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**SURVIVAL FEMINISTS: IDENTIFYING WAR'S IMPACT ON THE ROLES OF VIETNAMESE REFUGEE WOMEN**

by

W. CORY ALBERTSON

Under the Direction of Dr. Jung Ha Kim

ABSTRACT

Although the Vietnam War has long passed, it still defines the lives of many Vietnamese refugee women who endured its aftermath. This thesis examines how war and the refugee process has shaped the memories and changed the roles of Vietnamese refugee women age 55 and older. Based on 10 life history interviews with Vietnamese women living in Atlanta, this study finds they structured their narratives by awarding the period after the Vietnam War with the most prominence. Also, the research shows the greatest amount of role change and role strain occurred during this time. With the absence of their husbands in the war's aftermath, the women experienced great familial and financial instability, forcing them to add the role of head of the household. I argue that during this period, they exhibited resiliency, shrewdness, and entrepreneurial spirit on a familial scale—a culmination of events I define as survival feminism.

INDEX WORDS: Vietnamese women, Vietnam War, Refugee, Roles, Identity, Feminism, Atlanta, Mental health

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W. CORY ALBERTSON

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

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Georgia State University

2009

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# SURVIVAL FEMINISTS: IDENTIFYING WAR'S IMPACT ON THE ROLES OF VIETNAMESE REFUGEE WOMEN

by

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August 2009

*For the influential women in my life:*

*Mom, Mima Duran, Mima Albertson, Mamma Lily*

*Alicia, Katie, Chelsea,*

*Dr. Kim and Ms. Johnson*

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Beginning with my mother and grandmothers and continuing with my female friends and my mentors in both journalism and sociology, it seems as though I have had great luck to be surrounded by strong, intelligent and compassionate women my entire life. Adding to that group, it has been my great privilege to be surrounded by wonderful women on this project as well, beginning with the women I interviewed and extending to those who worked alongside me. I owe the most appreciation to my sociology mentor and Committee Chair, Dr. Jung Ha Kim, who has guided me like a lovely, energetic beacon of reason ever since I entered her "Introduction to Sociology" class as an undergraduate many years ago. Because of her I found a home in sociology and for that I will always be grateful. I also want to extend my appreciation to my committee members, Donald Reitzes (the lone male voice besides myself!) and Denise Donnelly, both of whom challenged me and offered wonderful new insights. In addition, I am indebted to my translator, Ngoc Truong, for being so judicious with her time and services. And while they were not involved in this study directly, I owe many hugs to my fellow classmates, especially Daniela Ruz and Moon Charania, for offering their emotional support. Lastly, and most importantly, this study's success lies with the 10 Vietnamese women who allowed me a glimpse into their lives by way of this thesis. Beyond the sociological concepts their lives exemplified, they taught me exponentially about a few of life's basic human experiences—gratitude, resilience, hope, humility, love, and, most of all, freedom. For their participation, they have my unending thanks and admiration.

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# CHAPTER I

# INTRODUCTION

For the women who fled Vietnam after the Vietnam War, the refugee process—leaving one's home due to fear or harm—did not begin with the physical act of getting on a plane or boat bound for the United States, but rather with the fall of Saigon on April 30th 1975. For years after that date, upheaval of every sort ensued, with much of the resulting social pressure settling on the shoulders of women—many of whom were raising children at the time. The women who left (or who attempted to leave) by boat soon after—the second and third waves of refugees known as "boat people"—endured maladies including malnutrition and pirates (Mollica, 1994; Fox, 1991). The women who stayed in Vietnam for decades after experienced the anguish of familial and financial instability partially caused by their absent, imprisoned husbands. However, many of these women, in their quest for survival, rose up beyond their difficulties to show remarkable strength and independence—a process I refer to as survival feminism.

Central to examining these processes and changes is an understanding of identities and social roles. According to Stryker, "Identities are 'parts' of self –internalized designations [that] exist insofar as the person is a participant in structured role relationships" (1980: 60). Based on symbols (or shared social gestures) that develop in the "context of social acts," roles are positions within a given community that "carry shared behavioral expectations" (Stryker, 1980: 37, 54). A chief component in shaping roles is social structure or "patterned regularities that characterize most human interaction" (Stryker, 1980: 65). Lawler notes that while roles are largely "made" and "enacted" by the actors, the force of the larger social structure "remains strong" (2003: 137). Role conflict typically occurs when "there are contradictory expectations that attach to some position in a social relationship" (Stryker, 1980: 73).

During and after war as well as during the refugee process, women's daily life routines and social roles are constantly challenged and interrupted. As daughters, sisters, wives and mothers, refugee women are expected to provide life's necessities for survival—food, water, shelter—as well as nurturing, love, and knowledge. But before and during flight from their home country, those gender roles conflict with and are interrupted by those of a refugee needing governmental protection from starvation, rape, abduction, or, even, death. And if relocated to the United States after the initial flight, they, once again, are faced with changing and conflicting roles. In Western countries where gender mores are less restrictive, refugee women negotiate and balance between maintaining their traditional ways and adopting Western ways (Chung & Bemak, 1998; Fox, 1991).

Through a series of 10 in-depth interviews with Vietnamese refugee women age 55 and older, I have identified how changes in roles and identities characterized their refugee process and how they felt those experiences impacted their life courses. The women's backgrounds are diverse, ranging from upper-middle class families born and raised in urban environments to others who came from poorer families living in the more rural, agricultural provinces of Vietnam. Especially important to this study, though, is their age because many of the Vietnamese refugee women that are now 55 and older were, at the time of the Vietnam War, beginning or newly settled in their roles as wives, mothers and workers. It was arguably this age group that was affected the most by the integration of South and North Vietnam as they were the backbone of both the workforce and the familial structure, taking care of elderly parents and young children alike. Also significant about this age group is that, because they are now older, they are more likely to feel comfortable discussing the difficult time period, making the data gleaned extremely rich and detailed. Older populations tend to be more open and comfortable discussing

their history, having had ample time to reflect on and analyze their lives (Beiser, 1987). Central to their narratives is an emphasis on process, providing good examples of how situations across an entire life course are interconnected.

Unfortunately, both sociologists and psychologists tend to leave the processes of a refugee's life course behind in favor of focusing on one stage of the refugee process (most likely the actual flight from a home a country) or on the consequences and outcomes of the refugee experience. For example, several books such as *Refugee Women* (Martin, 1994) and *Amidst Peril and Pain* (Marsella et al., 1994) devote considerable space to shared mental and physical health issues or outlining policy "perspectives." Likewise, Abe, Zane and Chun (1994) offer a similar exploration in their study on posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among Southeast Asian refugees. With all of these examples, it is outcomes as opposed to processes that are given the most attention in the examination. The importance of a more holistic exploration that incorporates the pre-flight, flight, and post-flight experiences with the use of roles (as defined by Stryker) can not be denied. Studying roles forces the researcher to delve not only into one part of the refugee process, such as the actual flight from the home country, but also into the life in which the refugee comes from—their cultural traditions.

However, role theory has come under fire for sexist assumptions about women's roles (Connell, 1987; Epstein, 1988; Kamarovsky, 1992). In my examination, I did not use the concept of social roles in ways that perpetuated sexist assumptions about women. Instead, I used a feminist lens and integrated feminist critiques of role theory while examining Vietnamese women's social roles as they are affected by the refugee process. The intersections of feminism, struggle and culture have not been examined thoroughly in this way with respect to Vietnamese women or with regards to refugee women in general. But the need for such research only grows

as those who are experiencing war, poverty, or disease continually look to the United States for help.

This thesis is designed to help fill that need while yielding new and inventive ways of analyzing the Vietnamese refugee women's experiences. In Chapter 2, I will discuss relevant literature and research pertaining not only to the refugee process but also to the cultural background of Vietnamese women. In Chapters 3 and 4, I delve into greater detail concerning the theoretical lenses I used for the purposes of analysis as well as the methodology I used in constructing this study. In Chapter 5, I highlight my findings which focus on three distinct periods the women discussed with regards to their life course: their experiences immediately after the war, their childhood and early marriage years before the war, and their time in the United States after migrating. Lastly, in Chapter 6, I offer a discussion that focuses on the importance of how we label these women as well as the potential impact their memories can have on their current mental health.

Hopefully, this study will serve as a foundational source that will aid in discovering more appropriate social programs leading to greater access by the Vietnamese refugee community including the actual refugees, responding non-profit organizations and local health centers. After my initial study, there is also great potential for similar research to blossom—examining more diverse populations of refugee women. As long as the United States continues to be a destination for those who wish to escape unfortunate circumstances, we must continue to explore the differences of the many various refugee populations while being sensitive to their various situations so as to better aid them when they arrive.

# CHAPTER II

# BACKGROUND

The plight of older Vietnamese refugee women has rarely been explored from a social psychological perspective. Most accounts provide general information (often from a psychological or clinical perspective) about the refugee experience. Therefore, the following literature review not only presents general findings, but also data that focuses on the larger "Asian" refugee experience as opposed to just the Vietnamese population. Interspersed throughout is a discussion of the impact of trauma from a multigenerational standpoint as well as from other temporal characteristics of refugees' experiences. It is important to note that some persons who migrate to the United States from Southeast Asia refer to themselves as "Asian," while others refer to themselves as "Asian American." Therefore, I will use the two terms interchangeably for the purpose of this discussion.

## The Cultural Identities of Refugee Women

Before delving into refugee experiences it is important to first understand the cultural circumstances of, and roles performed by, these women in their native culture. While there is an effort not to generalize to women in many diverse cultures, there are many similarities (Martin, 2004). Many refugees come from developing countries where there is constant political upheaval and where women occupy subordinate roles. Such is the case in many African, Middle Eastern, and Asian countries. Culture is important to the cultivation and maintenance of identities because identities are partly indicative of "associated cultural expectations" (Lawler, 2003: 139). For the Vietnamese, cultural values are directly linked to their religious beliefs, which include Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism and Christianity. Individual autonomy is frowned upon while upholding family pride and honor is of the utmost importance (Chun et al., 1998; Chung &

Bemak, 1998). For Vietnamese women, the most central roles are that of daughter, then wife and, eventually mother. Such role identities can exhibit varying degrees of centrality—levels of importance to the persons who inhabit them (Rosenberg, 1979). From an early age, Vietnamese women are taught to acquire personal qualities associated with maintaining their three most central roles or what is commonly known as the "three submissions." First, they must show obedience to the father. Second, after marriage, they must show obedience to the husband. And third, they must serve and care for their children. Even widows must show deference to their eldest son (Chung & Bemak, 1998).

## The Refugee Process for Women

Women hold a unique place in the refugee process. If their husbands have been executed or recruited for war, they may have to take on the responsibilities of becoming head of the household, which is culturally unusual in many developing countries. And still, if the family unit stays intact, the women may find themselves performing the same role—that of taking care of hearth and home—in an unstable, often dangerous refugee camp just as they did in their villages (Martin, 2004). The changes in dynamics and settings can be extremely traumatic for all family members, affecting their mental health and their interactions with each other (Fox, 1991).

Second and third wave Vietnamese refugees during the late 1970s and 1980s were branded as "boat people"—meaning their method of escape from the Viet Cong and Northern Vietnamese was by sailing to neighboring countries. Unfortunately, during the journey to resettlement camps, pirates terrorized many boats. Women were especially vulnerable as many traveled without their husbands or extended family. Depending on if the women and girls remained on their boats or were taken to the pirates' boats, some were brutally raped as many as 30 times (Chung & Bemak, 1998).

