan, et al, 2005), understanding a Vietnamese immigrant woman's identity development must be multifocal. It cannot be assumed that all Vietnamese immigrant women will have similar experiences, will adopt particular adjustment strategies, or develop a specific identity. Factors such as their immigration history, age (generational), class, and education all play a role. How each woman adapts, even the degree of adaptation, varies.

#### *Marital and Family Conflict*

Closely related to the reported challenge of gender roles and identity is the challenge of conflict arising in the married couple and in the family. As one participant noted, Vietnamese women immigrants found themselves facing additional burdens because of the cultural differences and the "struggle between fitting in within their family system, and Vietnamese cultural norms, and the pull to integrate" within the new U.S. culture.

One participant noted the tension that emerged within her marital relationship because of the differing degrees to which the two genders adapted to U.S. culture. Whereas the men were perceived to be slower at adapting, the women felt as though they, as a gender, were more prepared emotionally and more interested in adapting to U.S. culture.

Daisy talked about her challenges of child rearing related to the marital conflict she experienced in her marriage. Much of what she described seems related to the tension caused by the differences in gender roles between the two cultures and the effects of patriarchy that Vietnamese women face in a marital relationship.

Conflicts arose in my family because I am more willing to adapt and more quickly than the men. Relations between wives and husbands are strained when men do not want to let go of all the control they have in old country. Vietnamese women, in coming to U.S., realize they can have more say in the family and in their own lives; and when they take it, or desire to take it, conflict starts.

Violet contended that marital and family conflict is the most difficult challenge for Vietnamese women and infers that the effect spreads to the larger Vietnamese community.

The Vietnamese men want to be the pillar of the family even though he has less education than his wife does and probably makes less money than his wife makes. Yet he still likes to impose on his wife. I believe that most Vietnamese families have this problem. I believe the true pillars of the Vietnamese family are the Vietnamese women. They are also the pillar of the larger community. Because a Vietnamese family has so much conflict, therefore the Vietnamese community has so much conflict. Family is a small community.

She also agreed with others in the participant group that if the family is not healthy and prosperous the Vietnamese community cannot prosper and become strong and healthy. Orchid responded to Violet's statements and stated (from Confucian teaching) it is "easy for the landowner to rule the land but not easy for the owner to rule

the people.” In Confucian teaching, the family is the foundation of society. When the family is in harmony, then society can be in balance. Here, according to the participant group, (as a whole) men and women have not been able to “reach harmony in their relationships.” They posit, however, that they are not really in harmony in Vietnam either, which in their collective opinion, is why Vietnamese society here and in Vietnam is not in balance. As Orchid contended, “Vietnamese men are under-developed” (immature) because they cannot adapt to change. “Men cannot care for themselves,” they over rely on women to care for them, so they “create disharmony.”

Violet voiced strong opinions about the gender imbalance between Vietnamese men and women. She assesses Vietnamese men critically. Perhaps, being a single Vietnamese woman, she felt more comfortable to express herself more freely, whereas, the other participants may have felt more reluctant to discuss Vietnamese men because doing so would be tantamount to talking against their husbands and discussing their own marital problems. Violet recited a Vietnamese proverb:

“When wives and husbands are in harmony they can even tackle the seven seas.” Vietnamese men are not successful enough to change. They lack self-confidence and the ones that have self-confidence have a better chance to change and adapt to American society.

Violet echoed the opinion that that in the Vietnamese family women are the foundations, and if oppressed, the larger Vietnamese American community cannot be liberated. Violet felt that upward mobility and personal achievement have direct correlation to the level of adaptability of Vietnamese men. She felt the more successful the Vietnamese male is in the new culture the better he treated his counterpart. The more successful the Vietnamese male is in the U.S., the more harmonious is the family. She

also stated that the age of the Vietnamese male when he arrived in the U.S. makes a difference.

Hyacinth continued to explore the change in family and gender role for Vietnamese women in the U.S. She believes that this challenge contributes to family and marital problems in the U.S.

There were conflicts in my family because we women try to adapt, or desire to adapt, more quickly than then men do. The fact that men do not want to change culturally, and women do, creates disharmony, and everyone suffers. Then society is affected.

Hyacinth described how the dysfunction within the Vietnamese families had greater effect in the Vietnamese American community in San Jose. Again, the remnants of Confucian teaching emerged in Hyacinth's statement "if the family does not have peace, it is harder for the larger society to achieve peace and harmony." She stated that it would take "at least a generation" for this to change.

As other participants did, Rose also identified marital conflict as one of the most significant challenges for them as Vietnamese women immigrants. She also discussed the imbalance of gender roles and felt the double standard that Vietnamese men imposed upon Vietnamese women. She also echoed the concept of the double oppression meaning that not only does the Vietnamese woman have to support her family financially, but that she has few rights and little stature for her contribution here in the U.S. She opined that the transformation of the Vietnamese women's rise in upward mobility as well as status has caused even greater imbalance in the Vietnamese families in the U.S.

In Vietnam women can only work in the home, but the women have to support the men in all they do; and they must remember their responsibilities as women to the family. When they work outside the home, it is in support of the man. Here they have to deal with even more. In Vietnam only the man is the breadwinner. Here

the woman must also support financially, but the man controls. But, still here women do have an expanded role. In Vietnam there is no upward mobility, so they don't have to deal so much with society. All this causes conflict, internal, in the family and in Vietnamese community.

Growing up, Orchid experienced physical abuse from her father who had difficulty adjusting to the American culture. Orchid's view of gender relations and women's status in the U.S. is that no gender has a lawful or overt culturally supported advantage. In Vietnam, she stated, "males do enjoy a distinct advantage." Researchers have indicated that Vietnamese immigrant males face a challenge in accepting a change in their status within the family structure as well as the legal structure (Phan et al, 2005). In Orchid's situation she became vulnerable to abuse and aggression from her father, perhaps because he did not adjust easily to his change in status.

We women were very oppressed by the first generation coming over here, and many of us, I think, saw that as a failure and saw the oppression at the hands of our fathers as maladaptive, and now we don't accept that oppression. But many first generation men and women are still struggling with the old cultural ways, and it is hard. The oppression was in all ways, physical, emotional, psychological. My father called me a "whore," and my sisters, and this I didn't even take as a result of the American culture, but it was exacerbated by the fact that we knew something different was going on out there. I felt for my life sometimes with my father. Sometimes I feared being raped by my father. Our father physically abused us when he was drunk, but we would fight back. At that point I didn't feel as though I was dealing with my father; I felt like I was just dealing with an out of control man.

As Lily noted, older women who came to the U.S. have a different experience than those who came when they were still young.

There is great tension between the sexes in couples who are older. For the younger people things are a little easier. There is a lot of pressure on women and men to act certain ways, and this gets confusing in the U.S. where relationships between family members are up for grabs. Here everything has to be invented new.

In previous studies researchers propose that because Vietnamese men cannot control their environment in the U.S. in the same way they did in Vietnam, they felt demoted from their stature and identity as Vietnamese men (Nghe, et al. 2003; Sue & Sue, 1999). Men as fathers would turn inward to the family as a place to control their environment and act out their fear, anger, and pain (Sue & Sue, 1999). Chung and colleagues (2000) discovered high levels of distress in Vietnamese immigrant men because the male role in the Vietnamese society is assumed superior, resulting in more difficulty in assimilating into the U.S. culture for Vietnamese men. Nguyen (2204) found that domestic violence in the U.S. Vietnamese immigrant population is high, comes in all forms, and is often not discussed outside the family because it is not culturally acceptable to interfere in a Vietnamese family's affairs. Other research has shown there to be a significant amount of familial conflict in Vietnamese immigrant families because of the cultural differences and pace at which the two genders adjust to the U.S. culture (Bui & Morash, 1999; Uba, 1994).

### *Language Barriers*

Violet felt the biggest challenge Vietnamese women face had to do with not being able to speak the language when they come to this country. In her experience the language barrier proved to be the main cultural barrier because without a common language, she found it nearly impossible to understand how to behave.

Language difference is the greatest challenge, without being able to speak the language of the new culture, one cannot join the culture, one cannot contribute, one cannot grow as a person. When the woman cannot grow, the whole family is affected, is at risk.

Violet also felt that in order for an individual fully adapt to her new environment she must be able to communicate with those around her. Not being able to communicate

hinders the Vietnamese woman's ability to participate, and this can isolate the family and cause vulnerability. Recent research supports the view that in Vietnamese immigrant families, those that are at a lower socio-economic level and who isolate themselves, have higher risk for disease, domestic violence, and generational poverty (Nguyen, 2004).

Like other participants, Hyacinth felt that the language difference was a significant challenge, certainly for her. Hyacinth voiced the notion that language is power and felt that by not being articulate in the language amounts to living as though one is disabled by not being able to access that power. For Orchid, it also created conflicts, misunderstanding, and lack of advancement.

Language difference leads to misunderstandings and renders you unable to contribute to society. Not speaking the language prevents immigrants from getting resources (vocational, educational, and financial).

Rose discussed language as a barrier that caused much difficulty in her life as well as, she believes, for other Vietnamese women. To Rose it is inevitable that language would be a barrier for any immigrant who arrives to the new country.

Language of course causes great challenges. I could not speak English. My life stopped when I came here. I felt there was no future. It was difficult to change even though I knew I had to take care of my family. Because if I did not do it, there would be nobody to interact with the Americans; it becomes the woman's role. We are the ones who have to negotiate with the system, otherwise nothing would get done. I have no power in the family, but I have to exercise power on behalf of my family.

Even though Orchid came to the United States when she was eight years old, she already possessed excellent English reading and writing skills. Despite her own language skills, she identified language as a difficult challenge for immigrants coming to the U.S.

The next greatest challenge is the language barrier. Not speaking the language really inhibits your ability to take care of yourself and adapt quickly. I watched as other Vietnamese women struggled. The women who speak only Vietnamese take

much longer and have to make more effort. And this is a steep climb up when there is already cultural barriers, and hindrances.

Research indicates that most immigrants, who do not speak the language of a new culture, have a more challenging transition and adaptation (Phan, 2005; Pyke, 2000). For many Asian immigrant women, including Vietnamese, a language barrier isolates them, and becomes another way that they can be oppressed, adding layers of oppression. Such circumstances have been shown to increase the immigrant woman's risk for disease, domestic violence, and mental disorders (Phan, 2005; Nguyen, 2004).

### *Being and Feeling Different*

Hyacinth reported the cultural gap is among the most difficult aspect of being a newcomer to the U.S. As Takaki (1989) stated in "Strangers from a Different Shore," most Vietnamese and South East Asian refugees know they face adjustment challenges in America: "In their heart, they want to go back, but reality has crept in and they know they will be here for a long time" (1989, p. 458). Hyacinth's feeling of frustration of not being able to contribute made her feel "useless" at first, which added to her sense of subservience.

The difference between cultures creates challenges for immigrants. It was frustrating coming to the U.S.; in Vietnam my life was set for me. Coming here, I had to start out again. I couldn't contribute much to my family and I couldn't contribute to my new country.

Rose stated feeling estranged to the new environment and the culture, and in her experience, feeling different is the most difficult challenge. As an individual who was born and raised in Vietnam, she experienced a great sense of unfamiliarity to her new environment, her new world. She posits that the age of an individual when she immigrates to the U.S. has much to do with how fast she is able to adapt to the new

culture. At age 61 Rose is the oldest of the participants and perhaps her age presents challenges beyond that of younger immigrants in adaptation to the U.S. At an age when a person is normally slowing down and not in a building phase, to shift thinking to learning new languages, customs, and economic stability seems counterintuitive.

It is a very different culture between Vietnam and here. It is a different world in every way. I have lived in the U.S. now almost ten years and I'm still not accustomed to the American culture. I don't really have a place in it.

Orchid's dialogue was quite interesting because she described much of her cultural adjustment difficulty centering on food and dietary differences between the Vietnamese and American cultures. She went into detail describing her appreciation of and preference for Vietnamese food, and she articulated that that was the reason why she needed to marry a man of Vietnamese heritage. What Orchid indicates in this excerpt is that she cannot live with a man who cannot love her culture and Vietnamese food.

One challenge is arriving here looking like you don't belong and not feeling as though you fit in. The degree to which we can assimilate makes things difficult. The American culture is bland compared to Vietnamese culture, literally, for example food. There are so many things that we are different, that we must make some major decisions. I could not marry a white man who could not love my Vietnamese food.

The sense of feeling different from others is not a phenomenon this researcher found referenced in the scant literature on Vietnamese immigrants. In the sociological literature about minority cultures, and in the pedagogical writings of theorists such as Friere and hooks (1983; 1978), there is discussion about the personal experience of oppressed people.

### Coping Strategies

Two coping strategies were discussed by three participants: cultural engagement and education and employment. All of the participants took some college courses in the

U.S., and two earned a college degree in the U.S. These two coping strategies seemed to this researcher to be related. To an extent, the participants also seemed to sense a close relationship between the two strategies. For example, one participant talked about having dual intentions: one, being to improve her skills for economic gain; and two, to gain understanding about the U.S. culture in order to integrate.

### *Cultural Engagement*

Daisy felt she learned much from going to school here in the U.S. It helped her to interact with the U.S. culture in the most effective way. To become familiar with her new culture, Daisy felt she had to plunge into it and interact with the people and the culture as fast and as much as she could. She felt she could easily adapt to different cultures because of her experience first adapting to the Japanese culture. After a decade in Japan, she immigrated to the U.S. and again she had to adjust and adapt to a new culture; however, she had learned some adaptation strategies in Japan.

My strategy was to interact with the American culture as much as possible. I tried to make friends outside of the Vietnamese culture and in the Vietnamese culture. With learning English, I read American literature and history, magazines, and tried to learn about the San Jose history.

Even though adapting to a new culture is one of the strategies that Daisy felt was important to help her and other Vietnamese women to empower themselves and enhance their status in the society, she also felt that this only increased marital conflict. As she progressed in her acculturation, her husband chose to keep to the old traditions.

Besides going to school and trying to be educated, Violet also felt that Vietnamese women must interact and meet with both Vietnamese people as well as American people. By having American friends she felt she could learn and adapt to this culture faster than just reading about them in books.

Women should meet people in both Vietnamese and U.S. culture. I felt it was important to do both. By meeting and interacting with Vietnamese people, I felt a sense of support and a sense of kinship. That the sense of not being alone in my struggle. By meeting and interacting with Americans, I learned more of the customs, culture, and values of this culture. This was not formal classroom education though I think that sometimes is very valuable.