Adding to the traumatic experience of rape and abduction is the strict patriarchal nature of Vietnamese culture. Similar to the Middle Eastern women, the "highest" priorities for Vietnamese women to maintain are virginity and "good behavior." Vietnamese women often internalize their trauma by blaming themselves and not seeking help—professionally or socially. In their exploration of the Vietnamese female refugee experience, Rita Chi-Ying Chung and Fred Bemak note, "The cultural perception that the women had been 'used,' 'violated,' or 'left over' by the rapist is aptly portrayed in the following Vietnamese proverb: 'Someone ate out of my bowl and left it dirty'" (1998: 377). In fact, they must keep their abuse secret for fear of dishonor and punishment such as family disownment, community rejection, and/or divorce (Chung & Bemak, 1998).

The changes do not end once these families have been resettled or even if they first migrate to an industrialized country. For resettling Vietnamese families, three factors—downward economic mobility, the segmentation of families resulting in their isolation from kin, and the increased employment of wives—influence the amount of changes in the family (Fox, 1991). Vietnamese men, many of whom held jobs in the manufacturing industry or tending land in their native country, have difficulty finding employment in Western societies, which no longer have an abundance of similar opportunities. Therefore women, whose primary jobs focus on household duties, are more apt to work in service industries (Chung & Bemak, 1998). Also, many have not worked outside their homes before and look upon this as a new freedom. But new cultural and economic expressions of power for women can come with a price as power shifts can be traumatic for all in the family. As Nazli Kibria notes, "Such changes [have] opened up the possibilities for a renegotiation of gender relations, and [can be] the cause of considerable conflict between men and women in the family and community" (1999: 323). Conflict—

including spousal abuse—was more likely to erupt in spousal power struggles when wives pursued employment and/or furthered their education against their husband's wishes. The norm in Vietnam was to discourage women from working for someone outside of the family (Fox, 1991; Chung & Bemak, 1998).

In addition to their financial contributions, Vietnamese female immigrants increased their influence by serving as the "gatekeepers" in constructing new kinship networks, often inviting their own friends and specific extended family members to become "fictive kin" (Kibria, 1999). Unlike in Vietnam, in the United States women could increase their power through relationships in the private sphere because they no longer had to compete with the mother-in-law for female dominance nor were they exclusively surrounded by their husbands' family and friends. "Women were not simply passive beneficiaries of the family rebuilding process," says Kibria about her study of Philadelphia-area Vietnamese women. "Rather, they played an active part in family reconstruction, attempting to shape family boundaries in ways that were to their advantage" (1999: 325). Vietnamese women did not blatantly rail against the male domination of their culture, but instead used their "traditional" duties within the home to greater increase their power once in the United States (Kibria, 1990). But this power in maintaining and reshaping their family does not mean the women were immune to new cultural pressures regarding more lax Western family dynamics. In her study of 30 Vietnamese refugee women who had settled in the Chicago Metropolitan area, Patricia Fox (1991) found that the ease in which spousal couples divorce in the United States left the Vietnamese women feeling concerned about the stability of their marriages.

## Conceptualizing Well-being

Such dramatic shifts in familial relations as well as the traumatic nature of the refugee journey can cause severe mental health problems. Therefore, an understanding of the most prevalent mental health challenges affecting refugees is extremely important—not only for the purposes of my preparation for this study but also for the discussion of my findings. Some refugees experience acute stress reactions, which are considered "transient disorders of significant severity that develop in an individual without any other apparent mental disorder in response to exceptional physical or mental stress and that usually subside within hours or days" (Orley, 1994: 196). Others experience posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which, according to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, requires that "individuals must have been exposed to a traumatic event and must also exhibit symptoms from each of three symptom clusters that include intrusive recollections, avoidant / numbing symptoms and hyperarousal symptoms" (Friedman & Jaranson, 1994: 208). PTSD only manifests as a delayed reaction to an event of "exceptionally threatening or catastrophic nature"—the event can either be a brief occurrence or last for a considerable amount of time (Orley, 1994). Lastly, some refugees experience adjustment disorders that are "states of subjective distress and emotional disturbance, usually interfering with social functioning and performance, and arising in the period of adaptation to a significant life change or to the consequences of a stressful life event" (Orley, 1994: 198).

Although the refugee process has the capability to cause various mental health disorders, PTSD is the one with the most potential to persist well into the resettlement phase. Any traumatic event(s) experienced will have most likely involved actual and/or threatened death or injury to the refugee or a threat to the physical integrity of others, such as family and community

members. Often, the first symptom of PTSD, intrusive recollections of the traumatic event, remains for decades or a lifetime. It is an overwhelming psychological experience that continues to evoke panic, terror, dread, grief or despair, but is experienced through daytime fantasies, traumatic nightmares or, even, psychological reenactments. The second symptom of PTSD, avoidant or numbing symptomatology, centers on the attempts by the individual to reduce the chances that they will expose themselves to traumatic stimuli or, if exposed, attempt to lessen the intensity of their response. Hyperarousal, the third symptom of PTSD, typically includes insomnia, irritability, and slight paranoia (Friedman & Jaranson, 1994).

## Healthcare and Seeking Help

A common stereotype of Asian Americans is that they do not have mental health problems and, therefore, have little need for social health services (Chin, 1998). In reality Asian Americans characterize their mental health as part of their overall well-being—a holistic view where both mental and physical health care are inextricably linked (Chin, 1998). Also, Asian cultures tend to place considerable importance on group harmony, which makes interruptions (such as depression or episodes of PTSD) the cause of interpersonal tension, social isolation and general group “dis-harmony” (Chun et al., 1998).

Compared to other racial groups, Asians are more likely to express emotional health issues through somatazation, which is the act of using physical presentations such as abdominal pain or headaches, as a means to communicate mental issues (Chun et al., 1998). They can also have—to Western researchers—unusual manifestation expressions. “Koro,” mostly used by Southeast Asian and Chinese cultures, is associated with anxiety symptoms that are indicative of a fear of genital retraction. Korean cultures have “hwabuyng,” which translates to “fire illness” and is associated with everything from abdominal pain to poor eyesight. It is thought, within

Korean culture, to be caused by lasting anger, sadness, miseries, grudges or unfulfilled dreams (Chun et al., 1998).

Utilization rates of healthcare services for Asian Americans have been lower than those of non-hispanic whites, but it has been argued that this is due to the over-usage of standardized Western measures of psychopathology by responding non-profit organizations and doctors (Chin, 1998). For instance, Chin notes, "…Asian Americans tend to be viewed as less verbal, having more personality problems, more neurotic, more anxious and introverted, and less dominant…Using these comparative models the studies generally interpret Asian traits as less favorable and more pathological" (1998: 490). And simultaneously there has also been a lack of culturally competent treatments. Although it is widely debated, findings have shown that Asian Americans who actually sought services *were* more severely disturbed, receiving a higher proportion of mental disorder diagnoses than non-hispanic white American patients (Chun et al., 1998).

Southeast Asian Refugees at a high risk for depression have found to have benefited more by avoiding the temporal reintegration of their past. Temporal reintegration refers to the cognitive recapturing "of the past and reconnecting it with the present and future" (Beiser & Wickrama, 2004: 899). So, for refugees, depression is helped by not reconnecting their pre-flight and flight experiences with whatever their present situation may be. Often, it is not just individual events that are blocked out, but entire periods of personal history (Beiser & Wickrama, 2004). In an effort to protect oneself from the experiences of trauma, suppressing the past and dissociating it from the present and future are recognized as a common human method of coping (Beiser & Wickrama, 2004). In their fascinating study focusing on the temporal characteristics of trauma, M. Beiser and K.A.S. Wickrama (2004) found that, among Southeast

Asian refugees living in Canada, the longer the refugees remained in Canada, the greater the tendency to reconnect the past with the present and future. However, the past never gained equality with or “ascendance” over the present or future. Instead, the importance of the past was found to diminish in the first decade of resettlement.

# CHAPTER III

# THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Herbert Blumer, who coined the framework now known as symbolic interaction theory, believed that "human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them," while the meaning of "such things" comes from the social interaction that one has with other people (1969: 2). Symbolic interaction requires the conceptualization of identities, roles and definitions of the situation (Stryker, 1980). For this research, I utilized identity process and role theory within the symbolic interactionist paradigm and applied them to the refugee process. Role theory, though, has been a target of feminists who challenge what they see as sexist assumptions—especially the use of terms like gender and/or sex roles. As a complement to my use of role theory, I explored and incorporated feminist critiques of role theory. And as a complement to the broader symbolic interaction concepts, I included adhesive adaptation assimilation theory, as first argued by Hurh and Kim (1984) as part of my analysis to examine the period of adjustment once the refugees have resettled in the United States.

## Identity Theory and Role Theory

Identity theory maintains that identities are self-meanings based on role expectations (Hunt, 2003: 71). Role expectations can be derived from sources such as (but not limited to) one's family, community or culture. Also, identity theory views the self as a "multidimensional construct whose structure reflects the institutionally differentiated nature of society" (Hunt, 2003: 72). Roles are designations given by society—the symbols attached to "positions" used by a society to organize social groups and the "expectations" attached to such positions (Stryker, 1980: 57). When roles (and, consequently, identities) are interrupted either by external events or conflicts with another role, stress usually occurs (Burke, 1991).

This relates to refugee women on many levels. Just in their title—"refugee" and "woman"—they have two (often conflicting) roles. At different points during the refugee process one can be more important than the other. One can interrupt the other or they can work in tandem. As I noted earlier, pirates raped many Vietnamese refugee women who traveled by boat and, in the case of young girls, their virginity was taken from them. In many Asian cultures, virginity equates femininity and the transition to womanhood. Their very identity as a burgeoning woman is challenged and interrupted not only during rape, but in their definitions of self and the reflected appraisals of others.

## Feminist Critique of Role Theory

While roles are delegated and influenced by society, the same thing can be said of role theory. Society (and its theoretical musings) tends to be "androcentric," which has led to important feminist critiques of role theory regarding sex and gender (Gould, 1980: 459). Many feminists take issue with role theory, arguing that it continues to perpetuate sexist stereotypes and encourages researchers to think within those stereotypes (Epstein, 1988). As Connell notes, "Role Theory is often seen by [researchers] as a form of social determinism, stressing the way individuals are trapped in stereotypes" (1987: 50). Similarly, Edwards maintains that the "systematic male bias in 'sex role' sociology, as in society generally, is combined with an underlying 'double standard.'" (1983: 400).

Unfortunately, this double standard has, historically, concentrated on sex differences and the biological basis of gender differences (Gould, 1980). In an attempt to assuage critics, the term "gender role" began being used instead of the biologically determinant label of "sex role." Feminists, however, argued that gender was not a role by citing that terms such as "race roles" or

"stratified roles" are not used in similar fashion (Kamarovsky, 1992). I will be using the term "women's roles" because persons' roles most likely involve a hybrid of both sex and gender.

Role Theory has been further criticized by feminists because it tends to focus on the individual instead of exploring larger societal controls—rewards and/or punishments for maintaining certain positions (Connell, 1987). Connell states, "[Role Theory] comes down to a question of individual will and agency, revolving around choices to apply sanctions. The social dimension of role theory thus ironically dissolves into voluntarism, into a general assumption that people choose to maintain existing customs" (1987: 50). Critics feel that neither role theory nor the larger paradigm of symbolic interactionism are able to adequately examine structural relationships—relationships which harbor our social differentiation and externally impose constraints (Gould, 1980). However, Edwards points out that while symbolic interactionism does give considerable weight to the individual, it also "recognizes the often problematic relationship between the views and interests of individuals occupying recognized social positions and the role expectations held by society…" (1983: 392).

## Adhesive Adaptation Assimilation Theory

Whenever one studies the integration of persons from another country into a new culture, some framework is needed to examine their levels of assimilation whereby they acquire and incorporate the social characteristics of their new country into their lives. Previously, it was thought that assimilation was a zero-sum game where the practices and traditions of one ethnic group erase the other. However, Won Moo Hurh and Kwang Chung Kim (1984) found that immersion into Western culture does not necessarily always push out aspects of native culture. Instead, they advocate adhesive adaptation assimilation theory. It maintains that the assimilation process occurs "as a particular mode of adaptation in which certain aspects of the new culture

and social relations with members of the host society are added on to the immigrants traditional culture and social networks, without replacing or modifying any significant part of the old" (Hurh & Kim, 1984: 188).