Violet also talked about her recent experience traveling abroad to Vietnam with her college classmates and teacher. Violet said jokingly, “I went to Vietnam to learn English.” This is because her roommate on the trip did not speak Vietnamese. Interestingly, her roommate was a Vietnamese woman born in the U.S. who did not speak Vietnamese, and who went to Vietnam to learn Vietnamese. Violet confessed that she learned much about American culture during the two weeks she was in Vietnam with her school and classmates. She said this was the first time she stayed with “not just one but many Americans twenty-four hours a day” and that it was “the most valuable experience” for her. She felt she now had a much better understanding of the U.S. and of Americans. It is ironic she that she was doing all this learning while she was in her country of origin.

Lily echoed the experiences of the other women in her dialogue.

I think the women who do the best reach out and get support from the mechanisms that are available to them, and they go to school, and learn how to do something, and then they really embrace life here because they find out they can have some freedom and still support their families. So, the ones who investigate the U.S. culture, make a life for themselves. They move past the old life.

### *Education and Employment*

Daisy echoed the sentiment of Orchid and Violet about education. Learning English, going to school, and learning all that one could about the new culture seemed to work out well. She also stated that if one wanted to be or feel accepted by the culture, a person must speak and learn English. Daisy differentiated between preparation and immersing herself in the culture. Daisy does not work outside the home and she felt that

made her more dependent on her spouse and contributed to the imbalance in her marital relationship.

Learn and use English language. Go to school; learn anything in order to improve yourself so you can build your life. Grow yourself as a person with schooling. Become a person on your own. Maybe build a business, maybe a family business because Americans and Vietnamese are very different. This is what I would do different. Women I see who do this, they build a future for themselves and aren't slave to their husbands.

As do the other participants in the study, Violet values education highly and felt one of the most effective coping strategies for Vietnamese women in the U.S. is education. Learning is the most powerful tool in a successful adaptation process in the U.S. She felt Vietnamese women had always worked hard and had great perseverance. However, the Vietnamese women do not have the opportunity to go to school and to earn advanced degrees as they do in the U.S. Therefore, she felt strongly that Vietnamese women should first learn the language, and then advance themselves by furthering their education.

Learn the language, go to classes, keep learning until you cannot not take it in any more. I have not choice but to work even though I wish sometimes that I could quit my job to go to school fulltime. However, this is not possible because I have to support myself and my parents. You know, here you have to take care about yourself and the family. It is a strange concept to we Vietnamese to think more in terms of our selves and less about others. But we have to adjust.

Hyacinth expressed the feeling that education is the most important means that any immigrant woman can have to advance not only herself, and that it is the most effective and efficient way for Vietnamese women to adapt to the new society.

Learning the language was first and greatest strategy. Then, I can communicate and get into the culture to understand it. The second strategy is to get an American education as much as possible to get more into the culture. But my objective is to improve myself and my family. See one thing is that we have to put the past in the past and go into the future. We can't lose our own culture and who we are, but we have to progress.

Hyacinth's greatest conviction is to pay back and give back to her new society once she is fully adjusted and self-sufficient. She also feels that in order for women to be able to help their children to adjust in the new society, they must first be knowledgeable and educated to teach and guide their youngsters. To Orchid, an American education is more valuable than having material goods." She reported that when she was in Vietnam, her greatest dream and hope was to be able to be educated in the U.S. In that sense, she felt part of her childhood dream came true. She spoke of the importance of education and not only formal education, but also the lessons of and about the American culture, learned through experiencing the culture. Learning about the American culture can help Vietnamese women to maneuver in the new culture, and she believes that this can help women to be a better agent for change within their family. In this way, they build a new identity.

Learning the U.S. culture allows us to see how other people act, learn, behave, and do things, live life here. We learn how to do things like how to deal with conflict in this culture. Then we can take learning back to the family. See, this is all what we must do to establish our lives here, to become real persons, to build a Vietnamese-American community and culture, a new society. We take what we find good in the American culture and we adopt it, when it does not imbalance or betray our values.

Hyacinth felt the mother role in the U.S. culture is vital. Therefore, unless a mother is capable and educated, she is lacking in her ability to help her children adapt and function in this society.

It is critical for Vietnamese women to work in the U.S. In Vietnam because of the Vietnam-American war, women were forced to work while their husbands were in the battlefield. In the U.S. the circumstances are different, yet women work outside the home for many reasons other than economic pressure. Here in the U.S. women also work for self-fulfillment and self-growth and this is essential for any Vietnamese or women in general to take heart.

Orchid had a similar experience and used similar strategies in her approach to adapting to the U.S. culture.

Working outside the home is a powerful way for women to have a voice and a role in the society. Going to work allows financial empowerment. Earning money empowers me with social capital. I can participate more in society. I help my family, and I contribute to the U.S.

Lily spoke about the opportunities in the U.S. and about the strategy of

preparation, education, and personal investment in one's future.

They found that their new opportunities leave them with the choice to choose various careers, various plans for themselves. Working Vietnamese women are known to be very diligent and because of natural economic requirements, you know, once you get here, suddenly to take care of a family, one has to work and cannot depend on welfare forever. A lot of Vietnamese families, yes, depend on these support systems our government provides at the beginning whether it's welfare or the other sponsorships or whatever to get on their feet. Once they find that they can find work and learn to adjust their schedule, they really embrace that because it gives them economic freedom. It gives them the ability to earn on their own and to take care of their families, to pay the rent, and to save up for their children's education or to save up to even open their own business and that's how history has gone. We see now in our community a lot of Vietnamese women have very successful at having their businesses. You know, one very obvious example around the valley is nail and hair care. I understand that seventy percent are owned by women because they are willing to put in the investment of five hundred dollars or so to get the certificate so that they can work; and then once they work, they save all their hard earned money, and they don't mind the low wages and save the money and put it back into their families. That work helps them integrate and adjust to adapt to life a lot quicker. Then on top of that I think they continue their studies. A lot of them put in extra hours to study at universities at college at night that also help their knowledge which gives them further advancements.

Vietnamese women have been working outside of the home for more than a century in Vietnam because of the historical circumstances of several wars and conflicts. However, working in the U.S. has elevated Vietnamese women's status. Entering the workforce serves as both an economic engine for the family and enhances the women's status in society. In this sense by working, Vietnamese women are also gaining power.

## Recommendations

Much of what the women recommended to other Vietnamese women immigrants echoes the strategies they used themselves. Some recommendations were made, clearly, out of having observed and compared their own circumstances and choices with those of other Vietnamese women. Sometimes during the dialogues, it took extra effort to draw out the women in conversation. Without intimate knowledge of Vietnamese culture, the researcher might have mistaken the hesitance as something other than a cultural characteristic. In the Vietnamese culture, there is some judgment against women who talk about themselves, their families, or other people in a public forum. There is a tendency to view a woman who talks as a gossip. However, at the point when our dialogues shifted from the challenges and strategies—more self-focused—and turned to recommendations, the women opened up more, and began to tell more stories. Through their stories, two common themes arose in their recommendations to other Vietnamese immigrant women: cultural immersion and education, not surprisingly.

### *Cultural Immersion*

In much of her dialogue, Orchid described the differences and similarities between Vietnamese and American culture. By building such an astute awareness, Orchid prepared herself to make choices about her adaptation and the degree to which she assimilates. In some instances, Orchid spoke about the ways Vietnamese women can experience problems when they fail to learn about the new culture in which they live. One such instance involves learning about finance and basic economic realities. There are multiple differences between the Vietnamese economic system and the American economic system. Orchid's dialogue is representative of the other women in regard to

cultural immersion. Her recommendation has a particular caution about the economics of adaptation.

Get yourself into the U.S. culture; it is a trap not to. It doesn't mean to lose yourself, but women have to take their power. Be aware of the financial system in the U.S. Especially beware of the American credit systems, because Vietnamese women can get themselves into trouble with credit cards. As women we are the ones who must be aware, learn and take care of finances. Women must learn how the U.S. system operates. It is the woman who takes this on because we are the ones who learn the new language, and yet it is the man who keeps the power because our culture holds the Vietnamese language superior, and he who speaks the superior language is superior. But, really, this is changing in the younger generation with the children who are born here.

#### *Education and Preparation of Oneself*

As an immigrant twice, first in Japan then after ten years in the U.S., Daisy felt Vietnamese women need to prepare themselves for all the unexpected and unknown factors in her lives. In Daisy's view, they must investigate, learn, and prepare themselves. She stated she never thought that she would be in the U.S. starting over when she was in her thirties after being married and moving to the U.S. from Japan. She felt her life went in a "circle of the unknown and unexpected." She believes that Vietnamese women need to open themselves up to all possibilities as well as preparing for the worse situations. She also felt that these experiences helped her to be much stronger and more ready for the unknown.

One must open oneself up to all possibilities. Vietnamese women must open themselves up to, make room for their new culture. And, they must find out about what they don't know. The U.S. society is more complex than Vietnamese society; there are more pitfalls. It also has many more opportunities for women that were beyond my imagination when I first arrived. Unless you look, you cannot find.

As a single woman, Violet felt she must advance herself as much as possible, and she gives the same advice to other Vietnamese immigrant women. It was necessary for

her to advance herself so she could support herself. Violet, who seemed shy and quiet, held opinions with deep conviction and conveyed them with wit. I also enjoyed her perspectives about Vietnamese men. She had no hesitation giving her straight and direct criticisms of both Vietnamese men as well as Vietnamese culture.

Even though one could have friends and family members, I could not count on anyone to take care of me financially or emotionally. I have no choice. I have no man to rely on. My parents are older and I not only have to support myself, I must work and support them as well. I felt lost when I first came here, even with family members because it was my responsibility to provide. I had to find out about how things work here, and it was my responsibility to prepare myself for employment. Here, even if a woman is married, she could find herself divorced. Vietnamese men don't divorce, there is not such a thing in Vietnam; but here I have seen Vietnamese men divorce their wives. Vietnamese women of the new generation, they know this, and even when they marry Vietnamese men, they know they live in a dual-culture married... Vietnamese by culture, and American by law. This creates tension. The woman must be prepared in a different way than in Vietnam.

Orchid felt that the one way for her to advance herself is through education and making more money. She felt she had "limited choice" in her new culture, therefore to her the most important recommendation that she had for other Vietnamese women was to take advantage of the education system and through education she felt women could advance themselves both professionally and emotionally.

Hyacinth recommended Vietnamese women prepare themselves through education, both formally, as well as through learning about the U.S. culture. She felt that by both learning and modeling American culture, Vietnamese women would have a much easier time adjusting as well as raising her family. She felt positive about her future in the U.S., and she was glad she was able to obtain an American education.

Take steps to observe how things are done here, and adapt your family role so that you are teaching your family. But do this with more than *only* the family in mind. Have a vision for your life, too, and live your dreams. Find out about the resources available to you. This is something too many Vietnamese women do not do, still. They should learn how to use and share resources within their families.

This provides power and strength in the family, but for the women it does too. Even life is challenging here, it is here I want to be and to raise my family.

As an older woman, Rose feels she is running out of time. She felt that the Vietnamese women needed to learn the language and culture first as well as taking care of their needs.

They need to try to learn the U.S. culture, take care of their needs, and grow. They need to understand that some kind of education is vital to their survival. It is not the man. Here, marriage can last, or it can end. Growing ourselves is important. If you need to interact with Americans so you can practice your English then that is what you have to do! It's more difficult when you're older, though.

Based on Confucian teaching, education is the highest model for individuals to advance themselves. In many Western cultures, such as the U.S., education is also a powerful channel for self-expression and personal advancement. Orchid reports that education was a significant advantage in how she compensated for and overcame oppression and abuse, and empowered herself.

Prepare yourself intellectually. Prepare socially; find ways to make acquaintances in the American community. Prepare physically, to protect yourself as a woman and as a Vietnamese woman. Educate yourself about your health and about the U.S. legal system. Learn about the education system. Here, people can go to school with loans. There are resources available. With an education, you can have independence and make your own decisions as well as contribute to the family. With education you can have your own financial source. If you become knowledgeable about American law, you can protect yourself from the tyranny of others in your family. Women need to learn what is acceptable and not acceptable.

As an accountant Rose planned her time and her life in a very structured manner. Therefore, she felt being goal-oriented is a very important aspect of adaptation for Vietnamese women in the U.S. Planning for one's life, working hard, and fighting hard have all been part of Rose's reality since she was in her early twenties.

The woman must create a clear goal for herself and have good time management. Constantly needing to plan...women have to fight hard. You have to be realistic and plan for yourself, hold on to those plans and work for them inch by inch.

Even though Orchid accomplished much, such as graduating from college with honors and a 3.96 GPA, and serving as the president of the Vietnamese Student Association, she did not see her accomplishment as her greatest success. Despite her reservations about herself, she does appear to understand what she accomplished and is able and quite willing to share her successes with other Vietnamese women.

I tried to overcome all I could by overcompensating, by joining and by performing at a high level. All this gave some of us an outside harder shell. But I used to sabotage something so I was never the absolute top, because I still had the idea that I am not good enough, because I am a female. I took in what my father said about me, and us. So I cannot ever be totally successful.

In summary, the Vietnamese women who were part of this study reached a high level of consensus in recommending to other women that they should take an active role in their self-determination. It is clear that all of the women made choices about their lives and gave up the assumption that their lives were determined for them along with their home country when they immigrated. Two characteristics that came through the dialogues were perseverance and determination. While there was tension, struggle, ambivalence, loneliness, and sometimes grief apparent in their dialogues, all the women seemed to be buoyed by an inner strength that compelled them forward into building a future through education and work.

### The Unique Themes

In this section, the researcher presents the unique themes brought up by some of the women during the dialogues. A few study participants had unique perspectives in two areas: challenges and recommendations.

## Challenges

Four unique themes were discussed by one or two of the six participants, and while the other women did not dispute these themes, they did not particularly resonate with them. The unique themes were (a) prejudice and stereotypes, (b) generational differences, (c) raising children, and (d) financial burdens.