For the purposes of this study, I have incorporated adhesive adaptation assimilation theory as the assimilation process is especially important when examining the structural changes in the domestic realm during the refugee experience. The potential for role change and/or conflict could be directly related to refugee women's assimilation into the United States. Women are typically viewed as more marketable than men especially in the service industry and, thus, leave to work outside of their homes—a change that can be viewed as very alarming in some Southeast Asian cultures. The resulting issues can impact relations with husbands (who end up staying at home after having difficulty finding work) and children as the women struggle to balance the demands of Western culture and the traditions of their native culture.

# CHAPTER IV

# METHODOLOGY

Very little research has been done utilizing social psychological theories to understand refugees' experiences. Therefore, using social psychology as the main lens by which to explore the experiences of Vietnamese refugee women age 55 and older will shed a new light on their struggles. This qualitative study was developed both inductively and deductively as it utilized Grounded Theory Methods (GTM) of analysis. As LaRossa notes, GTM has long given the "impression" of solely relying on inductive reasoning when "in actuality, the methods rely upon induction *and* deduction" (2005: 853). In order to carry out the qualitative research, I conducted (with the aid of a translator) 10 semi-structured, face-to-face interviews, which followed a life history framework.

Anthony Giddens (2005) describes life histories as "consisting of biographical material assembled about particular individuals—usually as recalled by the individuals themselves" (2005: 39). Not discussing the refugees' early life and cultural background would do a disservice to the actual refugee process as well as to how the refugee experience has been integrated into their life afterwards. Essentially, data on the refugee's entire life is needed in order to expose the contextual detail of a person's "development of beliefs and attitudes over time" (Giddens, 2005). Life histories also use in tandem more tactile resources such as respondents' personal letters or cultural artifacts. I asked the respondents if they had any related items that they would be willing to share with me, but seeing as how many of them came to the United States with barely the clothes on their back, few such materials existed.

## General Research Questions

Because I used a life history approach, the interviews focused on the respondent's entire life course, which added necessary context to the refugee experience. However, the research concentrated on the three major stages a refugee must endure: pre-flight (or the circumstances that cause the individual to leave his or her home country), flight (which focuses on the actual act of transporting themselves to another location) and post-flight (or resettlement phase where, for the purpose of these refugees being studied, will be their migration to the United States). There was a possibility the respondents interviewed would not give as much importance to the three stages of the refugee process with relation to their entire life history. Whether importance was given or not, their statements (or lack there of) concerning the three stages conveyed considerable information about how they viewed the refugee process. For some, the level of weight given to the refugee process emerged as an entirely new and intriguing aspect to the study.

Qualitative research is based on directing hypotheses with the hope of developing relationships to theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). However, I did not highlight hypotheses per se, but rather a few general themes in the form of research questions derived from my review of the previous literature as well as unexplored topics I hoped my data would shed some light on. I continued to give considerable attention to the refugee process and its three stages for the purposes of outlining the research questions. The general research questions below (**in bold**) pertain to the initial themes of role change, loss of identity and the mental health outcomes of the refugee process. These are not questions that were a part of an interview script, but rather general questions about the refugee experience I initially wanted to explore. Also, the following questions are by no means the *only* themes that were explored. Because the nature of qualitative

research is largely exploratory, and the researcher is largely unaware of the themes he or she will find, the following questions represent just some of the initial questions I hoped the data from the respondent's interviews would answer.

**What significant forms of role change and / or conflict takes place from pre-flight conditions to flight and ultimately resettlement?**

This question was answered through a retelling of the individual refugee experience by the various Vietnamese women. Other research questions pertaining to this topic include:

Question 1: What were the initial reasons causing the refugee to leave her home country?

Question 2: Were there any unforeseen difficulties during the flight or post-flight process?

Question 3: How are familial and work responsibilities delegated before and after flight from the home country?

Question 4: Did the refugee woman's duties change once settled in the United States when compared to the duties when in her home country?

**Assuming that role change and / or role conflict did occur on some level after resettlement, how did they impact the present status of the refugee woman?**

This question was answered by exploring the refugees' resettlement experiences within the United States as well as their current status within their adopted community.

Question 1: What major cultural adjustments were experienced / noticed by the refugee woman once she resettled in the United States?

Question 2: Did family members view the refugee woman differently during role changes and / or conflict?

Question 3: How does the refugee woman characterize her life (i.e. identities and roles) now?

Question 4: How does the refugee woman rank her various roles before and / or after experiencing role change and / or conflict?

Question 5: Has the refugee woman expressed any physical or mental problems / challenges from the time of initial settlement to the present?

Question 6: Has the refugee woman ever sought professional help (either for physical or mental symptoms)?

## Sampling Frame

This study was conducted in conjunction with the Center for Pan-Asian Community Services Inc. (CPACS), a non-profit organization in Atlanta, Georgia. CPACS has served its community for over 25 years and is respected among Atlanta's Asian-American community. Drawing on my close relationship with CPACS (I have served as an instructor and community volunteer), I used snowball sampling to recruit the target population of Vietnamese women. I contacted a couple of persons through various classes and programs at CPACS who spread the 'word' and led me to potential respondents—the sample consisted of 10 women age 55 or older. As noted earlier, this age group is extremely important to the history of the Vietnam War because they were the group responsible for filling the workforce as well as maintaining family cohesion by producing children and taking care of elders. Also, they have a greater opportunity for reflection and tend to provide greater depth with regard to their life history than younger cohorts.

I chose a small number of cases because the goal was to obtain rich and detailed information with which to explore the issues and stages of Vietnamese refugee women living in

the United States. Each woman was interviewed once. The interviews ranged in length between 55 minutes and 2 hours, depending on the amount of detail the women chose to share about their lives. Also, my population was fairly homogenous, which led to less variation and quicker theoretical saturation among the respondents' interviews. Due to the large amount of context obtained through life history interviews, a smaller sample size of 10 was appropriate for this study. It may be argued that qualitative research with such a small sample of Vietnamese refugee women may have limited generalizability to the larger community of Asian refugees or even to the entire community of world refugees. However, encompassing all (or even one region of) refugees with the hope of gathering such contextually rich data would prove difficult.

## Interview Considerations and Technique

Given the subject matter, a qualitative in-depth interview process was the best avenue to receive rich, varied and meaningful data. As stated earlier, the interviews were conducted within a life history framework, which consists of biographical resources about individuals typically recounted by the individuals themselves (Giddens, 2005: 39). Using a life history framework allowed the participants to freely express themselves, giving more opportunity for their voices and perspectives to be heard. Since covering one's life can be an overwhelming and long process, some interviews were divided with breaks during the one session. At the beginning of the interview I asked the women to simply tell me about their lives in any way, shape or form they deemed appropriate—without interruption from myself. After they relayed everything they felt relevant, I then asked more specific follow-up questions designed to flesh out any areas of their life I felt needed more context or exploration. Again, the questions centered around the three stages of the refugee process: 1) pre-flight, which included events or reasons causing the family to consider leaving their home country 2) flight, which included the experiences of the

family while they were en route to an asylum country or resettlement country and 3) post-flight, which focused on the assimilation process and difficulties of settling in a new, often industrialized nation.

As stated earlier, the interviews lasted anywhere between 55 minutes (for the shortest) and 2 hours for the longest, depending on how forthcoming the women were with their answers. All of the women felt more comfortable speaking solely in Vietnamese, despite some of them speaking English. Therefore I used a Vietnamese translator, Ngoc Truong, during all the interviews. Truong works for the Center for Pan-Asian Community Services (CPACS) as a part-time program coordinator and translator, specifically aiding the Vietnamese population in the Atlanta metropolitan area. Only the portions of the interviews spoken in English (including my initial questions and Truong's translation of the participants' answers) where then utilized for a partial transcription.

Because of the cultural divide between myself (a white male researcher) and the subjects, there was potential for some cultural barriers with regards to some of the more difficult experiences. But working at CPACS for six years as an instructor and volunteer, I have had considerable experience interacting with Vietnamese youths and adults. I have even conducted informal conversations and interviews for non-research purposes. Their openness and cooperation with me was always unflappable and I received similar frankness during this research.

Their willingness to share their lives was important, especially considering that they were asked to recount difficult periods of their lives. For some Asian refugee families, the traumatic experiences that took place during the pre-flight and flight stages included impromptu raids by the government, being jailed or witnessing executions during attempts to flee. Also, for many,

the traumatic experience centered around the separations from spouses, children and/or parents whose fate often remained unknown for lengthy periods of time And while some refugees make one move (often to a Western country), others are forced to reside in refugee camps until resettlement options are available or until the situation in their home country subsides. Like their flight, the experience had the potential to be difficult. Not only are refugees from opposing factions or communities forced to reside together, but violence, crowding and unsanitary conditions are, unfortunately, all too common (Abe et al., 1994).

In addition, there was potential for discussion of gender-specific types of trauma and resulting healthcare issues, which are of considerable importance to this topic. Many times, the women were forced to become heads of the households as their husbands may have been executed, recruited by the military or sent to "reeducation camps." Thus, they must move and care for their families alone. Left vulnerable, they were susceptible—at multiple points during the refugee process—to victimization by army and resistance units, pirates, border guards and, even, husbands and other fellow refugees (Martin 2002). It is important to remember, that while the respondent was asked to recount difficult situations, the emphasis was not necessarily on describing, in detail, the events, but how the events impacted life afterwards. In the event that the respondents were emotionally disturbed or experienced distress due to recounting such experiences during their life histories, they were given the option to be referred to CPACS to receive counseling services. However, none utilized the offering.

In addition to the actual interviews, organizing how and where the interviews would take place presented a couple of logistical issues. Most Asian family experiences are very male-centered with little emphasis paid to women's individual feelings or perspectives. Therefore, some husbands may have objected to their wives participating in an in-depth, personal interview

(Goodkind & Deacon, 2004). No women backed out of the interview or were asked to back out due to responses from their husbands. However, there were indications that some of the women were telling their stories in secret. To give the women a safe place to conduct the interview, transportation was provided if requested—translator Ngoc Truong and I brought them to the neutral site of CPACS. Also, in the event of lack of childcare (some of the women regularly looked after grandchildren), the interviews were conducted in the home of the participant. No matter the personal situation of the women—whether husbands objected or not—all of the women were given a pseudonym to protect their identity. Below I have provided a table with the respondent's age, marital status and pseudonym.

**Table 1 Description of the Sample**

| **Case Number** | **Age** | **Marital Status*** | **Pseudonym** |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 72 | NM | Kha Huynh |
| 2 | 65 | M | Choi Thi Nguyen |
| 3 | 57 | M | Ngung Thi Thach |
| 4 | 75 | M | Kim Thi Nguyen |
| 5 | 66 | M | Lieu Vo |
| 6 | 75 | D | Thanh Truong |
| 7 | 60 | M | Cau Van Pham |
| 8 | 64 | D | Chien Bui |
| 9 | 68 | M | Thuy Thi Nguyen |
| 10 | 74 | M | Hoa Thi Pham |

* M refers to "married," NM refers to "never married," D refers to "divorced"

## Data Analysis

When in the home of the participants, extensive field notes were taken as part of my observation alongside the formal in-depth interview. This included environmental characteristics and body language not part of the formal interview. Environmental characteristics including the respondent's living space or neighborhood were used as context when discussing current class status in the United States. Similarly, body language (which included many scenarios) was used as contextual indications that a particular subject or discussion caused mental distress or, vice versa, happiness. Body gestures recorded included fidgeting, visible nervousness (sweaty palms, sweaty brow etc…), defensive stances or smiling during particular subjects.