### *Prejudice and Stereotypes*

A surprise for the researcher was the lack of focus on prejudice and stereotypes in the dialogues. However, when it did emerge during Orchid's interview and she described her experience of being discriminated against, other women nodded in affirmation. Orchid reported incidents of prejudice and stereotyping, which she attributes to some degree to be resultant from American attitudes about the Vietnam-American war of the 1960s and 1970s. Being abused and oppressed, having to deal with insecurity and low self-esteem, and dealing with a language barrier were not enough of a challenge for this immigrant. Because of her Vietnamese heritage, Orchid also had to deal with the hostility toward her because of the lost war.

Prejudice from Americans, especially related to the American-Vietnam war. We receive a lot of negative reactions from all American subcultures, white, black, brown, yellow, etc. because of the war. That added an additional layer...people lashed out at us, as though we were responsible for the war. Racism from other immigrant groups was difficult. Figuring out how to respond was a challenge. Another challenge was stereotypes about us. We felt as though we had more peer issues and more pressure because we were trying to make up for our parents' generation and assumed responsibility for the Vietnam war. We were discriminated against here when we stepped out of our neighborhood. So we stayed close, but there is difficulty there, too because it seems that some in our own community turn the discrimination and hatred inward toward the Vietnamese community.

Orchid echoed the sentiment of other Vietnamese immigrants who participated in previous research, such as that by Kibria (1993). To an extent, Orchid's comments about

the Vietnamese community's response is evidence of internalized oppression, whereby people become their own oppressors because of their minority status in a dominant culture (Bui & Morash, 1999).

Hyacinth talked about being in the predicament of not knowing how to extricate herself from the conditions of discriminatory situations. She discussed the dilemma experienced by Vietnamese Americans who choose to assimilate as well as those who cling to their Vietnamese culture and community.

We were discriminated against there when we stepped out of our neighborhood. So we stay close, but there is difficulty there too. Conflicts arose in the family because women adapt, or desire to adapt, more quickly than men do. The fact that men do not want to change, culturally, and women do, creates an imbalance in the family system. This imbalance creates an imbalance in the Vietnamese community.

Many Japanese Americans, after World War II, chose to assimilate completely because of their experiences in the Internment Camps—being different created problems (Houston & Houston, 1972). In contrast, the Vietnamese community seems to insulate itself by becoming more ethnocentric and less open to interracial marriage and mainstreaming. In doing so, they may experience more difficulty in fully realizing their potential.

### *Generational Differences*

A generational shift is taking place in how the Vietnamese woman is perceived in both the culture and the family in regards to the pursuit of personal happiness and identity. Historically, Vietnamese women enjoyed few lifestyle and career options outside the wishes of the male-dominated family. The old cultural pattern of what can be perceived as gender oppression, appears to suppress self-fulfillment and personal accomplishment by Vietnamese women. In recent studies, researchers indicate the

tendency of Vietnamese immigrant women to create identities based on gender oppression (Chung et al., 2000). This is not surprising given the historical context of the Vietnamese culture.

Based on Confucian teachings, self-sacrifice is a standard moral code for Vietnamese women. You sacrifice yourself for your family—as a child for your parents and siblings; when married for your father and mother in-law, your husband, and your children—in that order. A classic example of this is “The Tale of Kieu” (Nguyen, 1820)—the Vietnamese masterpiece seen as an equivalent of Shakespeare’s Hamlet by the Vietnamese population. This piece of still very popular literature reflects the ideal self-sacrificing woman. Kieu becomes a prostitute to bail out her father, she gives up the love of her life to her sister, and she sacrifices her husband (the one man willing to marry a prostitute and to buy her out of prostitution) to the king since the king must be obeyed above all.

Rose has been a good daughter and a good sister all of her life. Her father’s wish at death was that she would always help her mother raise and support her siblings. She sacrificed her life, her wishes, and her dreams in order to work at an early age to help her mom to support the family. As the oldest daughter, Rose did not fulfill her dreams in order for her brothers and sisters to live and fulfill their dreams.

Orchid describes both positive and negative effects of generational differences.

The challenges are different based on your age when you come here. Generations impacts the challenges. Between first and second generation there were challenges. Second generation has had it easier, because we have had the older generation to have made their mistakes and we saw those. But we took the brunt of the mistakes that our parents made in not adapting.

### *Bringing Up Children*

Another surprise for the researcher was that the women as a group did not focus more on raising children in the American culture. As with all other aspects of social life, the differences in how Vietnamese and American culture relate to children, is stark. In the Vietnamese culture, the standards for child rearing are more standard. In America, child rearing practices vary widely. In the Vietnamese society, children have clear markers for behavior, which varies only by gender. Daisy was eager to talk about her difficulty as a mother rearing her child in this culture. She felt the most difficult challenge for Vietnamese women in the U.S. is rearing children. Even though Daisy's son is only seven, she expressed much frustration in rearing children. Then she continued to discuss her difficulty of having her husband interfere with the way she reared her child.

Raising children is top challenge. The Vietnamese and U.S. cultures are very different about kids. Here they have bigger role in family and greater freedom, greater rights, no limits. The U.S. is a pleasure-seeking society, kids learn this immediately, and it becomes difficult to balance the old with new culture. Children do not obey parents here in the U.S. They just have too much freedom. The conflict between the husband and wife because the husband wants the wife to raise the children his way and the husband do not allow the wife to do her job and discipline the children according how she see it.

Daisy also discussed how child rearing affects marital relationships. Since women adapt more readily to American practices, and husbands are more reluctant to make change, the attitudes impinge on the way they desire to raise children and often lead to conflict between spouses.

### *Financial Burden*

The financial situations of Vietnamese immigrant women vary widely because of a number of factors. The status of the woman and her family in Vietnam plays a role.

Then one's status on arrival—an immigrant or refugee—is important. Other factors include the economic condition in the region in which the woman or family settles, the period in which she/they arrived, and the extent of her/their ability to integrate into the local labor market on arrival. Rose had this to say on the challenge of financial burden.

Here we Vietnamese women immigrants have to deal with even more. In Vietnam only the man is the breadwinner. Here the woman must also support financially, but the man controls everything. The woman has had to go out and support the family in Vietnam during some periods of our history. But that is different. Here it is a constant. The women needs a career, not just a job, or if it is without education, she has to work many jobs to survive. Job conditions aren't always good either. Immigrants find themselves with lower paying work because of the misperception of our abilities, some related to language but also because we are not educated about the ways of the American business.

The women in the study experienced various circumstances related to finances due to the type of jobs and education they had. Some of the women worked in service sector jobs. Others worked in professional jobs because they sought education. Some were educated in both Vietnam and in the U.S.

#### Recommendations to Other Vietnamese Women

Three unique recommendations were made during the dialogues, although they too generated some affirmation by the other women. All three—building support networks, re-inventing yourself, and appreciating yourself—were threads through the common discussions. For a couple of the women, though, these recommendations were given a high priority.

#### *Building a Support Network*

Violet seemed to have a healthy social life. She has many friends and family members that she could count on, and she felt that Vietnamese women in the U.S. must utilize their support network as important sources of support.

I have many friends and family members who are always willing to be there for me. Even sometimes, I don't agree with them. They always able to provide me with different perspectives that I might not even think of.

Whether due to a more gregarious, or a more curious nature, a few women became leaders in their community. Becoming a leader provides access to many more people. Lily was one participant who rose to a high stature in both the Vietnamese community and the local business community. As a successful business person, she often spoke of the great opportunities available to women in the U.S. and was one who had taken full advantage of those opportunities.

I think to raise support and guidance from other groups. And I think Vietnamese women are more, let's say, open about asking questions and receiving help whether it's expert advice or counseling, or from church, or from school. Or from friends, and I think those would help me see the feelings of integration and help make integration a lot easier.

### *Re-inventing Your Identity*

While most of the women had agreed that preparation and education were essential to a Vietnamese woman's successful adaptation, two of the women in the study paid particular attention to the strategy of re-inventing one's identity. In these dialogues, the two women diverged from the gender role discussions and talked more broadly about personhood, irrespective of gender.

Rose, for example, felt that balancing and blending the old and new culture is important aspect for Vietnamese immigrants in the U.S. She recommended taking what is best of the new culture and re-creating it with the flavor of the Vietnamese culture.

Bring in what aspects of the old culture combined with what here works for you and create a balance. Don't give up your own culture, but assimilate into the American culture to the degree that fits you. Don't completely sacrifice yourself for the family, but don't sacrifice your family either.

Orchid's dialogue shows that she is not simply accepting the Vietnamese way. She appears to have undertaken an approach that works well for an American identity. At times, Orchid's recommendations are as much about what not to do as they are about what to do. Some recommendations seem crafted out of personal experience, some out of the assessment of the experience of other people she witnessed and some, are future directed and for herself as much as they are meant for others.

Be sure to not become tied up with a man before checking out good options, shop for the man that fits for you. Don't settle on someone, the first one who comes along, and he feel you have to stay with him. This is common in Vietnamese culture. The first one who comes along the family sets you up to marry, they pressure you into it. Date several men, I don't mean sleep with many men, I mean explore your options.

What Orchid talked about has much to do with her own recommendation for Vietnamese women and marriage. She sought to convey that Vietnamese women should keep their options open, allow themselves to make choices, gain experience, and to avoid such things as family-arranged marriages.

#### *Appreciating and Caring for Self*

Rose and Orchid recommended to other Vietnamese women to take care of their health. Rose felt health is a very important part of a woman's existence. She recommended to other Vietnamese women to take good care of their health and their looks as this is a gift that was given by God to women.

They should take care of their health, all aspects of their health and their looks, that is a gift that they can give themselves. Try to balance between the old and new, to reach a compromise that will work for them.

Orchid's great sense of, and appreciation for, self seems to reflect an aspect of Maslow's self-actualization theory (1975). She recommended to other Vietnamese women that loving themselves and appreciating their attributes is most needed in the

process of adapting to the new culture and finding one's identity. She admonished that external attributes, such as physical appearance, cannot buy happiness; true fulfillment reflects a deeper sense of self.

Be yourself, I know a lot of young Vietnamese women, who go through the extent to have breast implants so that they are "more attractive" to white men and to just feel as though they fit in. You've got to love yourself.

One interesting effect of having engaged in the dialogues about their adaptation experiences caused the women during the group dialogues near the end to reflect and comment about the process. The simple act of stepping back and collectively assessing their journeys caused the women to perceive themselves and their futures in a different light. Suddenly they became scriptwriters of their futures rather than mere actors in a scripted play. Lily put it well.

Vietnamese women, already are getting out there, wanting to be part of the scene...they're out there organizing wanting to help. This very process here, now that we are engaged in as a group of women in your can organize to help others adapt and to create their own futures. It is a remarkable opportunity.

The other women too voiced the feeling of a shift taking place, and the researcher felt it as well. Discussing our experiences with each other and then later with colleagues and family members had a cathartic effect of release.

### Summary

In summary, this chapter contained the major findings related to Vietnamese immigrant women and their challenges, coping strategies and recommendations. A presentation of each of the common and unique themes revealed both remarkable similarities and differences in the women's immigration adaptation to coming to the U.S. The women's experiences spanned both historically identified "waves" of Vietnamese migration to the U.S. from the period of 1975 (after the fall of Saigon) to the present. The

group of women who participated in the study ranged in age from 28 to 61 at the time of the data collection. The six Vietnamese immigrant women chosen to be engaged in dialogue for this research were a convenience sample (Patton, 2002) drawn from a heterogeneous Vietnamese community in the city of San Jose, California. All six were members of the San Jose Vietnamese Buddhist and Catholic communities and are acquaintances of the researcher. Each were chosen for the study because the researcher knows each to be a woman who has adapted to the U.S. culture with some success, who was open to being included and open to a group dialogue. The researcher's measure of success was more about the woman not having sunk into poverty, crime, and/or ill health (either mental or physical) than any criteria related to education level, material wealth, or status.

The Vietnamese women included in the study faced many challenges in coming to the U.S. The common challenges identified were the following: gender role differences, marital and family conflict, language barriers, and generational differences. The unique challenges identified were, being and feeling different, prejudice and stereotypes, raising children and financial burden. The common strategies the women undertook to adapt to the U.S. culture included cultural engagement, and preparation and education. The common recommendations made by the women included the following: cultural immersion, and education and preparation. The unique recommendations made by a couple of the women were building support and networks, re-inventing oneself, and appreciating for and caring for self.

These three tables summarize and synthesize the research question findings.

Table 2: What challenges do Vietnamese immigrant women face in adapting to life in the United States?

Themes	Frequency
Gender role differences	6
Family and marital conflict	5
Language barriers	4
Being and feeling different	3
Prejudice	2
Generational difference	1
Bringing up children	1

Table 3: What strategies do Vietnamese women use to overcome the challenges they face in adapting to life in the United States?

Themes	Frequency
Cultural engagement	6
Preparation	6

Table 4: What recommendations would they offer to other Vietnamese women as they attempt to adapt to life in the United States?

Themes	Frequency
Cultural immersion	5
Education	5
Support network	2
Reinvent identity	2
Appreciate & care for self	2

## CHAPTER 5

### SUMMARY, DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research examined three questions about Vietnamese women in the U.S.:

(a) What challenges do Vietnamese immigrant women face in adapting to life in the United States? (b) What strategies do Vietnamese women use to overcome the challenges they face in adapting to the United States? How helpful are these strategies in adapting to life in the United States? (c) What recommendations would they offer to other Vietnamese women as they attempt to adapt to life in the United States?

In trying to understand the women of this study and other Vietnamese immigrant women in general, this researcher found that it requires a perspective broader than simply considering race, culture, gender, education, and socio-economic class separately. It requires understanding each woman as evolving beings within and across contexts. The researcher found three salient points as a result of the analysis. First, cultural gender role oppression within the Vietnamese culture is powerful, and subjugates men as well as women. Second, the women of this study are part of a segment of the Vietnamese community of San Jose, California that has chosen a selective assimilation strategy. Third, the action of engaging in research about their own culture, seems to have had an intervening effect on the women's thinking and networking.

This chapter contains three sections including (a) findings, (b) recommendations, and (c) future research. The findings discussion is organized in two parts: (a) a summary of findings and (b) further results that discusses cultural gender oppression, selective assimilation strategy, and the liberating action of participatory research.

## Summary of Findings

Given the challenge of moving to a new country, the women in this study adapted amazingly well in their new homeland of the United States. The older women who came to the U.S. later in life, however, seem to have had more difficulties in overcoming the loss of their home country and in making shifts in their outlook and attitude. The dialogues of the participants in the study demonstrate that the women who came to the U.S. early in their lives had some challenges that were similar to as well as different from the challenges experienced by the older immigrant women.