As stated earlier, the language of the in-depth interviews was a mix of both English and Vietnamese with the latter taking prominence based on the preferences of the respondents. I asked the questions in English, which the translator then converted to Vietnamese and vice versa with their answers. Since the answers of the interviewee were translated "on the spot" by a third party, the need for verbatim transcription was less meaningful because the aim of such a process is to document the actual spoken word of the interviewee. In *Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*, Weiss notes that transcription can take many forms including transcribing only what seems to be useful while paraphrasing the rest or, even, taking notes during the interview which will "provide an index to the tape" and allow transcription to be "done as needed" (1994: 56). I incorporated the latter strategy, making an extensive interview outline for each respondent and their interview. Quotes and life events were all given a number that corresponds with the tracking number of the tape, which made reviewing content and retrieving specific information possible. It is important to note that the numbers assigned to the indicators in the outline (corresponding to the tape's tracking) included (but were not limited to)

a life event, an observation by me, a relationship to social psychology concepts, or, simply, an interesting or compelling moment.

While reviewing the tape and creating the outline, there was, obviously, some initial forms of coding that took place with respect to the answers given by the respondent. This first stage of analysis most closely resembles grounded theory method's (GTM) open coding where the goal is to devise concepts or themes by examining the data and looking for indicators related to the concepts (Strauss, 1987). For example, I talked with Kha Huynh, a 71 year-old Vietnamese refugee woman who came to the United States in 2001. Raised in Hanoi, North Vietnam, both parents worked full time—her father was a mechanic and her mother a real estate agent. But despite both parents working, Huynh's family struggled for food and, thus, had very little money left over to send all six children to school—after a child reaches a certain age, public school is no longer free. At age 13, Huynh began working jobs to help the family and was forced to "grow up" very quickly. She took on a variety of occupations including making dresses as well as working in restaurants and in beauty shops. "I was very unlucky, I didn't have much time in the schools," Huynh says. "No school is for free. My parents both worked and still did not have enough to support us." Both in the outline and in my analysis, the previous quote was coded as an example of role conflict. Huynh's occupations reinforced her experience of family as "work," which is more typical for women. And not only were familial household duties "work," but her occupations outside the home were similarly bound to the support of the family. In Huynh's case, the conflict was between her role as a student and her role as the eldest daughter, the latter of which was expected to work to support the family.

An example of Huynh's ranking of roles is when she struck out on her own and moved to South Vietnam by herself. Her new life was still characterized by work, though. She says,

matter-of-factly, “I was too busy; I didn’t have time to feel alone. I was happy because I had a job.” Her happiness was not related to the desire or possibility of having a family of her own, which is how women in both Western and Eastern cultures are socialized. Instead, her happiness was directly related to her independence through work—being able to support herself on her own. This quote was noted and coded as an instance of her ranking of roles with work being placed at the top of that hierarchy. Similarly, other emergent social psychology themes were coded in this manner. Also, the same treatment was used for any instances where the events discussed have impacted the respondent’s well-being or where specific discussions surrounding their well-being occurred.

After all the interviews were conducted, I used characteristics of the second stage of GTM—axial coding—to develop relationships related (but not excluded) to my conceptual / theoretical models of identity theory, role theory, assimilation theory, and any mental health issues or outcomes. With the GTM coding process, the concepts suggested were organized into categories where their relationships to each other were then examined (Strauss, 1987). I found that most of the women organized their memories by attributing the most salience to the period following the Vietnam War (which included the most amount of role change and role strain), ahead of their time in the U.S. after migration and, even, their childhood and early marriage years. And by examining the relationships between these three time periods, I induced the central theme of “survival feminism” that weaves itself through the time periods in a number of different ways—all of which I discuss in detail in the following chapter.

# CHAPTER V

# FINDINGS

Like any war, the impact and experiences that take place are filtered, with each side focusing on their own involvement. While I am limited by my age and did not experience the impact of the Vietnam War as it happened, I believe much of the United States' perception of the war came from its soldiers fighting it. Continuous television images, photographs, and stories from returning soldiers relayed brutal guerrilla warfare fought in beautiful, but burdensome forests. There was an impression that the war was ravaging all of North and South Vietnam—disrupting countless lives on both sides of the border. Not so. Or more appropriately: not yet.

As the Vietnamese women I interviewed for this research invited me into their homes and hearts, I was surprised to learn that most of their lives were not impacted negatively while the war raged. None of the women reported significant changes during the war. In fact, many reported financial stability and a comfortable life. Lieu Vo, who lived in the South Vietnamese city of Qui Nhơn, described a life on the opposite end of the pendulum of war. "Life was very good, it was very peaceful…" she says. Similarly, Cau Van Pham, who lived in Saigon during the war notes, "I think the time before 1975, when I had my job…I think that time was the best time."

Like Pham, most of the women divide their lives at "1975." More specifically, April 30th, 1975—the date Northern forces overtook the South Vietnamese capitol of Saigon. Only then did these women feel the war's pressures and instabilities. In interview after interview I heard phrases like "Later in 1975, things got really bad…," "everything fell apart," and "But then in 1975, everything changed."

All of the women gave significant weight to this period of their life—either by refusing to talk about it, focusing much of their life history on it, or, as was the case with four women, beginning their life history when Saigon fell. I feel it appropriate to begin my analysis there too. Thus, this chapter will be divided by the women's experiences immediately after the war, their childhood and early marital life before the war and, lastly, their experiences in looking to the United States as an emotional and financial remedy for the hardships they experienced due to the war.

## After the War

For better or for worse, one of the hallmarks of war is that it unites groups of people. Often, those on the losing side are swept up in great waves of common experiences exemplified by millions of families struggling for food, struggling to find work or fending for their lives on the street. With regard to the Vietnam War, Western perspective often argues that *everyone*—both supporters of North and South Vietnam—suffered after the war by the simple fact that their freedoms were tightly controlled by a strict communist government. This debate, however, is better confined to other arenas. The testimonies of the women I interviewed clearly hint that those who supported South Vietnam during the war were united in being on the receiving end of greater hardship than their North Vietnamese counterparts. In this section, I will explore the most significant changes that took place in these women's lives after the war including their financial and social instability, their role change in becoming head of the household and their loss of identity at the hands of the new government.

### *Financial and familial instability*

Much of what the women experienced—whether it was role change or loss of identity—was shaped in some way by a lack of money. Financial stability, I discovered, showed itself to be

a much greater determinant of whether the women considered their lives "good" or "bad." Based on the available literature of Vietnamese women and its emphasis on family, I mistakenly hypothesized that their family support system would completely dominate their life descriptions due to women typically being characterized as focused on the home. Most of the women I interviewed, though, were active participants in their family's financial stability, achieving middle class status or higher by working outside the home in a variety of occupations—some in farms, one as a teacher, one as a policewoman and one as grocery store clerk. Lieu Vo, for example, worked for a United States funded program as a professional (and paid) "supporter" who boosted the morale of South Vietnamese soldiers during the war—an occupation similar to those found in United Service Organizations (USO) in the United States. "I supported them by talking to them," she says. "Also, I helped them by telling jokes or playing games so that they could forget about quitting the army—to have the mentality to go on and fight the enemy."

For Vo and the majority of the other women interviewed, their jobs gave them purpose and served as a necessary financial lifeline. But the end of the war took that purpose and its practical means of supporting the family away. Almost all the women were left without their jobs and in desperate need of money. Now their lives revolved around scrounging for whatever goods could be sold. The life of every woman I interviewed was now financially dependent on selling goods at the market. "I lost my job after the war was over," Vo remembers. "I had to find stuff to sell. Not just stuff at the market, but stuff inside my house—anything that's valuable. We needed money for food—I had to take care of my children." For the following five years, selling goods (and personal belongings) at the market would be her main source of income. But it was not a reliable source. Thuy Thi Nguyen, whose fabric business was shut down by the new government, recounts how new regulations made buying and selling goods difficult. "You can not imagine

that it would be so hard to sell the food at the market," she says. "We could not sell anything the government had their hands on—no fabric, no meat, no fish, anything that was necessary for our lives, not even rice or water. So it was just unbearable."

In order to ease the financial burden, some of the women took drastic measures, which often meant disrupting the family structure. The lack of money forced a few of them to uproot their families in order to help them survive. In an attempt to save money, Ngung Thi Thach and her three children moved to her childhood home of Cần Thơ to live with her elderly mother. While there, she worked on her mother's rice farm and supplemented their income by selling goods at the market. But while she moved there to ease her money woes, the new economic system put in place by the new government added complications to her effort:

> When the communist government came in, they took away most of [my mother's] land—she only had a small piece of land left. And sometimes we didn't even have enough food to eat. So, I just had to do whatever I could to help her and feed my children each day—day by day.

Like Thach, the financial difficulties led Thanh Truong to move her family as well, but far further than a childhood home. She felt the best way to take care of them was to send them to the United States and made the ultimate sacrifice in deciding that her husband and three young children would go without her. Truong would stay behind as "Plan B." Her family fled by boat and their attempt was successful. During this period, Truong cited her most salient roles as a mother and financial provider for her family. "Everything I do is for them—taking care of them," she says. But with the purpose behind her most important roles gone to the U.S., she was crushed:

> I was devastated, I was very sad. Most of the time I was thinking about my children—I think they were very lucky to go over [there], because in 1975, after Saigon fell, it was just really bad for kids. They didn't even have enough to eat, no clothing—they just had to go panhandling on the street…I just had to tell myself that, even though I missed them, I knew they were going to have a good future.

While most of the other women did not experience such a dramatic shift in the family structure as Truong, she and every other woman who was married or partnered did have a common thread throughout their lives: they all experienced the absence of their husbands or boyfriends in the aftermath of the war. The majority of the women saw their husbands, who fought for the South Vietnamese Army during the war, sent to "reeducation camp" for five to eight years. "Financially and also emotionally, everything that I had, everything that I dreamed of was gone down to ashes," recalls Ngung Thi Thach of the six year period her husband was in the camp. "I wasn't wealthy like other people—in order to send food to my husband," remembers Cau Van Pham, whose husband was kept seven years. "Sometimes it took me six months or a year to go visit him." The loss of their husbands coupled with the necessity of money, drove the women to despair. But it was also during this period and in their husbands' absences that they showed remarkable (and culturally uncharacteristic) independence.

### *New role: Head of the household*

As a result of their husbands being away, I found that all of the married women reported major shifts in roles. When asked about their roles after the war, they included not only "mother" and "wife," but now breadwinner—the latter of which took on increased saliency. "I had to be the head of the household—I had to take care of everyone," says Thuy Thi Nguyen, whose husband was in exile for three years after the war. "I stayed with my husband's family, but I had

to do more work." Luckily her in-laws took care of her four children while she had to "work and make money."

But moving in with in-laws or birth parents also added to the stress for some, because now they were expected to provide for, not only their children, but for their aging parents as well. For Hoa Thi Pham (and most of the other women) the role of head of the household was an additional role which caused considerable role strain and role conflict with her role as a mother. "My husband was not always at home, so I had to be not just the wife, but the husband taking care of everyone—just everything," Pham recalls with frustration still apparent in her voice. "It was very tough. I didn't really have any dreams at that time, I just worked real hard…for my family and my kids."

Most of the women I interviewed reported working "hard," but they also used this period as an opportunity to become entrepreneurial. Some, like Cau Van Pham, took advantage of business opportunities not previously available. After riding around on her bicycle collecting trash to recycle for income, a friend helped her get a job at a supermarket. There, she flourished and eventually struck a deal with her boss to open her own store within his market. "I worked there until the day we came to the U.S.," she says with pride.