Besides being extremely adaptable to their new environment, the women in the study were extremely positive and enthusiastic about their lives in the U.S. The main thread of success seemed to be their attitude of moving ahead and letting go of the past, yet at the same time preserving some of their Vietnamese cultural traditions that kept them connected to their original culture. The following summarizes and examines the answers to the research questions posed in this study.

Research Question 1: What challenges do Vietnamese immigrant women face in adapting to life in the United States?

### Being and Feeling Different

Three of the participants expressed a great sense of loss and displacement coming to their new environment. Orchid stated that not fitting in and feeling like she did not belong in her new environment, were a difficulty for her. Hyacinth expressed her frustration about being a stranger to her new land. She had everything set in Vietnam. When she came to the U.S., she had to begin all over again. Rose felt completely out of place—that it was a different world for her in every way. Lily and Daisy felt adjustment

in the new land definitely contributed to feelings of isolation, but they did not seem to share the great distress of the other three participants. Violet is the only one who stated that she did not feel as estranged to this culture as she thought she would prior to living in the States.

### Language Barriers

All participants felt language barriers to be the greatest challenges for Vietnamese immigrant women. Hyacinth felt language differences led to misunderstandings and interfered with one's ability to contribute to society. Not speaking the language prevents immigrants from getting resources they need. Violet stated without being able to speak the language of the new culture, one cannot join the culture. Orchid beautifully summed it up—not speaking the language inhibits one's ability to adapt.

### Gender Role Differences

The gender roles imbalances reflect the traditional, patriarchal Confucian teachings that were imposed upon both Vietnamese men and Vietnamese women for many centuries. Daisy and Violet had the strongest opinion about this. The man is the king and the wife is the slave. He possesses her, he owns her, and he has all the rights to her. Violet reflected that Vietnamese society has changed both in Vietnam and here in the U.S. Yet the Vietnamese men have not changed especially the men who are forties year and older. Orchid felt that Vietnamese men could not control their environment in the U.S. They felt demoted from their stature and identity and this impacted their relationship with women. Lily observed that younger Vietnamese Americans who grew up in the U.S. had many more options and had a wide-open opportunity for a more balanced relationship. She also felt that older couples suffered from much more

imbalance and gender oppression between the sexes. All participants shared a similar sentiment that the old patriarchal Vietnamese traditions had dampened the adaptation of Vietnamese men and women, and it created considerable marital conflict and lead to challenges in the family.

### Family and Marital Conflict

There was agreement among all of participants that this is an area of great difficulty for the Vietnamese communities in the U.S. This researcher was surprised how open the participants were in discussing their view on this particular area. It was a topic that was discussed with passion. They talked about the divorce rate within the Vietnamese community as being as high as forty percent. Rose discussed her thought that Vietnamese women in the U.S. had too much temptation. She went on talking about the scarcity of personal fulfillment within the context of family obligation. Daisy also discussed how Vietnamese women often sacrifice their deep inner desire for the greater good of the family unit. Hyacinth begins the dialogue telling the story of her mother as a virtuous woman who gave all of herself and her entire life to her husband and children. Lily was the only one who did not share much of the women's opinion in this particular area. Perhaps this was because she had married a Caucasian man, not a Vietnamese man.

Research Question 2: What strategies do Vietnamese women use to overcome the challenges they face in adapting to the United States? How helpful are these strategies in adapting to the United States?

### Education

All participants felt education to be the greatest tool for them to achieve and adapt to their new environment. Daisy stated, "Learn and use the English language, go to

school, learn anything in order to let in the culture.” Violet said, “Learn language, go to school, keep learning until you could not take it in any more.” Lily felt that you must educate yourself. With education, the participants felt that opportunities are unlimited for Vietnamese women in the U.S.—that getting as much education as possible will help women reach their greatest potential. All the participants seemed to have a deep aspiration to learn and continue their education as far as they could. This researcher wondered if a different group of women without such strong educational backgrounds would respond the same way as these six women.

### Striving to Fit into the Culture

The women in this study had important suggestions about how one could best fit into the new environment. Hyacinth felt learning about the American culture would help her to deal with conflict. Understanding this could help her apply this to her family, particularly to help her children to deal with their own conflict in the American culture. Violet felt the way that she could best fit into her environment is not just learning in a formal setting but meeting and interacting with as many Americans as she could so she could learn the language, the culture, and the values of her new culture. Rose felt that she needed to reach out for support and take advantage of all the opportunities that are available. Lily felt that being entrepreneurs such as working outside the home, opening one’s own business, and getting involved in the community were effective ways of striving and adapting to the American culture. Overall, the dialogues centered on the notion that getting involved with both American institutions and American people, was vital to the adaptation process of Vietnamese women in the U.S.

Research Question Three: What recommendations would they offer to other Vietnamese women as they attempt to adapt to life in the United States?

The participants had explicit recommendations to other Vietnamese women as well as others who are interested in the process of adaptation of Vietnamese women in the U.S.:

1. Learn to speak English.
2. Get as much education as possible.
3. Work outside the home.
4. Get involved with Americans and their institutions.
5. Retain parts of the Vietnamese culture that are important to you.
6. Learn to appreciate yourself and feel free to reinvent yourself.

#### Other Findings

##### Cultural Gender Role Oppression

At the outset of this study, the researcher as an educator and as a Vietnamese immigrant woman assumed that the oppression she experienced in her life was imposed by the Vietnamese men, and to some extent by a dominant U.S. culture. Through the research experience, the researcher's perspective has shifted. While it is true that Vietnamese men enjoy a high level of power, so too, do the women as is exemplified by the fact that it is the Vietnamese woman who is the family member who has the most contact with other social entities. While it is true that the family finances are in the Vietnamese man's name, it is the woman who manages the finances. For example, Violet eloquently stated the following in her dialogue:

The Vietnamese men want to be the pillar of the family even though he has less education than his wife does and probably make less money than his wife makes.

Yet he still likes to impose on his wife. I believe that most Vietnamese family has this problem. I believe the true pillar of the Vietnamese family are the Vietnamese women. They are also the pillar of the larger community.

While it is true that the Vietnamese man enjoys many advantages from being the designated “head of household,” the Vietnamese woman is also “protected” in Vietnamese society (Ta, 1981). What is also true, and what stood out during the dialogue sessions with the participants, is that both men and women uphold the three submissions and four virtues cultural norms of the old Confucian patriarchy teachings.

The realization of the researcher through listening to the participants’ stories and in reflection is that if the women are obliged to carry out cultural expectations as demanded, so too are the men. Conflict, tension, and pain were elements of each of the participant’s experience in this study—perhaps internalized conflict from centuries of war and oppression. Both genders are forced by cultural dictates to behave in specific ways, regardless of their own personalities and desires. This dynamic of women upholding the cultural norms, came through in their descriptions of men as the “kings” of the families. Effectively, the women are retelling the subjugation story and enforcing the cultural norm every time they make these kinds of statements. In their dialogues, the women in the study often spoke harshly about women who did *not* uphold the Vietnamese cultural norms. In this way, they too were subjugating the men and women in their stories by affirming that the man is “king” and by speaking harshly about any Vietnamese woman who deviates from that cultural norm. Yet, internally, most of the women, especially those who came to the U.S. later in life, struggled with the Vietnamese cultural imposition that created their futures for them without any accommodation for individual desires.

What was also clear through the dialogues with the participants is that in the Vietnamese community of San Jose, California, the Vietnamese culture is shifting. Now in the Vietnamese community businesses have been created—both family businesses and woman-owned businesses. Vietnamese commerce is flourishing. According to the San Jose Economic Council, women own 70% of the nail salons, not only the Vietnamese community, but throughout the area, as just one example of their progress. The tension and ambiguity apparent in the participants' dialogues are representative of the challenges the Vietnamese immigrants still face. All of the cultural norms of Vietnam are up for examination by Vietnamese immigrants and while many Vietnamese immigrants seem to be keeping some of their customs, new ways of living are being created. No single model exists of what it means to be a Vietnamese-American man or woman. More in keeping with the American immigrant tradition, a new culture has emerged in which people select for themselves how they live their lives, keeping what works for them from the old culture, adopting new ones from the new culture, and importantly, creating new ones out of their own needs.

Almost all the participants in this study agreed that they would like to keep some of their culture's customs especially for Lily, Hyacinth and Daisy, who has young children who were born in the U.S. However, they also felt it is important for them to continue to grow and reinvent themselves as their lives continue to unfold in the U.S. Orchid illustrated this in her dialogue.

Prepare yourself intellectually. Prepare socially. Prepare physically and continue to re-invent your identity as a woman as a Vietnamese American women. Keep your eyes and your option open.

### Selective Assimilation

Closely related to the previous discussion about cultural oppression and the shifting Vietnamese culture in the U.S., is the subject of adaptation. In the present study, the participants all seem to have chosen a selective assimilation approach to adapting to the U.S. culture. All of the six participants valued and felt being educated is the best tool for assimilation. Four of the six also felt being financially independent to be another selective mode of assimilation. Although the participants are in different age groups and immigrated at different times, they all have purposefully entered into a process of exploring the choices they have in front of them. The complexity, ambiguity, and ambivalence of such an endeavor came through in the dialogue sessions with all of the participants. The Vietnamese community of San Jose is a thriving community, which has not become a community of poverty. It is still in a state of evolution, although economically speaking, it has progressed and appears to be coming into its own.

### Recommendations for Educators, Practitioners, and Researchers

Marginalization of any segment of society does not serve the overall society. Whether the marginalized group becomes so because of its own doing or because of the oppression of the dominant group, it hampers the overall society. In the U.S. where the overt goal has always been the inclusion of all immigrants as productive citizens of the whole, it is important for the Vietnamese community to become an integrated part of American life. In a similar way, neither gender of the Vietnamese community should be oppressed.

It is first up to the Vietnamese community to make choices about how it will progress in the U.S. Within the Vietnamese community, individuals and families must

explore and envision new futures. In order for there to be an integration of Vietnamese people into the larger American culture, both communities must come together to envision a common future.

For educators, the prospect of bringing the Vietnamese community into the foreground of the nation's attention holds great promise. What is abundantly clear from the participant dialogues is that the women of this study express a genuine desire, if not need, to contribute to society for their own advancement, for the advancement of their families, and for the U.S. society as a whole. It is clear that Vietnamese women are hard working, conscientious, diligent individuals with great strength and fortitude. Such individuals are valuable resources in society. Educators could collaborate with Vietnamese community members to build awareness of Vietnamese heritage. Courses could be offered that reach beyond the typical approach of viewing Vietnamese as victims of war and instead, focus on Vietnamese people as having a peaceful and creative culture, who have contributed to humankind.

For counselors who work with Vietnamese couples and families, a few suggestions occurred to the researcher. First, counselors should realize that Vietnamese women need some help in being comfortable talking about their families and in particular their relationships. Counselors should be aware that Vietnamese women take pride in their families. To speak about their own challenges is to speak against their husbands and families, and they may experience shame. Second, the Vietnamese culture is still evolving, yet at this time, it is still customary that family holds a greater emphasis than the individual does. For the Vietnamese people, there is tension and inner conflict about thinking about themselves over the family. Counselors should understand that their

Vietnamese women clients derive their identity through their contribution to their families.

For example, Rose, who is the oldest of nine, started working at 17 to help her mother support the family. At different times in her life she worked at more than one job to make as much money as she could to support younger siblings so they could be in school. She even traveled to work abroad in Hungary in order to make more money to send home. She is very proud and glad that she was able to pay back her parents for giving her life and fulfill her father's dying wish to care for her mother and siblings. Another example is Lily. She is the youngest child of a family of ten who migrated to the U.S. as a teenager. She was in the U.S. alone at the age of 17, yet when she realized she would not be able to return to her homeland, she continued to go to school full-time, work full-time, and send money home to support the entire extended family. She eventually sponsored seven siblings, her parents, nephews, and nieces to come to the U.S. and continued to support them financially. She received her MBA and became the first Vietnamese female CEO in the high tech industry in Silicon Valley. Today she sits on numerous foundation boards. She clearly fits the Super Women Syndrome given her many career accomplishments and her ability to take care of and financially support her entire extended family. She embodied the exterior of a successful American businesswoman, but inside she bears the soul of a very dutiful and loyal daughter, sister, mother, and wife.

#### Researcher's Reflections: Liberating Effects of Participatory Research

All of the participants in this study were women who have made a choice to interact with and engage the greater Vietnamese community and the greater American

community. They have joined. Yet, the act of involving themselves in this participatory research study had an effect that seems to have surprised all of them. During the dialogues, and especially near the end, observations about the reflection and the process of stepping back emerged in the conversation. As one woman remarked, it is not that they have not observed and reflected and made choices about their lives before this study. However, something shifted through the act of reflection and sharing in a group.

Participatory Action Research methodologists inform us the act of conducting such research places the researcher, as well as the participants, in various modes of inquiry.

Heron and Reason (2001) suggest that there are three modes of Participatory Action Research (PAR) approaches. In first-person PAR, the focus is on a single person. In second-person PAR, the focus is on people coming together in cooperative inquiry, and in third-person PAR the focus extends to a larger community. In the present study, the researcher engaged in first- and second-person modes. To a certain extent for a newer researcher, the process of conducting a PAR places the researcher in a self-reflective mode, which continues throughout the research project. The second-person mode of coming together with a group in a cooperative inquiry describes the dialogue sessions the researcher facilitated between the participants.

As a Vietnamese woman and an educator who has taught in women's study programs, and specifically taught courses in which the content focused on Vietnamese women, the researcher has known about the struggles and challenges of being an immigrant woman. The act of teaching has placed the researcher in the mode of being in the "insider-outsider" role (Heron & Reason, 2001). While the researcher anticipated some shifts to occur through engaging in a PAR study, the journey proved more

enlightening than imagined. The research process allowed the researcher the gift of perceiving the Vietnamese culture from both the inside and the outside. During the dialogues with the participants, the researcher resonated with the participants and at times, felt as if she were an observer looking at the issues and data for the first time. What became clear in the late dialogues with the participants was that the participants and the researcher became not only the researcher but also the researched.

#### Limitations

The present study was conducted as a participatory action research endeavor with six Vietnamese immigrant women in San Jose, California. The obvious limitation of the small sample size suggests that the experiences of the six women of the study may not be similar to the experiences of Vietnamese women immigrants in general. It would be interesting to broaden the study with more women and to differentiate the participants in some way, perhaps by immigrant wave. The present study was conducted in both English and Vietnamese so as not to eliminate the chances of gathering data from a diverse group of participants with differing ways and stages of adaptation.

#### Recommendations for Future Research

One interesting prospect, given the realization that oppression subjugates both the oppressor and the oppressed, would be to conduct research in which both genders were included. In such a study, it might be fruitful to hold dialogue sessions with several groups of women, then with several groups of men, and then with mixed groups. It is apparent that if participatory action research and any other process is going to assist the Vietnamese community create a new future, including all of the members of the community would be important. To continue with the PAR tradition, the next study could

be conducted with the explicit goal of reaching out in third-person mode to the broader Vietnamese community for the sake of effecting its evolution and empowerment within the larger American society.

Another prospect is to conduct a study in which the participants were segmented by age group and follow up studies conducted after five years and then ten years to study the progress of the individuals and their families.

In conclusion, the Vietnamese immigrant women of this study made amazing adaptations to the U.S. culture. Their experience demonstrated a selective assimilation approach to adaptation. The older women who came to the U.S. later in life seem to have had more difficult challenges in overcoming loss of their home country and in making shifts in their outlook and behavior. The women who came to the U.S. early in their lives had some similar and some different challenges than the older immigrants. Most of the women experienced conflicts and tensions in their relationships and families related to role expectations brought from Vietnam and exacerbated by the significant differences between Vietnamese and U.S. cultures. One interesting finding of the study was that what we think of as Vietnamese cultural norms, are actually norms imposed on Vietnamese culture by the Chinese many centuries ago. In immigrating to the U.S., Vietnamese people have the opportunity to rethink and envision a new future, and a culture that fits who they desire to be as Vietnamese-Americans.

At the same time women all over the world including the U.S. experience oppression to varying degrees. Even in the United States, until recently women were considerably oppressed as evidenced by this quote from Germain Greer that sounds like an updated version of Confucian teaching. “The house wife is an unpaid employee in her

husband's house in return for the security of being a permanent employee.” (Greer, 1970)

Double oppression is not new, but the women in this study provide examples of strength and triumph over oppression. Their examples are truly universal.

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APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

## RECRUITMENT FLIER

## Invitation to Participate in Research

Greetings,

My name is Mai Le Ho I am Vietnamese woman, and I am currently conducting a doctoral study about the experiences of Vietnamese women in adapting to life in the United States.

I am seeking participants to take part in conversations about their experiences related to this topic.

Interested women should meet the following:

Participants should be between 20 and 60 years of age currently, who were born in Vietnam and who immigrated to the United States when they were between the ages of 10 and 50. It is not necessary to be fluent in English because the researcher is fluent in both Vietnamese and English.

If you are interested in participating in the study, or would like to suggest someone to be contacted, please contact me at:

Mai Le Ho  
(408) 393-9821

Thank you!

Mai Le Ho  
University of San Francisco

## APPENDIX B

## LETTER TO PROSPECTIVE PARTICIPANTS: VIETNAMESE VERSION

## THƯ MỜI

Thưa quý vị,

Tôi là Hồ Lê Mai, tôi viết thư này để kính mời quý vị tham gia vào một công trình nghiên cứu trong luận án Tiến Sĩ mà tôi đang thực hiện tại phân khoa Giáo Dục và Đa Văn Hóa Quốc Tế Đại Học San Francisco. Công trình này nhằm nghiên cứu kinh nghiệm hội nhập của phụ nữ di dân Việt Nam tại Mỹ. Sự tham gia của quý vị sẽ góp phần hoàn tất công trình nghiên cứu này và làm gia tăng kiến thức chung. Sự tham gia của quý vị là hoàn toàn trên cơ sở tự nguyện. Nếu quý vị quyết định tham gia, quý vị sẽ dự hai buổi họp trong tháng tới. Trong hai buổi họp này quý vị và tôi sẽ nói chuyện về kinh nghiệm hội nhập của quý vị. Nội dung buổi trao đổi cũng như danh tính của quý vị sẽ được giữ kín theo luật định. Sau khi hoàn tất, kết quả cuộc khảo cứu sẽ được thông báo đến quý vị.

Quý vị có toàn quyền tự do tham gia hoặc từ chối không tham gia vào cuộc khảo cứu này. Ngoại trừ tác giả công trình khảo cứu, không ai biết danh tính những người tham gia hoặc từ chối tham gia công trình khảo cứu này. Tất cả tài liệu liên quan đến công trình khảo cứu, kể cả các băng ghi âm, và các bản ghi chép, sẽ được cất giữ an toàn để bảo mật.

Những người được mời tham gia công trình khảo cứu là những phụ nữ Mỹ gốc Việt, trong lứa tuổi 20 đến 60 và sống trong cộng đồng Việt Nam tại San Jose, California.

Chân thành cảm ơn sự hợp tác của quý vị.

Trân trọng,

Hồ Lê Mai

## APPENDIX C

## LETTER TO PROSPECTIVE PARTICIPANTS: ENGLISH VERSION

Dear Participant:

My name is Mai Le Ho and I am inviting you to participate in a study that I am conducting currently as a doctoral candidate in the International and Multicultural Education Department at the University of San Francisco. The study is about the adaptation experiences of Vietnamese women immigrants in the United States. Your participation would greatly assist in the completion of this important study and add to our knowledge base. Your participation is strictly voluntary. If you choose to participate, you will be involved in one to two meetings over the next month. Your meetings with me will consist of dialogue between you and I about your immigration adaptation experiences, and your identity will be kept confidential to the fullest extent of the law. After the completion of the research study, the results will be made available to you.

Since your participation in this research is completely voluntary, your refusal to participate will involve no penalty. No one, with the exception of the researcher, will be able to identify those consenting or refusing to participate. All study materials, including audio tapes and transcripts will be securely stored for your protection.

My target participant is a Vietnamese (American) immigrant woman age 20 to 60 and living in the San Jose California Vietnamese community.

I thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely, Mai Le Ho

## APPENDIX D

## INFORMED CONSENT FORM

University of San Francisco

Consent to Be a Research Subject

## Purpose and Background

Ms. Mai Le Ho, a graduate student in the School of Education at the University of San Francisco, San Francisco California is doing a study on adaptation strategies of Vietnamese women adult immigrants who now reside in the United States. Although the majority of Vietnamese women immigrants have been in the United States for three decades, and some research exists about this group of people, the researcher is interested in understanding how Vietnamese women have adapted to life in North America.

I am being asked to participate because I am between 25 – 65 years of age and am a woman of Vietnamese heritage who immigrated to the United States within the last thirty years.

## Procedures

If I agree to be a participant in this study, the following will happen:

1. I will answer questions posed by the researcher in which I will give basic information about me, including age, gender, race, religion, family, and job history.
2. I will participate in a dialogue with the researcher, during which I will be asked about my adaptation experiences in the United States.
3. The interview will take place in a safe, comfortable place mutually agreed upon by me and the researcher.

## Risks and/or Discomforts

1. It is possible that some of the questions asked may make me feel uncomfortable, but I am free to decline to answer any question I do not wish to answer or to stop participation at any time.
2. Participation in research may mean a loss of confidentiality. Study records will be kept as confidential as possible. No individual identities will be used in any reports or publications resulting from the study. Study information will be coded and kept in locked files at all times. Only the researcher will have access to the files.

3. Because the time required for my participation may be up to 2 hours, I may become tired or bored.

#### Benefits

There will be no direct benefit to me from participating in this study. The anticipated benefit of this study is a better understanding of the experiences of Vietnamese women who have immigrated to and now reside in the United States.

#### Costs/Financial Considerations

There will be no financial costs to me as a result of taking part in this study.

#### Payment/Reimbursement

I will be reimbursed \$5.00 for my participation in this study. I will be paid in cash immediately after I have completed my dialogue. If I decide to withdraw from the study before I have completed my participation or the researchers decide to terminate my study participation, I will still receive full reimbursement.

#### Questions

I have talked to Ms. Ho about this study and have had my questions answered. If I have further questions about the study, I may call her at (408) 393-9821 or Dr. Rosita Galang (415) 422-2098.

If I have any questions or comments about participation in this study, I should first talk with the researcher. If for some reason I do not wish to do this, I may contact the IRBPHS, which is concerned with protection of volunteers in research projects. I may reach the IRBPHS office by calling (415) 422-6091 and leaving a voicemail message, by e-mailing IRBPHS@usfca.edu, or by writing to the IRBPHS, Department of Education, University of San Francisco, 2130 Fulton Street, San Francisco, CA 94117-1080.

#### Consent

I have been given a copy of the "Research Subject's Bill of Rights" and I have been given a copy of this consent form to keep.

**PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH IS VOLUNTARY.** I am free to decline to be in this study, or to withdraw from it at any point. My decision as to whether or not to participate in this study will have no influence on my present or future status as a student or employee at USF.

My signature below indicates that I agree to participate in this study.

---

Subject's Signature

Date of Signature

---

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

Date of Signature

## APPENDIX E

## DIALOGUE SUMMARIES

## Orchid Dialogue

Orchid is a 28-year-old Vietnamese immigrant woman. She presents as a creative, intelligent, vibrant woman with a lively sense of humor. She is a college graduate, who earned her bachelor's degree in Sociology with honors. She currently works as a manager for a dental office in San Jose, California. She was quite open in her responses to questions and expressed her hope that giving voice to her experience will enable other women to feel empowered to speak and to be counted as Asian/Vietnamese women in the U.S.

*Challenges*

Seven themes emerged as areas of challenge for, or were identified as challenges for Vietnamese immigrant women by Orchid: being and feeling different, language barrier, gender role difference, marital and family conflict, prejudice and stereotypes, and generational differences.

*Being and Feeling Different*

Orchid's dialogue was quite interesting because she described much of her cultural adjustment difficulty centering on food and dietary differences between the Vietnamese and American cultures. She went into detail describing her appreciation of and preference for Vietnamese food, and she articulated that that was the reason why she needed to marry a man of Vietnamese heritage. What Orchid indicates in this excerpt is that she cannot live with a man who cannot love her culture and Vietnamese food.

One challenge is arriving here looking like you don't belong, and not feeling as though you fit in. The degree to which we can assimilate makes things difficult. The American culture is bland compared to Vietnamese culture, literally, for example food. There are some many things that we are different, that we must make some major decisions. I could not marry a white man who could not love my Vietnamese food.

*Language Barriers*

Even though Orchid came to the United States when she was eight years old, she already possessed excellent English reading and writing skills. Despite her own language skill, she identified language as the second most difficult challenge coming to the US

The next greatest challenge is the language barrier. Not speaking the language really inhibits your ability to take care of yourself and adapt quickly.

### *Gender Role Differences*

The third challenge that Orchid discussed with the researcher during the interview could be interpreted as dealing with patriarchy and the differences in gender roles between Vietnam and the United States. Orchid expressed that Vietnamese women face particular difficulty dealing with patriarchic norms that Vietnamese men hold on to from Vietnam.

Women have no freedom at all on arrival. We have to gain it. Here, Vietnamese women face double patriarchy, first from Vietnamese culture, which is deep, and then America has a patriarchal culture, just not as deep and oppressive as Vietnamese. But for Vietnamese women, it is much more oppressive.

### *Marital and Family Conflict*

Growing up, Orchid experienced physical abuse from her father who had difficulty adjusting to the American culture. In the U.S., no gender has a lawful or overt culturally-supported advantage. In Vietnam, males do enjoy a distinct advantage. Researchers have indicated that Vietnamese immigrant males face a challenge in accepting a change in their status within the family structure as well as the legal structure (Phan et al., 2005). In Orchid's situation, she became vulnerable to abuse and aggression from her father, perhaps because he did not adjust easily to his change in status.

We women were very oppressed by the first generation coming over year, and many of us, I think, saw that as a failure, and saw the oppression (at the hands of) our fathers as maladaptive and now we don't accept that oppression. But, many first generation men and women are still struggling with the old cultural ways, and it is hard. The oppression was in all ways, physical, emotional, psychological. My father called me a "whore" and my sisters, and this I didn't even take as a result of the American culture, but it was exacerbated by the fact that we knew something different was going on out there. I felt for my life sometimes with my father. Sometimes, I feared being raped by my father. Our father physically abused us when he was drunk, but we would fight back. At that point, I didn't feel as though I was dealing with my father, I felt like I was just dealing with an out-of-control man.

In previous studies, researchers indicated that because Vietnamese men cannot control their environment in the U.S. in the same way they did in Vietnam, they felt demoted from their stature and identity as Vietnamese men (Nghe, et al. 2003; Sue & Sue, 1999). Men as fathers would turn inward to the family as a place to control their environment, and act out their fear, anger, and pain (Sue & Sue, 1999). Chung and colleagues (2000) discovered high levels of distress in Vietnamese immigrant men because the male role in Vietnamese society is assumed superior, resulting in more difficulty in assimilating into the U.S. culture for Vietnamese men. Orchid appears to have been a victim of this cultural phenomena.

### *Prejudice and Stereotypes*

Another challenge that emerged during Orchid's interview is having experienced discrimination. She reports incidents of prejudice and stereotyping, which she attributes to some degree to as a result of American attitudes about the Vietnam-American war of the 1960s and 1970s.

Prejudice from Americans, especially related to the American-Vietnam war. We receive a lot of negative reactions from all American subcultures—white, black, brown, yellow, etc. because of the war. That added an additional layer... people lashed out at us, as though we were responsible for the war. Racism from other immigrant groups was difficult. Figuring out how to respond was a challenge.

Being abused and oppressed, having to deal with insecurity and low self-esteem, and dealing with a language barrier was not enough of a challenge for this immigrant. Because of her Vietnamese heritage, Orchid also had to deal with the hostility toward her because of the lost war.

Another challenge was stereotypes about us. We felt as though we had more peer issues and more pressure because we were trying to make up for our parents' generation and assumed responsibility for the Vietnam war.