Thuy Thi Nguyen, whose family-owned fabric shop could no longer operate due to new government regulations, started a number of businesses—a restaurant and, then, a pho noodle eatery—before eventually settling on a hair salon. But again, government regulations would prove cumbersome. "They would send a secretary—a girl—that would come everyday to my shop," Nguyen says. "She would sit there. She would watch to see how many haircuts I did, how many nails I did. When she would write that down, the government would get half and I would get half." To quash the government's take, Nguyen began importing European and American

hair products knowing she could charge any price. She also knew clients would prefer the imported, higher-priced products instead of the government-sanctioned Vietnamese products. She began to worry, though, that the government secretary would report her climbing profits (and their declining share). Shrewdly, she employed the most reliable of business loopholes: bribery.

> I asked her, "How much do they pay you?" She said, "$2000 a month." I said, "How about I pay you $4000, because I use a lot of the imported products and if you report it, I'll get in trouble. So everyday, if I do 30, you can say 15. That way, you can live a little and I can live a little." She agreed to that.

Nguyen's entrepreneurial attitude continued after her husband's return. In fact it was the connections and business savvy she developed in his absence that landed him a job as an accountant. After the war, returning husbands found many of their previous social connections gone. And their status as former soldiers for the South Vietnamese Army made it difficult to get high-paying or prestigious jobs. Regardless, only one woman reported a complete role reversal with her husband after he returned. Lieu Vo said her husband stayed home doing housework while she worked solely outside the home cleaning houses for others. He also took care of her personal needs. "He saw how I worked really, really hard," she says. "He would take care of me every little bit—from food to hot water so I could take a shower. He loves me a lot. He knows that I worked really hard so he took care of me in every way."

It is ironic Vietnam would see such role shifts around the same time the United States saw marches en masse with second wave feminism. Feminism began as a movement designed to herald the necessity of gender equality—it was designed to make men and women equal (Lorber, 2005). But when one takes a global perspective, opportunities for equality differ greatly. The

sentiment can be extended to feminism as well—for a large feminist step in one country might be viewed as small compared to the strides made in another. However, for the women making that step, it mostly feels like a stride. The strides made by the women I interviewed were quieter, smaller and bred not out of an intellectual movement but made in dire times. They were not meek, obedient wives as much of Western *and* Eastern-made history has stereotyped Asian women to be. As the new heads of their households facing increasing poverty, they challenged those preconceived notions with resiliency, decisiveness, shrewdness, and entrepreneurial spirit on a familial scale—a culmination of events I feel should be coined as survival feminism.

### *(Attempted) loss of identity*

While the roles of wife, mother and head of the household shifted, conflicted and jockeyed for saliency, an aspect of all three can be tied back to their identity as a citizen of Vietnam. It is that membership and its cultural traditions that influenced exactly *how* they would perform in their roles. And while their roles as wife, mother and head of the household were often strained, it was only their identity as a Vietnamese citizen who supported South Vietnam that was ever in jeopardy of truly being lost. When I began my research for this project, I expected to hear of the financial difficulties, the family struggles to survive and the role changes, but I was surprised when almost half the women reported feeling discriminated against by the new government.

I want to make clear my intentions with this section are not to draw favor for or against the government practices but rather the importance of how the women experienced and internalized what they reported as discriminatory practices. According to the women, the discrimination was not racially, financially or gender motivated, but based on their citizenship and support for the previous government. The discrimination they reported was not one of

sweeping laws, but more backroom interactions like interrogation, continuous surveillance and a selective denial of public services—all designed to quiet any remaining sense of loyalty and identity attached to South Vietnam.

The few women among those I interviewed that attempted to escape by boat, consequently reported the greatest discrimination. Thuy Thi Nguyen pooled her worth (which mostly consisted of gold at this point) with others to build a boat in the hopes of leaving Vietnam. But her boat was captured resulting in a lengthy stint in jail, where she remembers the daily interrogations and difficult living conditions: "They would sit me down, ask me 'Why do you want to escape Vietnam—why do you want to go on the boat?' I said, 'I hear these rumors that when you go to America, life is better.'" Her latter statement was not so much a statement of hope, but a statement of defiance. Her guts coupled with her absence from local government "meetings" while trying to escape kept her under constant surveillance once she was released:

> So, when I came back, this policeman asked, "How come I never see you? Did you just come back from being caught—did you try to escape by boat?" But very calmly, I would say, "Oh, I'm here all the time. I know your name. How come you don't know my name? You're not very good. You don't do a good job with the people—you don't get to know them that much." So, he kind of backed off.

The surveillance of government officials was omnipresent in these women's lives. But it mainly revolved around jobs and the acquisition of money. However, most of the women feel they were not trying to profit, but simply trying to survive. After her attempt to escape by boat, Thanh Truong remembers being watched constantly and, at one point, being jailed after officials spotted her in a jewelry shop. "The police, they controlled everything," she says. "I remember, one time, when I went to the gold store, just to buy some gold, they put me in jail and asked,

'Where did you get this money from? Where you get this money from to buy gold?'"

Government officials also watched and threatened persons selling goods, as Nguyen can attest:

> One time, they approached me and said that "You need to sign these papers. You shouldn't be selling all this stuff. If you don't, we're going to move you to the new economy." And what that new economy was—they would move people to the forests. They would have you live in this little house and you had to work on the farms. My youngest was only 3. I just couldn't do it. I couldn't bear to see my family in this new economy.

Not only did the women have do deal with discrimination first-hand, they indirectly, and most painfully, saw it directed at their family. Because the husbands were now deemed dishonorable due to their association with the South Vietnamese Army, they bore the brunt of the disassociation and social punishment. Cau Van Pham recounts her husband's run-in with local officials:

> When my husband first came back, they watched over him and what he did. They even said, "You can not do this job"—driving the [taxi]. You know, without that job, we'd have no money to feed our family. During the town hall meeting, he stood up and said, "If you don't let me do this job, then please feed my family"…that pushed everyone to stand up for their rights.

In addition to the punishment towards the husbands, the government also discriminated against their children. Because most Asian cultures judge individuals based on family honor, the children of former South Vietnamese soldiers also suffered. Many of the women reported that their children were not allowed to continue in school because they were from "non-communist"

families. For Hoa Thi Pham, it was the treatment of her children that most challenged her identity as a Vietnamese citizen:

> Three of my oldest kids, they could only go to 7th or 8th grade because the children of non-communist families could not go during the communist times. They only let children of communist soldiers go to school. Three of my kids couldn't go to school at all…I just felt that, here I am, a Vietnamese citizen, but they don't treat you like citizens. They kind of treated you like an outsider-person, even though you are Vietnamese.

Out of all the women who reported discrimination, Pham is the only one who openly questioned her identity as a Vietnamese citizen. She experienced a loss of identity in this regard, whereas with the other women, it was 'attempted' but not successful—at least with respect to their responses, which by no means completely solidifies its nonexistence.

## Before the War

For the women I interviewed, the period of 10 years or so after the war marked many endings—an ending of their former country, an ending of jobs, an ending of marital and motherly contentment, and an ending of their expected, traditional roles as Vietnamese women. Put simply, they experienced an ending of stability. That is not to say they did not endure hardship before the war. Chien Bui lost her father at age 6, while Choi Thi Nguyen lost her father at age 3. Both women reported added responsibility to their young lives. And many more spoke of consistent financial struggles. But in describing the first 20 or so years of their life, I rarely heard words such as "tough," "difficult," or "hard"—words they used constantly to define their life after the war. No previous hardships seemed to compare in scope and intensity to what they experienced after the fall of Saigon.

As a result, almost all of the women remembered their early lives—childhood and marital beginnings—fondly. “My childhood was good, even though we had financial problems…,” admits Bui. And Nguyen notes “When I was living with my family—it was a very good time.” Other women expressed sentiments similar to Bui and Nguyen using words like “loving” and “happy.” I fully expected them to spend as much time exploring the happier times before the war as they did with their post-war lives. The women, however, devoted the smallest portion of their life history narratives to their childhood and early marital experiences.

While they may not have given significant time to this period, I feel it is crucial to explore it in-depth. The period after the war challenged the expectations of what a Vietnamese family and a Vietnamese woman are supposed to project. And to better appreciate the strides these women were forced to make, it is important to examine just how deeply rooted those expectations are. As stated earlier, Vietnamese women are taught to adhere to what are commonly known as the “three submissions”: first, they must show obedience to the father; second, after marriage, they must show obedience to the husband; third, they must serve and care for their children (Chung & Bemak, 1998). In this chapter I will explore their early life influences and circumstances, which are filled with instances of role taking—crucial steps to them becoming “obedient” women in both their parents’ and their husbands’ households.

### *Obedience to the parents*

Among the women I interviewed, the war acted as a remarkable unifier of shared experiences. Their pasts, meanwhile, could not be more diverse. Some of the women were born in larger, more populated environments like Hanoi in the North and Saigon in the South. Their fathers were businessmen, firefighters and mechanics, while their mothers were housewives. Others were raised in smaller, more agricultural towns like Quảng Ngãi, which typically saw

entire families working on the farms. With respect to their childhoods, the women shared only one common thread. All of them, in some way, were taught to emulate the traditional "obedient" Vietnamese woman who is bound to the private sphere with the roles of mother and wife. However, that does not mean they all learned its importance the same way.

For many of the women, as they were playing records, hopscotch and jump-rope, they were also "playing" house—taking the roles of their parents and integrating them into their young minds. I discovered that all of the women, when describing their childhoods, exhibited an element of role taking. It is during this process that one learns to "take one's place in a complicated social process" (Stryker, 1980: 38). Some of the women learned about family roles by simply watching their parents interact. For others, it was a mixture of observation and blunt teachings—usually by the mother.

Cau Van Pham lived in Saigon during her childhood and was the firstborn of nine children. Her father was a firefighter while her mother was a housewife. Despite her mother having only achieved a 3rd or 4th grade education, Pham felt she was a very good teacher. "She always talked about people that take care of their family—not just family but also [secondary] relatives," she remembers. "That's why, when I grew up, I had that as a role model for what I was supposed to do. That's what my duty is." And about her father, she notes, "My dad didn't really teach me anything, he went to work most of the time. He didn't talk much—pretty much just my mom." Although her father did not teach her through spoken statements, he taught her by his absence that the private sphere should be reserved for the woman, while the man works outside the home.

Like Pham, Thuy Thi Nguyen also watched her father spend most of his time outside the home. He began working as an accountant for a car company, eventually working his way up the

business ladder to manager and, ultimately, being able to "save up his money and buy the whole company." Her mother worked in the home, caring for Nguyen and her nine siblings. Again, like Pham, Nguyen's mother was more direct with her teachings with regards to the role of a Vietnamese woman:

> My mom taught me about the three things: That when you're a young Vietnamese woman, you live at home; you have to listen to your parents. Whatever your parents say, you have to obey. And when you get married, you obey your husband—your husband's family. Later on, you obey your children…you have to be honest, you have to be faithful, you have to be nice…

But while Nguyen was taught the "three submissions," she was not bound to the home by chores. She recounts doing only "some" housework and happily having enough free time to spend with neighborhood friends.

The majority of the women I interviewed, though, learned about women's roles by actually doing the duties they would later be required to execute as wife and mother. Ngung Thi Thach, whose aunt and uncle raised her, remembers watching her uncle "not do much" in the house. Conversely, she saw her aunt show "respect" and "love" for the family by taking care of her husband, cooking and doing "all" the chores in the house. Both her aunt and her uncle, who was a teacher, put great emphasis on school, but Thach found her priority at home:

> My aunt, she did most of the housework—she was a very strong woman. She didn't push me. She said, "You've got to go to school, you go to school, it's important. I just need you to help around the house." I think that was my most important job, helping my Aunt with chores—cooking and cleaning.

Being able to lighten her Aunt's domestic load clearly brought Thach great pride and strengthened her identity in what she considered her most important role. All the women who were expected to do chores and housework cited the role of "caregiver" or "helper" as their most salient during this period—ahead of roles such as student. When asked what she felt her most important role was during her childhood, Choi Thi Nguyen responded simply, "I helped my mom with the chores around the house when I came home from school."