### *Generational Differences*

A generational shift is taking place in how the Vietnamese woman is perceived in both the culture and the family in regards to pursuit of personal happiness and identity. Historically, Vietnamese woman enjoyed few lifestyle and career options outside the wishes of the male-dominated family. The old cultural pattern, of what can be perceived as gender oppression, appears to suppress self-fulfillment and personal accomplishment. In recent studies, researchers indicate the tendency of Vietnamese immigrant women to create identities based on gender oppression (Chung et al., 2000). Orchid describes both positive and negative effects of generational differences.

The challenges are different based on your age when you come here. Generations impact the challenges. Between first and second generation there were challenges. The second generation has had it easier, because we have had the older generation to have made their mistakes and we saw those. But we took the brunt of the mistakes that our parents made in not adapting.

### *Creating a New Identity as a Vietnamese-American Woman*

In her interview, Orchid seems to be in a dual process of cultural adjustment and identity creation. With some aspects of her life, Orchid appears to be reluctant to change her values, even though keeping them may cause her pain. Her description of the internal dilemma in choosing a mate reflects a potential cultural conflict; she has reservations about Vietnamese men, but is unwilling to consider white men due to what she perceives

as undesirable cultural traits. Orchid's apprehension reveals the cognitive and emotional tumult some immigrants face as they construct new identities as Vietnamese American women.

Challenge as a young woman is figuring out things about a mate. So, we have to decide whether to date only Vietnamese, which is difficult, because if they are like our father's generation, we've still got to deal some with the shadow of the Vietnamese culture. If the Vietnamese man is very adapted to American culture, you may have a better time. If you marry a white man, then there are the differences between the culture. And, there are some things about Vietnamese culture I do not want to lose, and things about American culture that I don't want to have. For example, in U.S. culture, they let go of their families, and their elders, they put them in "homes." Love in Vietnamese culture is all about loyalty. In American culture, love is commercial, or fickle. American culture is obsessed with love they cannot have (grass is greener). Here, it is difficult to express love—Americans seem superficial.

As some recent research indicates (Phan, et al, 2005), understanding a Vietnamese immigrant woman's identity development must be multifocal. It cannot be assumed that all Vietnamese immigrant women will have similar experiences or will adopt particular adjustment strategies, or develop a specific identity. Factors such as their immigration history, age (generational), class, and education all play a role. How each person adapts, even the degree of adaptation, varies.

### Strategies

Despite Orchid's great challenges, she was enthusiastic and optimistic that the Vietnamese women have a great future in the U.S. She enthusiastically described two strategies in the U.S. that helped her to cope, adopting an open mind and striving to fit into the U.S. culture.

#### *Adapting to the New Culture with an Open-minded Attitude*

Orchid was fortunate to come to the United States at a young age, therefore she had the experience of attending grade school, junior high, and high school in the U.S. By the time she attended high school, she had made significant strides to adapt to the American culture, and by her estimation was able to function as an American citizen.

I came here as a child, in high school, I was ready to discover and adapt.

#### *Striving to Fit/Overcoming Internalized Oppression*

I tried to overcome all I could by overcompensating by joining and by performing at a high level. All this gave some of us an outside harder shell. But I used to sabotage something so I was never the absolute top, because I still had the idea

that I am not good enough because I am a female. I took in what my father said about me, and us. So I cannot ever be totally successful.

Even though Orchid accomplished much, such as graduating from college with honors at a 3.96 GPA, and serving as the president of an on-campus Vietnamese student club, she did not see her accomplishment as her greatest gift, talent and success. Despite her reservations about herself, she does appear to understand what she accomplished and is able and quite willing to share her successes in the form of recommendations to other Vietnamese women.

#### Recommendations to Other Vietnamese Women

Orchid expressed her coping skills and makes recommendations that helped her, which she perceives could empower other Vietnamese women. Orchid made four recommendations for Vietnamese women: (1) educate and prepare, (2) build cultural awareness, (3) re-invent identity, and (4) appreciate one's self.

##### *Educate and Prepare Yourself*

Based on Confucian teaching, education is the highest model for individuals to advance themselves. In many Western cultures such as the U.S., education is also a powerful channel for self-expression and personal advancement. Orchid, reports that education was a significant advantage in how she compensated for and overcame oppression, abuse, and empowered herself.

Prepare yourself intellectually. Prepare socially. Prepare physically, to protect yourself as a woman and as a Vietnamese woman.

##### *Build Cultural Awareness*

In much of her dialogue, Orchid described the differences and similarities between Vietnamese and American culture. By building such an astute awareness, Orchid prepared herself to make choices about her adaptation and the degree to which she assimilates. In some instances, Orchid spoke about the ways Vietnamese women can experience problems when they fail to learn about the new culture in which they live. One such instance involves learning about finance and basic economic realities. The differences between the Vietnamese economic system and the American economic system are diverse.

Be aware of the financial system in the U.S. Especially beware of the American credit systems, because Vietnamese women can get themselves into trouble with credit cards.

### *Re-invent Your Identity*

One clear characteristic of Orchid's dialogue was her sense of who she is relative to other people. She appears to have undertaken a methodical approach to constructing an identity that can work for her. At times, Orchid's recommendations are as much about what not to do as they are about what to do. Some recommendations seem crafted out of personal experience, some out of assessment of the experience of other people she witnessed and some, are future directed and for herself as much as they are meant for others.

Be sure to not become tied up with a man before checking out good options, shop for the man that fits for you. Don't settle on someone, the first one who comes along, and he feel you have to stay with him. This is common in Vietnamese culture. The first one who comes along the family sets you up to marry, they pressure you into it. Date several men, I don't mean sleep with many men, I mean explore your options.

What Orchid talked about "re-inventing your identity" has much to do with her own recommendation for Vietnamese women and marriage. She sought to convey that Vietnamese women should keep their options open, allow themselves to make choices, gain experience and to avoid such things as family-arranged marriages.

### *Appreciating Self*

Orchid's great sense of and appreciation for self seems to reflect an aspect of Maslow's self-actualization theory. She recommended to other Vietnamese women loving themselves and appreciating their attributes is most needed in the process of adapting to the new culture and finding one's identity. Her admonishment that external attributes, such physical appearance cannot buy happiness and true fulfillment reflect a deeper sense of self.

Be yourself, I know a lot of young Vietnamese women, who go through the extent to have breast implants so that they are "more attractive" to white men, and to just feel as though they fit in. You've got to love yourself.

## Daisy Dialogue

Daisy had an even more interesting migration than the other women in the study. When she was 20 years old, she and her family escaped Vietnam by boat. The Japanese government rescued and resettled the family. Daisy thought her life was set and that Japan would be her new home and her new country. However, that all changed when she met her husband and moved to the U.S. Daisy is 46 years of age, and is currently attending a local community college and rearing two children, ages 7 and 3.

### Challenges

#### *Rearing Children in the U.S.*

Daisy was eager to talk about her difficulty as a mother rearing her child in this culture. She felt the most difficult challenge for Vietnamese women in the U.S. is rearing children.

Raising children is [a] top challenge. The Vietnamese and U.S. cultures are very different about kids. Here, they have bigger role in family and greater freedom, greater rights, no limits. The U.S. is a pleasure-seeking society, kids learn this immediately, and it becomes difficult to balance the old with new culture. Children do not obey parents here in the U.S. They just have too much freedom.

Even though Daisy's son is only seven, she expressed much frustration in rearing children. Then she continued to discuss her difficulty of having her husband's interference in the way she reared her children.

The conflict between the husband and wife [is] because the husband wants the wife to raise the children his way, and the husband do[es] not allow the wife to do her job and discipline the children according how she see it.

Daisy also discussed the different rules and conflicts she and her husband encountered as she worked hard as a wife and mother to help rear their son. This researcher has a strong sense that child rearing is only a symptom of a much bigger conflict that Daisy is facing. Perhaps much of her marital conflict is centered on rearing children. However, rearing children might only be a subtext of Daisy's greatest challenge.

#### *Gender Role Differences*

Daisy talked passionately about relationships between Vietnamese men and women. She felt a great gender imbalance between men and women in Vietnam and it has imported here to the United States.

Man is the king and wife is the slave. The wife does not have the right to her husband's business such as the husband's letters, finances, work, money etc. On the other hand, he has the right to know everything about her. He possesses her, he owns her and has all the rights to you.

### *Marital and Family Conflict*

Daisy transferred her challenges of child rearing to the marital conflict she experiences in her marriage. Much of what she described is the imbalance of gender roles and the imbalance of patriarchy that Vietnamese women have to face in a marital relationship. Daisy echoed what the two other participants had begun to discuss. Her challenge seems universal for Vietnamese women immigrants who participated in the study.

Relations between wives and husbands are strained when men do not want to let go of all the control they have in old country. Vietnamese women, in coming to U.S., realize they can have more say in the family, and in their own lives, and when they take it, or desire to take it, conflict starts.

### *Generational Differences*

Daisy felt another big challenge that Vietnamese women have to face has to do with generational differences. She talked about her neighbor:

Older women completely depend on their children. Her neighbor's children do not listen to her, and if she wanted to go places she had to wait for her children. She has much repressed anger and could not express it to any one she kept her sorrow and depression to herself.

Vietnamese immigrant women seem to hold on to their grief about not being able to express themselves and do what they want. Then, women who do not adapt to U.S. life are then dependent on their kids, setting up another dependency relationship. Vietnamese women are still oppressed, they hide things about themselves, and as a result, many do not even seek treatment when they become ill.

Daisy was talking about her neighbor as if she was talking about herself. This researcher wondered how much of this feeling was her own feeling and how much of this repressed anger was her own depression and anger. This researcher also wondered if the relationship between her parents and husband were estranged. In the Vietnamese culture a daughter-in-law are one's own (unpaid slaves) but a son-in-law is a special guests. This patriarchal attitude often put son-in-laws at a higher status and son-in-laws in Vietnam feel this sense of entitlement toward their in-laws. Extended family conflict is often a common cause for divorce among Vietnamese marriages. Oftentimes, husbands feel they have the right to help their own family (parents and siblings) financially, physically and emotionally. In contrast, the wife does not have the same right, especially when it comes to financial help to her parents or siblings. If a man is an oldest son, he even has a greater

role in helping to take care of his parents and siblings. Based on Vietnamese Confucian values, men have all the advantages that his spouse does not.

### *Creating a New Identity as a Vietnamese American Woman*

Daisy did not see identity as an issue as much as the imbalance of gender differences as well as marital conflict.

### Strategies

#### *Learning*

Daisy echoed the sentiment of Orchid and Violet about education. Learning English, going to school, and learning all that one could about the new culture seemed to work out well for Daisy. She also stated that if one wanted to be or feel accepted to the culture, one must speak and learn English.

Learn and use English language. Go to school; learn anything in order to let in the culture.

#### *Striving to Fit Into the Culture*

Daisy felt she learned much from going to school in the U.S. It helped her to interact with the American culture in the most effective way. To become familiar with her new culture, Daisy felt she must dive into it and interact with the people and the culture as fast and as much as one could. She felt she could easily adapt to different cultures because of her experiences first coming and adapting to the Japanese culture, then when she began to feel comfortable in Japan she migrated to the U.S. and again she had to adjust and adapt to a new culture.

My second strategy was to interact with the American culture as much as possible.

Even though adapting to new culture is one of the strategies that Daisy felt is important to help her and other Vietnamese women to empower themselves and enhance their statuses in the society, she also felt that this only increased marital conflict. As she progressed in her acculturation, her husband chose to keep to the old traditions.

#### *Working Outside the Home*

Daisy does not work outside of the home and she felt that that made her more dependent on her spouse and this contributes to the imbalance in her marital relationship.

## Recommendations to other Vietnamese Women

### *Prepare yourself*

As a two-time immigrant, first to Japan then to the U.S., Daisy felt that a Vietnamese woman needs to prepare herself for all the unexpected and unknown factors in her life. She stated she never thought that she would be in the U.S., starting over from the beginning when she was in her thirties after being married and moved to the U.S. from Japan. She felt her life is a circle of the unknown and unexpected. She feels that Vietnamese women need to open up themselves to all possibilities as well as preparing for the worse situations. She also felt that these experiences helped her to being much stronger and more ready to the unknown.

And one must open oneself up to all possibilities.

She said her last sentences with a smile. This researcher could help but tip my hat to this woman. She must and is still experiencing many challenges in her lives but her kind manner and positive attitude makes me feel humbled. This researcher prays and hopes that someday Daisy will be able to mediate a better marital situation.

## Violet Dialogue

When this interviewer asked the participant what flower she would like to pick for her she stated Violet. She said that this flower is very simple, delicate, and dainty but it possessed a potent fragrance, especially in the morning. Violet is also a 46-year-old single woman. She worked as a medical assistant in a medical clinic in San Jose. She was still living with her parents. She tried to go to school part time mostly at night because she worked full time in the day. She was witty and had much to say about Vietnamese men. She joking said, "That is why I am still single."

### Challenges

#### *Being and Feeling Different*

She does not feel as strange to this culture as much as she thought she would prior to living in the States.

#### *Language Barriers*

Violet felt the biggest challenges Vietnamese women face had to do with not being able to speak the language when they come to this country. She also stated language barrier is directly related to and society and culture barrier.

Language difference is greatest challenge, without being able to speak the language of the new culture, one cannot join culture

Violet also felt in order for an individual fully adapt to her new environment she must be able to communicate with those around her. Not being able to communicate would hinder the Vietnamese women ability to adapt fully to her new society, her new culture.

#### *Gender Role Differences*

Violet felt that the Vietnamese man definitely had, and continued to keep, double standards in the U.S. They enjoyed the accomplishment of a more educated wife. They enjoyed a wife with status but at the same time, they still wanted the traditional wife who would obey them and listen to them no matter if they are right or wrong. The Vietnamese men in the United States also enjoyed the wife that would bring home double income, though he does not condone nor accept the fact that she is his equal partner.

This is especially difficult for VN immigrant women, because we want to assimilate, and men do not want to change from old ways. The thing is, that even in VN, things are changing and the men do not want to change, there, either. The men are still "king" in the family and want to do things, here, as they did in VN. Now, here, when women do fight to get their freedom and get some education,

and language knowledge and go out to work, they contribute to the family, but still, the men control the family and the women.

Vietnamese society has changed both, in Vietnam, and here in the United States. Yet the Vietnamese had not changed especially Vietnamese men who are forty year and older. Even though they are here in the states they wanted to apply their 40-year-old-plus custom on their wife and family even though they might already had adapted to the American life such as adapting to the American educational and professional systems.