The importance of traditional roles is also shown in how one woman, Kim Thi Nguyen, felt great inadequacy as child. She put great emphasis on her role as "helper" to her mother, but notes, "I don't think I was much help to my family besides just watching my brother and sister and helping on the farm. I wish I could've done more, but I love my family." The importance of clearly stating her love for her family is paramount, because the "statements" of love typically shown by women and young girls are through housework. She was the only woman to report any loss of identity during childhood—a testament to the role's power.

For the few women who lost a parent during their childhood, the power and importance of the "helper" role was even greater. In many respects, they were not just filling the role of a helper, they had to step in and help fill the role of the absent parent. Hoa Thi Pham was affected the most from her absent parent because she lost her mother at age 13. By the time of her mother's death, she had already instilled in her teenage daughter the importance of the "three submissions." When her mother died, Pham knew what she had to do for her father and younger sister. "After my mom passed away, I had to replace her," she says bluntly. This included her mother's place working on their farm as well as household duties. "All my father knew was just to work on the farm," she notes. "He didn't know how to do housework." For Pham, the traditional role of the Vietnamese woman was cemented in her life by the death of her mother.

For the two women I interviewed that lost their fathers, the fact that their mother was the head of the household allowed for learning the traditional duties in an unconventional atmosphere, which also allowed for some deviation. Chien Bui, who lost her father at age 6, remembers being taught by her mother about the three submissions. “But whether I do it or not is up to me,” she says. “She didn’t really pressure me, because, teaching is one thing, doing it is another.” Similarly, Lieu Vo, who lost her father at age 5, remembers being taught “a little bit” about marriage and the duties of women. But Vo got most of her information from an advice book which she felt allowed her to combine modern and traditional values. Future marriages aside, the top concern for these two women, like Pham with the loss of her mother, was to shore up some of the burden a second parent would have carried. Like all of the other women interviewed, the role saliency of the women who lost a parent was placed with being a “helper”—albeit a more necessary one in a single-parent family. “My most important duty was to help the family—school came second,” says Vo. And Chien Bui adds, “Going to school was not that important. I helped my mom a lot. Whatever I could do to help her I was willing to do to support her.”

Remarkably, among all the women I interviewed, there was very little role conflict or role strain between the duties of a student and the necessities of a “helper”—their two most salient roles during their childhood. Even as children, the boundaries were clear and non-negotiable: for Vietnamese women, family comes first. For Bui, Pham and most of the women I interviewed, the steep learning curve it took to realize this would soon be put to valuable (and similar) use in creating their own families.

### *Obedience to the husbands and children*

Although all the women learned and absorbed the lessons concerning the expectations of husband and wife, it was Lieu Vo who best summed up the relationship. “I feel the role of a man is like a pole in the house, so he controls everything,” notes Vo, who married her army officer husband at just 20 years old. “The woman is the second person—kind of like the strings that tie around the pole.” Those “strings” include service to the family through housework, taking care of the emotional needs of the husband, and being the main caregiver of the children. Vo’s potent statement is one shared by almost all the women I interviewed. And because those “strings” were so deeply engrained into their minds as children, I expected the majority of them to be housewives during the beginning of their marriages. But, often, what they said and what they did told two different tales of just how the “role-taking” in their childhood finally played out as young, married women.

Out of the 10 women I interviewed, only one, Kim Thi Nguyen, became a housewife. Married at age 18, she stayed at home doing housework and raising what would eventually be seven kids while her husband worked outside the home as a policeman. It would not be until after the war that Nguyen, then in her late-40s, would work outside the home—showing her enterprising spirit by starting a cake-making business to bring in much-needed income. The aftermath of the war brought her into the public sphere, while most of the women I interviewed were there well before the war started. Those women cited their most important role as “mother,” while ever-present was not just a need to work outside the home, but a desire to. Still, that does not mean the balancing act was easy.

Thuy Thi Nguyen met her husband at a friend’s wedding in Saigon. She was a bridesmaid and he was a groomsman. “He kind of followed me and then a couple of years [later] we got

married—he stuck to me," she says, laughing. Eventually, she would "follow" him to his family's fabric business, where she worked as a salesperson. She says that she was able to work because she hired two women as "babysitters" to watch over her four children. But even with the babysitters, she acknowledges her hectic schedule, recounting a typical day from early motherhood:

> I woke up early in the morning, got the children ready—fed them—and was at the store by 9 o'clock. And then I came back in the afternoon around twelve—fed them, let them have their nap—and went back to work. And then be back at around 5 or 6—to make sure they had their bath and dinner. And then start again.

Rarely did Nguyen have time to stop and think about the future for herself or her family. "I didn't have any specific dreams, because I was just working a lot," she says. "But my hope and dreams were that my children would be good, obedient kids."

Hoa Thi Pham also worked outside the home while taking care of her family. She married her husband at age 20 and eventually had 10 children. In Vietnamese culture, it is customary for the couple to move in with the husband's parents, so Pham also felt the responsibility to take care of them as well. And as the eldest daughter in her birth family, she also tried to continue to look after her father and younger sister. Pham delicately balanced housework with outside work on the family farm, harvesting rice, sugar-cane and vegetables like yams and potatoes. "Sometimes it was a little bit tough, because it was just me and I had lots of work to do…," she says, with little more elaboration. Concerning one of her more time-consuming chores, Cau Van Pham says, "I remember washing this big bowl of laundry, because, the boys, they didn't wash clothes." Like Hoa Thi Pham, the reach of Cau Van Pham's housework arm was greatly extended. Her family household during the early days of her marriage consisted of her husband,

her five children, her husband's parents and also extended relatives—the "whole" family as she describes it. "Financially we were happy, because both me and my husband worked," she says. "But physically it was very tiring because, after I came home from work, I had to take care of my babies. Also I had to take care of my husband and my husband's family." But despite the physical exhaustion, none of the women reported any overwhelming difficulties—their roles at home and at work seemed not to suffer. As it turns out, the role-taking from their childhood—learning housework and how to be an "obedient" woman—taught them more than the actual duties required. During that "taking" process, they also learned balance. Like the relationship between the roles of student and "helper," the relationship between the roles of worker, mother and wife also experienced minimal strain or conflict.

The role of "mother," while viewed as an "obedient" position is also a coveted one. And when there is a failure to inhabit that role, it can cause serious ramifications for the woman's life. Choi Thi Nguyen married her husband at age 19 in her hometown of Cần Thơ before moving to Saigon. The pressure to create a family (and for Nguyen to inhabit the role of "mother") began to take its toll on the marriage. "For three years when I…we didn't have any kids—so my husband divorced me!" she says bluntly. Later in the interview, she would also admit to another cause of the marriage's demise: he had a mistress. But her first admission seems to indicate that the blame was placed squarely on her. The failure to produce children and move into that next role—the "obedient" mother—was a chief reason for the divorce. Whether the medical issue lies with her body or his, her statement exhibits how she felt the blame. She did not feel any lasting stigma from the marriage, however. "I didn't think it was wrong for me [to get a divorce], because he just, you know, he didn't come home early, he came home late," she says, alluding to the infidelity. "And all my friends said, 'You don't have to be like this, so you should come with us

and work.'" And work, she did, in an American club in Saigon where she eventually met her second husband—a United States soldier with whom she would have a son. Surprisingly, few women I interviewed had such direct connections with the United States while the war was mounting. And I suspect none of them could predict, at this stage in their young lives, that the war and the fall of Saigon would converge their paths to where all of them would some day be deeply connected to the United States.

## Remedy to War

Although most of the women did not have direct interactions with United States soldiers or other personnel, they did have a relationship to the mythology of the U.S.—"America" as they called it. To them, "America" was only an idea, a vision—their golden gateway to democratic freedoms as well as to financial stability. They envisioned all members of their families flourishing there, living together harmoniously, which is so important to Asian cultures. They would have ample time to nourish those dreams, because as the gut-wrenching images and news reels from the war remind us, more Vietnamese people were left behind than were taken on the planes, boats, and helicopters fleeing the soon to be overtaken country. The United States—the physical people, the machinery, the reality—was leaving. Only "America"—the idea, the dream, the hope—remained.

Because most of the women's husbands were sent to reeducation camps, their families were eligible to partake in the Humanitarian Operation (HO) program set up between the U.S. and Vietnam. Persons with Amerasian children as well as people who worked for the U.S. during the war would also become eligible. But all the women would have to wait decades before setting foot on U. S. soil. Even though the HO program existed, the legal and emotional process

to get to the U.S. would be excruciating, full of false starts, monetary roadblocks, and hard decisions.

For some of the women, the issue was a matter of money. "When we heard about the program, we wanted to go, but we didn't have enough money to do the paperwork," says Hoa Thi Pham. Similarly, Chien Bui, who was the only woman I interviewed who had children with a member of the U.S. Army, states, "We heard rumors that they had a program for Amerasians to come over here, but then we didn't have enough money to file the paperwork." For other women, the issue was a matter of maintaining family ties. When Cau Van Pham and her husband were set to leave in 1991, he got "really sick." Then, when they tried to leave again, in 1994, she was told the program would not allow for her children to go. For Choi Thi Nguyen, her elderly mother did not want her to go, so she stayed for her. "But in 1990, she said, 'You have a lot of children, it's better to go and I won't hold you back,'" remembers Nguyen. A few of the women were so desperate, they tried to leave through illegal means—three or four times, usually—which meant a life in and out of jail before finally initiating the legal process to arrive under the HO program. Despite how they all arrived in the U.S., the journey just to be able to leave was a long and difficult one. Kha Huynh, who worked for the U.S. Army for 10 years before their pullout, echoes many of the women's sentiments when she says, "I never gave up hope that one of these days I could go to America."

The difficult process of trying to leave would be just the first step in merging the real United States and the idealized "America." For these women, this period of coming to the United States was the most salient behind their experiences immediately after the war. In this chapter I will discuss the difficulty (and challenge to roles for some) in leaving Vietnam and the difficulty

in trying to assimilate in a new country. Also, I will give special attention to how the women's memories and thoughts of their war-torn years still affect them.

### *Hope and longing in the United States*

One of the clearest commonalities among all the women was their feeling of wanting to go to the United States. I got the sense that most of them equated the dream of "America" with happiness. But when the time came to leave Vietnam, with the reality of the move sinking in, their reactions became more varied. Not surprisingly, family—children, in particular—determined much of how the women viewed leaving Vietnam. And those reactions were almost inextricably tied to the women's ability to fulfill the role of "mother." The women who were allowed to bring their children with them to the U.S. reported more happiness with respect to the move. One woman, Ngung Thi Thach, reported feeling only a sense of happiness when discussing leaving Vietnam. She vividly recounts her first night in Atlanta:

> Our flight landed here at midnight and there was an [American] lady from war relief. She came and picked us up and she drove us to our house on Clairmont Road—where we lived [first]. I just felt like I was in heaven—that really happy, uplifting feeling. My childhood was very good, so was my husband's. But my kids, they didn't have the luxury to have what I had when I was young—to see the bed, with the mattress and the house that could have everything, everything that we could ever want. I just wanted them to have a good life, because they missed out on so much, so much.

In addition to the type of life she wanted to give her children, the sense of "heaven" for Thach was also related to the amount of governmental support she and her family received from the U.S. once here—a level of support the women never reported having in Vietnam.

For some of the women I interviewed, though, being in the United States showed itself to be a great example of the cherished sign of the Tao—the formidable yin and yang relationship. One side found feelings of happiness to be in the U.S., while the other found feelings of unhappiness at not having family, friends, and other community ties close by. Such was the case with Choi Thi Nguyen, who came to the U.S. in 1992 with her husband and four children:

> I was very happy. I knew I could be in a country where my children could be free and I had freedom. I was very happy when the people that sponsor us, through the world relief organization, they came and helped us do the paperwork, helped us get settled and later on they found jobs for us.