### *Marital and Family Conflict*

Violet discussed the third question further, yet she felt was the most critical challenges for Vietnamese women is marital and family conflict. She recited the three submissions based on Confucian teaching and the four virtues.

The Vietnamese men want to be the pillar of the family even though he has less education than his wife does and probably make less money than his wife makes. Yet he still likes to impose on his wife. I believe that most Vietnamese family has this problem. I believe the true pillars of the Vietnamese family are the Vietnamese women. They are also the pillar of the larger community. Because a Vietnamese family has so much conflict therefore, the Vietnamese community has so much conflict. Family is a small community. She also agreed with Violet that if the family is not healthy and prosper how could the Vietnamese community prosper and became strong and healthy. Violet stated it is easier for the land owner to rule the land but contrary it is not easy for the owner to rule the people.

While language is a challenge, the participants seem to indicate that the husbands create the biggest barrier. In Confucian teaching, the family is the foundation of society. When the family is in harmony, then society can be in balance. Here, men and women have not been able to reach harmony in their relationships, but they are not really in harmony in Vietnam, either, that is why Vietnamese society here and in Vietnam is not in balance. Vietnamese men are under-developed (immature) because they cannot adapt and adopt to change. Men cannot care for themselves, they over-rely on women to care for them, so they create disharmony.

Violet has very strong opinions in regard to the gender imbalance between Vietnamese men and women. She criticized and analyzed Vietnamese males in a critical manner. Perhaps, being a single Vietnamese woman, she felt more comfortable to express herself more freely. Whereas, the other participants felt more reluctant to discuss about Vietnamese men, because talking about Vietnamese men were and associated to talking about their husbands and discussing their own marital problems. Violet also recited a Vietnamese Proverb:

When wives and husbands are in harmony they can even tackle the seven seas.

Violet also feel that in the Vietnamese family the women is the foundation and if she is oppress how could the larger Vietnamese American community be liberated. Violet continued by saying:

Vietnamese men are not successful enough to change. They lack self-confidence and the one that had made in the American society had better chance to change and adapt.

Violet felt that upward mobility and personal achievement has direct correlation to the level of adaptability of Vietnamese men. She felt the more successful the Vietnamese male is in this new culture the better he treated his counter part. The more successful the Vietnamese male is in the U.S. the more harmonious is the family. She also stated that the age of the Vietnamese male when he arrived in the U.S. makes a difference. She states earlier during the dialogued that the younger they meaning Vietnamese male arrived in the U.S. the better the chance he has to adapt more successfully in the American culture.

### Strategies

#### *Learning*

As the other participants in the study Violet also values education highly and felt it seeking an education is one of the most effective coping strategies for Vietnamese women in the U.S. She stated learning is the most powerful tool and weapon to a successful adaptation process in the U.S. She felt Vietnamese women had always worked hard and had great perseverance. However, the Vietnamese women do not have the opportunity to go to school and to earn advanced degrees as they are in the U.S. Therefore, she felt strongly that Vietnamese women should continue to acquire as much as she can, first to learn the language, then to advance themselves by furthering their education until they are not able to do it, as she stated in the below statement.

Learn language, go to classes, keeps learning until you could not take it in any more.

#### *Striving to Fit Into the Culture*

Besides going to school and trying to be educated, Violet felt that Vietnamese women must interact and meet with both Vietnamese people as well as American people. She felt it is important to do both. By meeting and interacting with Vietnamese, people one felt a sense of support and a sense of kinship that she or he is not alone in his or her struggle. By meeting and interacting with Americans, she could learn the language, culture, and values of her new culture. To her this is not formal classroom materials, though she felt that sometimes it is even more valuable. By having American friends she felt she could learn and adapt to this culture faster than just reading about them in books.

Women should meet people in both Vietnamese and U.S. culture.

Violet also talked about her recent experienced traveling abroad to Vietnam with her college, classmates and teacher. She said that she went to Vietnam to learn English and her roommate on the trip was a Vietnamese who was born in the U.S. went to Vietnam to learn Vietnamese. Violet stated that she learned so much about American culture during the two weeks she was in VN with her school and classmates. She said this was the first time she stayed with not just one but many American twenty-four hours a day and that it was the most valuable experience for her. She felt she now had a much better understanding of America and of American. It is also ironic Ngoc pointed out that she was doing all this learning while she was in her own country.

### *Working Outside the Home*

Violet has no choice but to work, even though she wished sometimes that she could quit her full-time job to go to school full-time. However, this is not possible because she has to support herself and her parents.

### Recommendations to other Vietnamese Women

#### *Support Network*

Violet seemed to have a healthy social life. She has many friends and family members that she could count on, and she felt that Vietnamese women in the U.S. must utilize their support net work as important sources of support.

I have many friends and family members who are always willing to be there for me. Even sometimes, I don't agree with them. They always able to provide me with different perspectives that I might not even think of.

#### *Advancing in Your Education and Career*

As a single woman, Violet felt she must advance herself as much as she can. It is necessary for her to advance herself so she could support herself financially and physically.

Even though one could have friends and family members, I could not count on anyone to take care of me financially or emotionally. I have no choice. I have no man to rely on. My parents are older and I not only have to support myself, I must work and support them as well.

Violet felt that the one way for her to advance herself is through education and making more money. She felt she had limited choices; therefore to her the most important recommendation that she had for other Vietnamese women is to take advantage of the education system, and through education she felt one could advance herself both professionally and emotionally. She definitely has strong convictions.

This researcher was delighted with Violet's interview. It was unexpected how this 46-year-old shy, quiet, and demure woman could be so opinionated and have such wit. This researcher also enjoyed her perspectives about Vietnamese men. Violet had no hesitation giving her straight and direct criticisms of both Vietnamese men as well as Vietnamese culture. The researcher is grateful to Violet for her insights and candid remarks.

## Lily Dialogue

Lily is 50 years of age. She came to the United States in 1974 as a high school exchange student. She won a presidential essay contest writing about the role of women in Vietnam and was sent to the U.S. among 3,000 students who competed for the same scholarship. In her senior year, she was selected by the presidential scholarship committee to spend a year in the U.S. Filled with honor she was proudly departed her homeland Vietnam to the United States. Little did she know that this was her last time she would return as a Vietnamese citizen. She called herself an “accidental refugee” because she could not return to Vietnam after the April 1975 collapse of South Vietnam. She was expected to return home in May of 1975, after a year of high school education in the U.S.

Lily is the youngest in a family of 10 siblings. She later became the matriarch of her family because she was the only one able to bring resources and opportunity for her nine siblings and parents. She worked, attended school, received degrees, and sent money back home. In addition, she sponsored seven siblings, her parents, nephews and nieces to the U.S. while supporting them all financially.

Among the six participants, Lily is also the only woman married to a Caucasian man, and has a biracial daughter. She was the first Vietnamese woman executive in Silicon Valley. She is an astute businessperson and also an activist. The interesting thing about her is that she excelled in math and science. Yet she was selected to win one of the highest honors for a high school student in Vietnam in an essay contest. She told me she loves literature. She loves Pablo Neruda’s poems as well as a Vietnamese poet named Spring Essence Ho Xuan Huong.

Lily is definitely a modern-age, accomplished individual. This researcher cast her in a Super Woman role, i.e., responsibilities she assumed included care and support for her extended family. So, is she different from Rose and Orchid. Indeed, Lily embodied an exterior of a powerful and successful American businessperson. Yet, she performed as a very dutiful and loyal daughter, sister, mother and wife. Lily assumed total care of her ailing husband for many years, thus cementing her role as a Super Woman.

### Challenges

In Lily’s dialogue, she focused some attention on the issues of identity and the challenges associated with different age groups and immigration circumstances. Unlike the other participants, Lily prefaced her responses to the question of “challenges” by proposing that the age and circumstances of individuals influence their experience. She expressed the view that for older immigrants, the integration process is more complicated. Younger immigrants, especially, children who are in a natural learning phase are more adaptable. According to Lily, for older Vietnamese women immigrant’s integration would indicate significant changes in lifestyle.

Lily's perspective of immigration is shaped by the fact that her experience occurred when she was an adolescent and that she has lived in the U.S. for over 30 years. Lily indicated importance for women to seek direction to outside support them in their life transition:

There are no clear cut strategies, I think, but to raise support and guidance from other groups. And I think Vietnamese women are more, let's say, open about asking questions about receiving help whether it's expert advice or counseling, or from a church, or from a school. Or, from friends, and I think those relationships would help me see the feelings of integration and help make integration a lot easier.

I think the women who do the best reach out and get support from the mechanisms that are available to them, and they go to school, and learn how to do something, and then really embrace life here because they find out they can have some freedom and still support their families. So, the ones who investigate the U.S. culture, make a life for themselves. They move past the old life.

#### *Vietnamese Workforce Women as Entrepreneurial*

As a successful businesswoman, Lily spoke about the opportunities in the U.S. and about the strategy of preparation, education, and personal investment in one's future:

They found that their new opportunities leave them with the choice to choose various careers, various plans for themselves. Working Vietnamese women are known to be very diligent and because of natural economic requirements, you know, once you get here, suddenly to take care of a family, one has to work and cannot depend on welfare forever. A lot of Vietnamese families, yes, depend on these support systems our government provides at the beginning whether it's welfare or the other sponsorships or whatever to get on their feet. Once they find that they can find work and learn to adjust their schedule, they really embrace that because it gives them economic freedom. It gives them the ability to earn on their own and to take care of their families, to pay the rent, and to save up for their children's education or to save up to even open their own business and that's how history has gone.

#### Strategies

##### *The Strategy of Preparation: Getting Ahead*

Lily sees the Vietnamese woman as a great business asset because of their cultural roles women play as responsible, hard working, calculating, strategic and wise.

We see now in our community a lot of Vietnamese women have very successful at having their businesses. You know, one very obvious example around the

Valley is nail and hair care. I understand that seventy percent are owned by women because they are willing to put in the investment of five hundred dollars or so to get the certificate so that they can work and then once they work, they save all their hard earned money and they don't mind the low wages and save the money and put it back into their families. That work helps them integrate and adjust to adapt to life a lot quicker. Then on top of that I think they continue their studies. A lot of them put in extra hours to study at universities at night to increase their knowledge which gives them further advancements.

Currently being out there and wanting to be part of the scene, I think you see a lot of women want to be part of the work force. They want to be out there organizing helping others regardless of whatever they need to do that is called of them helps them to adjust, helps them to flee from the pain of leaving their country and adjusting to the difficult life here. Being practical, not relying on the past and not continuing to dwell on the past instead being hopeful and looking forward to the future also helps. So to sum up I would say two things. Working, education, and hard work and continued education are the strategies that seem to work for a lot of Vietnamese women.

### *The Older Vietnamese Woman: Immigration Challenges/Opportunities*

Lily noted that older women who immigrated to the U.S. have a different experience than those who came when they were still young:

The challenges are many, but I think the flipside of challenges are opportunities, so depending on how you look at it, it's characterized by your age at which you immigrate and what your circumstances are. For older Vietnamese women, the lifestyle and integration into the community is a lot harder compared to younger women and because of the fact that they're young makes it easy for them to adapt.

Now we're not talking so much about freshly immigrated women. We're talking about after thirty years of adjusting for Vietnamese women. The issues are really about identity: who they are, what they represent, what their heritage is about, the yearning to understand their roots, the Vietnamese culture, and also the desire to reconcile the American culture of a lot more choices and independence and peer pressures like how at school to be more "western" and to be more open. Whereas, these younger women probably don't get the same kind of openness from their parents and cannot talk about issues that impact them personally as openly with their families.

There is great tension between the sexes in couples who are older. For the younger people, things are a little easier. There is a lot of pressure on women and men to act certain ways, and this gets confusing in the U.S. where relationships between family members are up for grabs. Here, everything has to be invented new. That's probably the biggest challenge but they find ways to talk to their friends and will find that adjusting and immigrating is a lot easier evidenced by

the fact that today in many young Vietnamese women are successful in many different aspects whether it's professional, or political, like civic engagement of private sectors.

### *The Involved Vietnamese American Woman*

Lily recognizes the power of the Vietnamese as community leaders able to affect change for themselves, their families, the community, and the world.

Vietnamese women already are getting out there, wanting to be part of the scene....they're out there organizing and wanting to help. This very process here, now that we are engaged in as a group of women can organize to help others adapt and to create their own futures. It is a remarkable opportunity.

We see Vietnamese American women have a lot more opportunities. They found that their new opportunities leave them with the choice to choose various careers, various plans for themselves. Maybe even from their own Vietnamese- American identity that gives them strength and many avenues to demonstrate their achievements and their true success and contribute to society and I'm delighted to see that the evidence in many women in the names of writers like Monique Ching, and in politics like Janet Nguyen and Madison Nguyen, or in the medical profession, science and technology, in business by many. Even in academia. So I would say yes, challenges are there, like in life—there are challenges.

Identity, I think is the strongest in my opinion for young people. The challenges of cultural adaptation are stronger for older Vietnamese women but the opportunities in terms of professional careers and economic freedom and freedom to choose are truly significant for Vietnamese women.

### Recommendations to Other Vietnamese Women

In the United States, the land of opportunities, women have far more options here than in VN. Vietnamese women should get as much education as they could and the sky is the limit for them. They also should always have an outlet and a strong social network so that they would not be isolate. I remembered when I first came to the U.S. I did not have the kind of support and social support as the younger generation Vietnamese women does now. I feel the younger generation of Vietnamese people will have the opportunity to perform much better than their elders.

Lily has much to give to her own family, her new country as well as her home land. She involved in multiple activities both mainstream as well as within the Vietnamese circle in the U.S. and VN.

This researcher has learned much from this dynamic and intelligent woman, and is most grateful for Lily's time and generosity of giving of herself to this study. The

researcher feels most fortunate to have the opportunity to meet and work with her in this study, and feels she is the true beneficiary of Lily's treasure of knowledge.

## Hyacinth Dialogue

Hyacinth is a 50-year-old women. She is a wife, a mother of two and works part-time outside the home, as well as caring for her children. She attends a local community college. She graduated from college in Vietnam and was working as a teacher prior to coming to the United States. She stated she is proud of her education because very few women of her generation were able to attend and complete a college education in Vietnam after the Vietnam-American war. Besides being proud of her educational background, she also is proud of the fact that she was able to support herself financially. Hyacinth is articulate, mature and forthright with her responses during the interview. She expressed feeling good about participating in the research study because she believes that her participation contributes to the growth and development of the future of the Vietnamese community.