Like with Thach, the support of government relief workers took on special significance in feeling "happy," but Nguyen was also experiencing sadness:

> I was very sad and I missed my mom too. But I wanted to come over here for the future of my children. If my children would have stayed back in Vietnam, they would have had no future; they would have had no job. But over here they had a chance to get a job, to provide for their future family.

For all of the women with children, two prominent characteristics of the role of "mother" are to provide the most stability and to provide the most opportunity possible. Thach and Nguyen felt they were able to do this for their children by bringing them to the U.S., and this rationale supplied the most salient reason for any amount of reported happiness in leaving Vietnam.

But just like the women who took their children with them to the U.S. reported more happiness, the women who had to leave their children behind reported more (or only) sadness, even though the children were older and with families of their own. For the women I interviewed, being a mother is a role that never ends, regardless of the child's age—for a parent

continuously feels the urge to protect and provide. “I literally didn’t want to leave,” says Hoa Thi Pham, who could not take two of her older children with her. “But all my children said, ‘You should go, because you should be there to take care of dad, if he gets sick.’ Because my husband, he said if I’m not going, then he would go, because he could not stand living under the communist rule.” Remembering her first day in the U.S., Pham says, “I cried most of the day, because I missed my kids.” Like Pham, Kim Thi Nguyen’s children were older with families of their own, which made them ineligible to come with her to the U.S. But in an effort to maintain her role as mother, she left them with a means of support in the form of the cake-making business she started after the war ended. But still, that does not ease her mind:

> I do worry, because I don’t think they’re able to support themselves making the cakes. When we have money, we try to be thrifty; we try to not go shopping too much. We spend a little bit and send it back to Vietnam to help. I miss my family a lot; I miss all my grandkids, my children. I just miss my kids a lot. I don’t really miss the country that much.

Kim Thi Nguyen’s latter statement of not missing her country surprised me. I mistakenly thought that the women would exhibit a greater conflict of emotions regarding their home country and / or their citizenship in it, but few mentioned feelings of any kind with respect to leaving their home country. Because the women were mostly forthcoming about difficult personal details regarding their family or feelings about their country’s government before and after the war, their lack of noting how they felt leaving it begs the question: How important were their ties to their citizenship in Vietnam? Only one woman, Lieu Vo, felt leaving her country was hard:

> The sad part is that I had to leave my country and I feel very hurt by it. But when I came over here, the government—everyone—had been really nice and really good. They helped to ease the pain that I felt when I left my country. And yet, even though I still miss my country, I think that our lives are much better here.

The fact that her statement was not echoed among the rest of the women reinforces how, for most, their family roles and relations instead of their role as a Vietnamese citizen was paramount.

### *New country, new definitions*

Because the U.S. is a nation full of immigrants, much of its development in stature and lore is based on how they see it—both internally and externally. Beyond their feeling "pain," feeling "sad," or feeling "happy" with regards to being in the U.S., all the women I interviewed were forced to interact with their new country—now becoming more of a melding between the real United States and the idealized "America" in their minds. As stated earlier, I am employing adhesive adaptation assimilation theory, which maintains that assimilation is not always a "zero-sum" relationship. Instead, the theory insists that new cultural and social characteristics can coexist with previous traditions (Hurh & Kim, 1984). I hypothesized that the majority of the women would relate vast issues and difficulty regarding their assimilation into U.S. culture, but that was not so. Few of the women relayed difficulty in assimilation with regards to developing new community networks or adjusting one's identity. I believe this is partly due to the fact that the women I interviewed have lived in the United States for a number of years—many for decades. In retrospect, I should have probed more to determine if their current contentment with U. S. culture clouded any earlier difficulty they might have had with the assimilation process. Surprisingly, only one woman, Thanh Truong, reported an interaction—additive, challenging or

otherwise—between the culture of her new home and the Vietnamese culture she was comfortable with.

When Truong arrived in the U.S. in 1992, her daughter rented her an apartment, alone, in downtown Atlanta. Living with parents—no matter one's age—is commonplace in Vietnamese culture, but is frowned upon in the United States as a sign of childish dependence. "She's been here longer and she has kind of adapted to American culture," Truong says of her daughter who came to the U.S. with her father shortly after the fall of Saigon. "She said 'I can't be near you, I can't stay with you.'" Because of her daughter's assimilation, Truong was forced to assimilate—to become more independent. In Truong's case, the traditions of the U.S. were not adding to Vietnamese familial traditions, but overtaking them—that is until her two sons got wind of their mother's predicament. Both sons (one of which was living in South Carolina at the time) decided to move in with their mother. Still, Truong admits that becoming accustomed to U.S. culture (work culture, in particular) was hard:

> Life here was very strange to me. And I was old too, so it was kind of hard to adapt. But after two months, I started working at a hotel in midtown…When I first started working, I wasn't used to it. I'd just work and cry—cry a lot. And my [ex] husband's family said, "Why don't you just quit the job and go to South Carolina?" Even though I'm old, I wanted something to do to just pass the time. I had to find something to do, because the first couple of months when I was here, I would just sit and stare. It was snowing in February, so it was really, really sad.

Truong's feelings were rare as none of the other women relayed specific difficulties with regards to assimilation. However, this does not mean those issues have not existed. It could be that since many of the women have been living here for a few years that any issues at the beginning of their

tenure have been trivialized with the passage of time and increasing comfort with the surrounding culture.

Although the majority of the women did not report assimilation issues, almost all of them relayed some surprise in their first encounters with the real United States as opposed to the idealized "America." Again, I expected to hear more difficulties, but only one woman spoke to this—reporting that having to learn English again surprised her. For most of the women I interviewed, they spoke of positive aspects of the country with which they were taken aback. Kha Huynh simply stated "freedom," while Kim Thi Nguyen cited a more specific realization: "the government, because they help support us." Thanh Truong cited more practical issues. "The houses are very clean, the streets are orderly," she says. "…in the winter time there is heat, and in the summer time we have AC."

Much of their surprise, however, was reserved for one thing: jobs. Work and jobs yielded the most fodder among the majority of women with respect to their first years in the U.S. "What surprised me the most are the jobs here, because when I work, I can make money—I can buy anything I want," says Chien Bui. "And the work here is not that hard compared to the work in Vietnam…" Initially, Bui stayed at home, cooking and cleaning while her two daughters worked. But she says she "got bored" and began looking for a job. Eventually she found work at a basket company and later a blinds company. Most of the women were used to working either in outdoor markets or farms, which made the transition to working inside wholly different. "Life here is very comfortable, the food is way better and we can buy anything we want," notes Hoa Thi Pham, who worked in a paint store for five years. "And the jobs, we don't have to go outside…" Also, they were surprised with the stability of the jobs which trickle down to stability in both money and food. "Here you work and you can have food to eat, but in Vietnam you work a lot,

but you don't have food to eat…," notes Ngung Thi Thach, who, along with her husband, is financially supported by her two older sons.

Similar to the women's actions due to the change in culture after the Vietnam War, many of the women again exhibited survival feminism—becoming more independent in the face of substantial cultural changes by filling their lives with work opportunities in order to survive and thrive. Cau Van Pham, who came to the U.S. in 2006 with her husband, her daughter and her daughter's two children, works at the airport sorting drinks and organizing the flight attendants' food carts. Pham was the only woman to give prominence to her work over her familial duties during her current period living in the U.S. "I think working is the most important duty for me, not because I stand eight hours on my feet, but because it also gives me some exercise," she says. "It's good for older people to be active." For Choi Thi Nguyen, who came to the U.S. in 1992, the responsibility fell to her to support the family. She reports that her husband had greater difficulty in maintaining and finding a job:

> My husband first worked for a Vietnamese barber shop but then they don't pay well. He then went over to an American barber shop. He worked there for three years. Then after that, he stayed home and fixed cars…It's very hard for him because he doesn't know English.

Although she cites the language barrier, previous literature suggests that men also have less marketability than women, who find jobs easier in service industries. Unlike her husband, Nguyen maintained her first job as a housekeeper for 10 years before moving to a laundry service, where she worked for five years.

For most of the women, work and jobs did not just serve the purpose of providing financial stability, they provided the most important component of their assimilation into the

United States. Because of their jobs, many learned how to interact with customers, take public transportation, and learn English. It was also through jobs that the idealized "America" fully merged with the real United States. For some, the dreams and aggrandizing rang true with few negative aspects—at least compared to their time in Vietnam. But for most, a more balanced, or realistic, view slowly emerged. "I do not think America is heaven," urges Chien Bui, who best explains many of the women's current vision of the U.S. "You come here and you can have everything—you have to work for it."

### *Lingering memories*

When the women try to sum up their lives, they often use words like "hard" and "difficult" to describe their experiences after the war while they describe their time in the U.S. as "more comfortable" or "happy." Ideally, those opposing assertions and time periods would not conflict, but too often the women reported lingering memories from their difficult past. As discussed earlier, Asian culture rarely separates mental and physical health, instead opting for a more holistic view where both are interconnected in a complex relationship (Chin, 1998). Just over half the women I interviewed specifically reported some form of mental health issue that took place during their life course. Conversely, very few reported physical health issues in tandem. Most of the women were straightforward in their separation of mental and physical health, perhaps caused by time spent acclimating to Western culture's penchant for analytic separation. For the purposes of this discussion I will focus both on any mental health issues reported as well as the difficult situations and emotions that continually plague these women.

For some, like Thuy Thi Nguyen, the greater mental health issue occurred as the hardship was taking place. Nguyen reported health concerns during her repeated attempts to flee Vietnam by boat with her four children in tow. "I felt really sad sometimes, I got depressed, anxious," she

remembers. Similarly, Thanh Truong reported mental distress soon after the fall of Saigon. As briefly stated earlier, she saw an opportunity for her husband and her then-young children to leave for the U.S. She remained in Vietnam as "Plan B." During this period she was coping with the inability to raise and care for her children, resulting in a loss of identity in the role of mother. "Just to pass time, to erase, ease the bad memories, I would go hang out with friends…," she recalls. But where Nguyen and Truong differ is that Truong reported lasting mental distress well after leaving Vietnam. After trying to leave "four or five times," she would finally arrive in the U. S. in 1992, losing much of her children's childhood. So pivotal is this loss to her history, she begins her life narrative there:

> When I came over here, my children were already grown. I didn't have a chance to take care of my children…my son and daughter already graduated from college and my youngest one already started his two years at Georgia Tech. I'm very, very sad that I didn't have the chance to take care of my babies when they were young.

With tears continually welling up as she speaks about the situation, it clearly still affects her. She sacrificed a role, which she would later describe as her most important. When asked if she had any regrets in her long life, at first she said "No." But then she immediately added, "It's a sad thing that I wasn't able to be close to my children during that time. I remember, one time, my son wrote a letter home. He said, "I don't know what it feels like to have a mom." Such words would devastate any mother, regardless of historical or geographical placement. However, Truong was rare in that she reported feeling mental distress both soon after the war and during her time in the U.S.

The majority of the women who relayed any mental distress reported experiencing it solely after they came to the United States. Kim Thi Nguyen is still haunted not by the Vietnam

War, but by the First Indochina War, which was fought between France and Vietnam from 1946 to 1954—during her early teen years. During that time, she and her family would constantly have to be ready with a bag of clothes and shoes nearby in case of attack.

> Concerning my mental health, I don't think it affected me that much, but I still remember running away when the bombs hit. Sometimes I just remember and it's very scary. But I had my health back then and I was able to push it to the past. Time has helped a little bit, but sometimes I still think about it—very scary time, still today.