### Challenges

#### *Being and Feeling Different*

Hyacinth reported the cultural gap is among the most difficult aspect of being an newcomer to the United States. As Ron Takaki stated in *Stranger From the Different Shores*, most Vietnamese and South East Asian refugees know they face adjustment challenges in America: “In their heart, they want to go back, but reality has crept in and they know they will be here for a long time” (pp 458).

The difference between cultures creates challenges for immigrants.

Hyacinth also expressed her frustration of being a stranger to this new land. Hyacinth stated she had everything set in Vietnam. When she came here to the U.S., she had to begin again from the very beginning. She felt that she could not contribute much to her new society and that made her quite frustrated.

#### *Language Barriers*

Like other participants, Hyacinth also felt that the language difference was a significant challenge for her. Hyacinth believes that language is power, and felt that by not being articulate in the language amounts to living as though one is crippled by not being able to access that power. For Hyacinth it also created conflicts, misunderstanding, and lack of advancement.

Language difference leads to misunderstandings, and renders you unable to contribute to society. Not speaking the language prevents immigrants from getting resources (vocational, educational, and financial).

Hyacinth felt strongly that not only an individual lacking access to obtaining adequate resources from the new society, but by not having sufficient language acquisition the individual is not able to contribute his or her talents to their new country.

### *Gender Role Differences*

Hyacinth echoes Ron Takaki again by talking about the changing family roles in the transition of coming to the U.S. (p. 456). In Vietnam, the women usually were dependent on the husband. Then when they came here, some Vietnamese women took jobs. Hyacinth reports that this made the men feel insecure. She talked a length about her own mother and discussed how her mother's love and sacrifice are the elements that held her family together. However, she felt that the Vietnamese women in the U.S. are expected to play a much more vital role. Family finance was a major factor in her seeking employment, as well helping her children and often extended family (her father, mother, and sometimes in-laws) to adjust and survive.

Women have to play greater role in the family here.

She expressed a feeling of bearing a heavy responsibility for caring for others on top of trying to establish and adjust, herself.

### *Marital and Family Conflict*

Hyacinth continues to explore the change in family and gender role for Vietnamese women in the U.S. She believes that this challenge contributes to family and marital problems in the U.S.

Conflicts arose in my family because women adapt, or desire to adapt, more quickly than then men do. The fact that men do not want to change, culturally, and women do, creates an imbalance in the family system. This imbalance creates an imbalance in the Vietnamese community.

Hyacinth described how the dysfunction within the Vietnamese families had greater effect in the Vietnamese American community in San Jose. Based on Confucian teaching, if the family does not have peace, it is harder for the larger society to achieve peace and harmony. She also felt that it would take at least a generation for this to change, perhaps her children or children's children generation to change.

### *Prejudice and Stereotypes*

Hyacinth echoed the sentiment of many immigrants who come before her in *Family Tighrope*, by Nazli Kibria.

We were discriminated against here when we stepped out of our neighborhood. So we stay close, but there is difficulty there, too.

Hyacinth talked about being in the predicament of not knowing how to extricate yourself from the conditions of the situation. She discussed the dilemma experienced by Vietnamese Americans who choose to assimilate as well as ones who cling to their Vietnamese culture and community. Many Japanese Americans, after World War II, choose to assimilate completely despite their experiences of the Internment Camps. As a result, Japanese Americans are the only Asian American group that lost both their language and culture. In contrast, the Vietnamese community seems to insulate itself by becoming more ethnocentric and less open to interracial marriage and mainstreaming. In doing so, they may have trouble in fully realizing their potential.

### *Generational Differences*

Not discussed.

### *Creating a new Identity as a Vietnamese American Woman*

Not discussed.

### *Strategies*

Hyacinth expressed the feeling that education is the most important means that any immigrants/women could use to not only advanced herself but it is the most effective and faster way for Vietnamese women to adapt to the new country/society.

### *Learning*

Learning the language was first and greatest strategy. Then, I can communicate and get into the culture to understand it. The second strategy is to get an (American) education as much as possible to get more into the culture.

Hyacinth greatest conviction is to pay back and give back to her new society once she is fully adjusted and self-sufficient. She also felt that in order for women to be able to help their children to adjust in the new society, they must first be knowledgeable and educated to teach and guide their youngsters. To Hyacinth, an American education is more valuable than having material goods. She reported that when she was in Vietnam, her greatest dream and hope was to be able to be educated in the U.S. In that sense, she felt part of her childhood dream came true.

### *Striving to Fit Into the Culture*

This participant spoke of the importance of education and not only formal education, but also the lessons of and about the American culture, learned through experiencing the culture. Learning about the American culture could help the Vietnamese women to maneuver in the new culture and she believes that this would help women to be a better agent for change within their family.

Learning the U.S. culture allows us to see how other people act, learn, behave, and do things, live life, here. We learn how to do things like how to deal with conflict in this culture. Then, we can take learning back to the family.

Hyacinth also felt the mother role in this new culture is vital as she mentioned earlier in the interview. Therefore, unless the mother is capable and educated she is lacking in helping her children adapting and functioning in this society.

### *Working Outside the Home*

According to Hyacinth, it is critical for Vietnamese women to work in the U.S. In Vietnam, because of the Vietnam-American war, women were forced to work while their husband were in the battlefield. In the U.S., the circumstances are different, yet women work outside the home for many reasons other than economic pressure. Here in the U.S., women also work for self-fulfillment and self-growth, and to Hyacinth this is essential for any Vietnamese or women in general to take heart. Hyacinth opined that working outside the home is also a powerful way for women to have voice, and a role, in the society.

The third strategy is to have worked outside the home. Going to work also allows financial empowerment. Earning money empowers me with social capital. We can participate more in society.

Vietnamese women had been working outside of the home for century because of the historical circumstances of several wars and conflicts. However, working in U.S. has elevated Vietnamese women status. Entering the workforce serve as both, an economic engine for the family, and enhances the women's status in society. In this sense by working, Vietnamese women are also gaining power.

### Recommendations to Other Vietnamese Women

#### *Educate and Prepare Yourself*

Lastly, Hyacinth recommended Vietnamese women prepare themselves through education, both formally, as well as through learning about the culture of United States. She felt by both learning and modeling the Vietnamese women would have a much easier time to both adjust as well as raising her family. She felt positive about her future her in the U.S. and she was glad she was able to obtain an American Education.

Take steps to observe how things are done here, and adapt your family role, so that you are teaching your family.

Even though the adaptation has not been easy for Hyacinth, she knew in her heart this is where she wanted to be and this is where she wanted to raise her family.

## Rose Dialogue

Rose is a 61-year-old woman. She came to the U.S. when she was in her forties, accompanied by her mother and siblings. She is the oldest daughter in her family. She has five younger siblings, and she felt that in many ways she is like a mother to her younger brothers and sisters because she had to work and help her mother raise her family because her father passed away when the children were still quite young. She was an accountant in Vietnam. When arrived in United States, she started to work right away because she has to support her family. She started working in the electronic industry then married because that was her mother's dying wish. Rose is a model of the traditional daughter, sister, and mother to her siblings. She went back to school after she divorced and is currently working as a teacher's aid for a San Jose school district as well as trying to finish her child development degree from a local university.

### Challenges

#### *Being and Feeling Different*

Rose stated feeling estranged to the new environment and the culture and to her this is the most difficult challenge. As an individual who had been born, reared and grew up in Vietnam, she experienced a great sense of unfamiliarity to her new environment, her new world. Even though Rose has lived in the U.S. for almost ten years, she said she is still not accustomed to the American culture. She posits that the age of an individual when she migrated to the U.S. has much to do with how fast she could adapt to the new culture.

It is a very different culture between Vietnam and here, it is a different world in every way.

Rose is the oldest of the participants, therefore her greatest challenge is her process of adaptation in the U.S.

#### *Language Barriers*

Rose discussed language as another barrier that caused much difficulty in her life as well as, she believes, for other Vietnamese women. To Rose, it is inevitable that language would be a barrier for any immigrant who arrives to the new country.

Language of course causes great challenges.

#### *Gender Role Differences*

Rose has been a good daughter and a good sister all of her life. She sacrificed her life, her wishes, and her dreams at an early age in order to work to help her mom to support the family. Rose did not fulfill her dream in order for her siblings to live and fulfill their dreams.

Problem in adapting is their own contradiction: One, based on upbringing of family responsibility. Two, here women have opportunity, so they have to balance within themselves they are in internal conflict, because of the fight between family and personal ambition and desire. This is a contradiction in roles...it feels like a temptation here, because here women can, if they wish, not sacrifice themselves to the family. It becomes a tug-of-war.

A constant tug-of-war is what Rose and other Vietnamese women of her generation have to deal with when they come to the U.S. If they were to stay in Vietnam, this would not be an issue. Women's roles are clearly defined and programmed for them. In the U.S., having choices pose the biggest challenge for Vietnamese women of Rose's generation. She referred to these choices as temptation because in the Vietnamese society, a woman choosing to live out her desires is a sin. She must always sacrifice herself for her family. She must not have hope and dream that is not of common good of her family.

#### *Marital and Family Conflict*

As other participants did, Rose also identified marital conflict as the most significant challenge for Vietnamese women. She also discussed the imbalance of gender roles and the double standard that Vietnamese men imposed upon Vietnamese women. She also echoed the concept of double oppression, meaning that not only the Vietnamese woman has to support her family financially, yet she has no rights and stature because of her contributions here in the U.S. She opined that the transformation of the Vietnamese women's rise in upward mobility as well as status has caused even greater imbalance to the Vietnamese families in the U.S.

In VN, women can only work in the home, but the women have to support the men in all they do, and they must remember their responsibilities as women to the family. When they work outside the home, it is in support of the man. Here, they have to deal with even more. In VN, only the man is the breadwinner. Here the woman must also support financially, but the man controls. But still, here women do have an expanded role. In VN, there is no upward mobility, so they don't have to deal so much with society. All this causes conflict, internal, in the family and in Vietnamese community.

#### *Creating a New Identity as a Vietnamese American Woman*

Rose felt that with double, sometimes triple, obligations, Vietnamese women in the U.S. have even greater challenges than in Vietnam. She stated that even though in Vietnam, the women are oppressed, they have a clear role and a clear path. In the U.S., too many demands are forced on them, and all these expectations cause the women to be completely worn out.

Society in America...creates further pressure, because here, you have to continue, all your life to improve yourself. You cannot stop, as a woman. In [the] U.S., woman comes first, pets second, children third, and men last, by VN perspective of the U.S. culture. Now, VN women here, they want more, they have greater desire. With this struggle...the mental struggle...the demand is also on physical capability, so we become exhausted.

Rose also expressed to this researcher that she is not sure if the Vietnamese women are better off here in the U.S. or in Vietnam. She often felt ambivalent about the Vietnamese woman's identity in the U.S. as it presents such complex and multi-faceted issues.

## Strategies

### *Creating Goals and Plans*

As an accountant by trade, Rose planned her time and her life in a very structured manner. Therefore, she felt being goal-oriented is a very important aspect of adaptation for Vietnamese women in the U.S. Planning for one's life, working hard, fighting hard is all part of Rose's reality since she was in her early twenties. This researcher felt as if Rose never really had a childhood, or even an adolescent experience. She was an adult all her life or had to act and live as an adult all her life. However, because of these experiences she is nurturing yet has great strength. She is gentle but firm. She is vigilant still realistic. She seems to be a good role model for all women of her generation, not just Vietnamese women.

The woman must create a clear goal for herself, and have good time management. Constantly need to plan. They have to fight, hard. You have to be realistic.

### *Reaching Out for Support*

Get the support that is available in the U.S...because here the society does support women more...there are subsidies, and child care...so woman must take advantage of what is available here in the U.S.

Rose was a great example of someone who knows and benefited from the American system. She knew how and where to get the resources she needed. She even helped other Vietnamese women to access these resources to better their lives whether it is subsidize housing or childcare program, etc. Her conviction is first to help herself secondly to help others who come along her path. Rose is a faithful Buddhist and she believes in the law of Karma. She always believed those who do good for others will do well for themselves.

### *Working Outside the Home*

This is not even a question. Rose stated working outside of the home is not a choice for her—it is a duty.

### Recommendations to Other Vietnamese Women

#### *Educate and Prepare Yourself*

As an older woman, Rose felt she is running out of time. She felt that Vietnamese women needed to learn the language first, then the culture, as well as taking care of their needs. Rose definitely echoed all the other participants in recommending to other Vietnamese women the need for education of the American culture, of the language, and the support systems, and finally, their needs for self-growth.

They need to try to learn the U.S. culture, take care of their needs, and grow.

#### *Re-invent Your Identity*

Rose also felt balancing and mediating the old and new culture is an important aspect for Vietnamese women in the U.S. She recommends that Vietnamese women take the goods of the new culture and adopt it in the process of assimilation. At the same time she also recommends that women keep the positive aspect of her old culture. Rose seemed to struggle much in her life to define her own identity, as well as searching and satisfy her own desires without scarifying her family. It seemed as if she was at constant battle with herself, trying to fulfill what she wanted, as well as what others wanted for her and from her. Rose's situation is typical of that oldest daughter in a large humble family situation. In Vietnam, many oldest sisters are perceived as a young mother to her siblings while the mother is working outside of the home.

Bring in what aspects of the old culture combined with what, here works for you and create a balance. Don't give up your own culture, but assimilate into the American culture to the degree that fits you. Don't completely sacrifice yourself for the family, but don't sacrifice your family either.

#### *Appreciate and Care for Self*

Interestingly, Rose is the only women that recommended to other Vietnamese women to take care of their health. She felt health is a very important part of a women existence. She recommending to other Vietnamese women to take good care of their health and their looks as this is a gift that was given by our divine to women.

They should take care of their health, all aspects of their health and their looks, that is a gift that they can give themselves. Try to balance between the old and new, to reach a compromise that will work for them.

Among all the participants this researcher truly has deepest respect for this courageous, older Vietnamese woman. She went through so much hardship, and she gave so much of herself to others, yet she seemed to continue to have more to give. She is like a wise fairy princess who has so much wisdom to pass along for those who understand her values. This researcher has been truly blessed to have had the opportunity to dialogue with Rose, and will always remember her words of wisdom.