Although she somewhat downplays the war's current impact, it is an issue and time in her life she still wrestles with. When asked if she has any regrets in life, Nguyen does not hesitate in mentioning her childhood circumstances. "If I was to go back in my life, I wish I wasn't born during war time," she says. "Or I wish I was [born in the U.S.]. I would have education—everything that I need."

Like Kim Thi Nguyen, Cau Van Pham and Hoa Thi Pham also reported mental distress after coming to the U.S., but they utilized medical services for treatment—the only women to do so. "I did seek help," admits Cau Van Pham, who came to the U.S. in 2006. "I went to the doctor. He gave me some medication for the hypertension. At night, I take those medications, and then I'm ok. Some nights, I still worry a little bit, but overall, I'm ok." In coming to the U.S., she left behind extended relatives, but more importantly, four of her five children. Faced with not having all her children with her in the U.S., Hoa Thi Pham's diagnosis was more severe. Like many Asian women cited in previous research, her mental health issues were initially masked with physical symptoms:

> I did have anxiety and I got sick—stomach ache, like heart burn, a lot of the time. But we went to the doctor and the doctor couldn't find anything. We went to a specialist

> downtown to do a colonoscopy, but they couldn't find anything wrong either. Later on, a family doctor asked, "When you came over here, did your children come with you?" We said "No." That's how he figured out that I was depressed and really worried.

Hoa Thi Pham's depression is only one example of perhaps the biggest disparity between the previously idealized, cure-all "America" and the real United States. The latter could only remedy the financial chaos of their time in Vietnam, leaving the emotional chaos to be dealt with by time and, sometimes, medication. While they may characterize their lives in the U.S. as "much, much better" or more "happy," the remnants of their life in Vietnam, marred by war and poverty, still loom large—as if those experiences happened yesterday. For many of the women, it still feels that way.

# CHAPTER VI

# DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

## Discussion

The experiences of the 10 Vietnamese women I interviewed, as discussed in earlier chapters, present a highly personal exploration of a tumultuous conflict played out on both the world stage and in the women's individual lives. They relayed the difficulties of the Vietnam War's aftermath by discussing the absence of their husbands (who were in "reeducation" camps), the resulting financial and familial instability that forced most of the women to become heads of their household, and the pressures of the North Vietnamese government to eradicate any person's identity as a South Vietnamese citizen. Adding even more weight to the importance of such role and life shifts, the women then contrasted their after-the-war lives with happier times growing up. It was during this period, before the war, where they learned that women were to be obedient to husbands and children, with the roles of mother and wife taking precedence—this would be greatly challenged after the war. Lastly, they told of their migration to the United States, a bittersweet transition filled with hope of financial stability and the sadness of absent family. For some, this period also presented challenges in coping with the tragic memories of their past.

Although the findings in this research do not generate definitive conclusions about the population of Vietnamese refugee women as a whole, the data does provide some insights and alternatives to previously conducted research on the subject. Previous research, such as that discussed in the literature review, tended to characterize the women solely as victims without clout or power. And some research argued that the refugees adequately reintegrated their past with the present and future, but that the past never achieved the same amount of temporal weight. In the following sections, I will extend these assertions as well as offer some different

perspectives. I will argue that the women do not view themselves as victims nor did they exhibit that characterization with their actions. And I will also argue that they did not relegate their past behind the present and future, but rather the opposite.

### *Victims or feminists?*

Treatment of mental health issues among refugee women, during every stage of the refugee process, hinges largely on how the women project and characterize their lives—what roles they hold dear and which they espouse. And mental health treatment is often determined by what roles sociologists, psychologists, governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) project onto a given population. The individuals are experts in their own lives, while the researchers and officials are experts in culture and response tactics. One area of agreement between the individuals and officials is that Vietnamese women do typically function as subordinates to men, whereby the women must consistently comply with the wishes and rules of first, the father, and, after marriage, the husband (Chung & Bemak, 1998; Fox, 1991; Martin, 1994). The most salient roles for women as subordinates are that of mother and wife. Their chief responsibilities are to take care of the husband and children by taking care of the daily duties in the private sphere—cooking, cleaning and childcare within the home.

It should be noted again that previous research on Vietnamese women is limited, but most of what is available solely focuses on characterizing the women as subordinates usually in the roles of mother and wife (Chung & Bemak, 1998; Fox, 1991). In her study of Vietnamese refugee family dynamics, Patricia Fox notes, “We know that by cultural tradition, Vietnamese women are dominated by male authority…” (1991: 45). And expanding on that point, Chung and Bemak say, “What is noticeably absent is anything about education, employment, social relationships, or personal development, underscoring the importance of family and prescribed

roles as mother and daughter" (1998: 375). Thus, the women are typically depicted *only* as victims. Using the term victim, I do not mean that the women are subjected to oppression by some greater power, but rather that they are shown as having little or no individual agency or resourcefulness concerning their own or their families' lives. Both studies imply that where there is subordination (with the most important roles being that of mother and wife) there is also no room for *any* independence or exhibition of feminist principles.

All the Vietnamese refugee women in my study (save one who never married or had children) *did* show that their most important roles where that of mother and wife. They showed the importance given to these roles in two ways. First, most of the women explicitly stated that the roles of mother and wife were the most salient with respect to their role hierarchy. This placement held with the same level of importance throughout the various stages of their lives. Second, beyond their actual statements of importance, they exhibited the roles' heavy weight by consistently discussing certain actions associated with being a wife or mother. They spoke of the desire to take care of an elderly parent, the enjoyment in cooking for a daughter's friends, or the wanting to ease the daily burdens of a hard-working husband.

Also in agreement with the previous research, most of the women I interviewed gave evidence of subordination with respect to male family members. As children, the women were taught in a variety of ways—some by actual discussions about a woman's place, others by emulating the roles of their parents—that women were to adhere to the wishes of men, despite the women's individual desires or wants. Speaking of her relationship with her husband, another woman said she did "whatever he said" in order to keep him from leaving her. And still another woman relayed how it is her "job" to make her husband happy. One woman spoke to this when discussing how her husband divorced her because she did not have kids soon enough. In these

relationships, the women were taught to allow the man to "control everything," as one woman described it.

However, my findings diverge from the strict binary assertion of having only subordination or only independence. If compared to the women of the United States or other Western nations, the women in Vietnam did have less independence and did not exemplify feminist principles. But put into the context of Vietnamese culture, my research suggests the women experienced both subordination *and* many varying levels of independence. The women I interviewed did not entertain ideas of becoming a company CEO or president, but almost all the women did seek purpose and some financial independence through work outside the home as secretaries, policewomen or teachers. "I always had two dreams—whether to become a teacher or to become a nurse," notes Cau Van Pham. "I couldn't become a nurse so I wanted to become a teacher." After she married her husband, Pham did not quiet her dream to stay home to take care of her family. She became a teacher in a local private school, teaching spelling and writing. Pham is not an outlier or an exception in this study as the majority of the women took great pride in maintaining jobs outside the home during all the various stages of their life.

After the war and in the absence of their husbands, the women took what independence they did have and expounded on it considerably. As discussed in earlier chapters, the women exhibited remarkable entrepreneurial spirit and independence when faced with the possibility of their family suffering. The women's roles were no longer relegated to wife and mother, but also included head of the household and businesswoman, complete with all of the financial burdens and responsibilities in addition to taking care of the home. Here, the absence of their husbands meant an absence of any subordination, which allowed them to become survival feminists. I acknowledge that I am placing a Western conception of feminism onto them and that they, most

likely, would not characterize themselves as feminists. But they would not characterize themselves as victims, either. However, I feel that by calling them survival feminists gives a more appropriate level of importance and achievement to their actions. They showed great strength, independence and resiliency when faced with the aftermath of war. And this tenure was not over as soon as their husbands returned. Most remarkably, they carried their survival feminist spirit with them once they came to the United States.

In order for these women to receive effective mental health care within the United States or other Western nations, we must leave such binary characterization as victims *or* feminists, subordinate *or* independent, behind. Western thought process typically hinges on either / or assumptions, while Eastern thought incorporates a both / and perspective (Nisbett, 2003). Researchers, responding governments and NGOs should better incorporate this latter perspective that allows the women's lives more range and depth; for the women are taught to be subordinate, but then showcase great independence as well. Compared to Western culture, they are victims of male dominance in their society, yet they still find ways (different from a more blatant Western process) to be feminists.

### ***Past prominence or present dominance?***

While the importance of the women's roles throughout their life is central to how they relay their experiences, the actual process of memory retrieval and the temporal integration of the different life stages is also significant. As noted earlier, temporal integration refers to claiming the past and reconnecting it to the present and future (Beiser & Wickrama, 2004). Because the women I interviewed are older, already with a considerable amount of years behind them, I did not simply look at whether or not they integrated the past. More specifically, I looked at *how* they have integrated their past experiences—specifically with the aftermath of the

Vietnam War—in with their present and future. Was the past focused on more than the present and future? And when they talked of the past as a whole, did the war dominate the discussion or did they bypass it, choosing to focus more on their childhood or early marriage years? Unfortunately, most research concerning refugees skips these important questions about memory retrieval and integration, instead focusing on possible consequences such as already manifested mental health disorders (Abe et al., 1994; Chin, 1998; Chun et al., 1998; Marsella et al., 1994). Also, researchers tend to give greater attention to refugees during the immediate aftermath of war rather than to those who have lived years or decades in their adopted home after war's end (Abe et al., 1994; Chin, 1998; Chun et al., 1998; Marsella et al., 1994).

Conventional wisdom would suggest that refugees would pack away their bad experiences (such as war and the resulting familial and financial instability) from the past into the far corners of the mind and focus more on the stability of their present lives in the United States or their hopes for the future. The small amount of research concerning temporal integration that does exist concurs with this line of thought. However, as discussed earlier, Beiser and Wickrama's study of Asian refugees living in Canada suggest that the longer a refugee remains in an adopted Western home, the more likely they are to reintegrate their past (including their difficult experiences as a refugee) with their present and future. But Beiser and Wickrama also maintain that the longer a refugee remains in their adopted home, that the salience of the past diminishes when compared to the present and future. They do note that "younger refugees were more likely…to avoid nostalgia than their older counterparts," however, the salience attributed to the past by the "older counterparts" was still minimal (2004: 904).

Before I began interviewing the 10 Vietnamese women for my research, I expected similar findings as Beiser and Wickrama. I hypothesized that the women would talk about the

past (having integrated it with the present and future), but would not attribute as much salience to it when compared to the present and future. My findings agree with Beiser and Wickrama in that the women did integrate their past with the present and future. However, my findings greatly differed in that their past was the *most* salient of the time periods. Specifically, it was their past experiences in the immediate aftermath of the war which were given the greatest amount of attention. All the women gave prominence to this period in various ways. The majority devoted the bulk of their life history narrative to it. Most surprising, four women actually began their life history with the aftermath of the war. As an example, before giving any context to her life, Thuy Thi Nguyen begins her life history with this sobering depiction:

> I'm going to start in 1975. Before 1975—from 1954 to 1975—my family, my husband and I, we were in the fabric business. We shipped and sold fabric. But after 1975, we lost the business. The communists, they wouldn't let any stores open. They took over our business—everything, they took away. They only left us with a small house. What we had to do was spread a sheet of fabric in front of our house. And we'd go to the market and we'd buy jeans and t-shirts to sell right in front of the street. [It was] kind of like a black market because the communists would not let any store—anybody—do any business. We had to do that in order to financially support our family and to feed our children.

Similarly, Chien Bui chooses to start her life narrative by saying, "When I was living in Vietnam during 1975, I had two children. Both my kids are Amerasion—one was five and one was seven. And during that time—1975—it was really hard to live and to work." Bui would later say she "doesn't want to dwell on the past, because it's too hard to talk about." For Nguyen, Bui and the other two women who began their lives as the war ended in 1975 as well as the majority of the

women who gave the most attention to this period of their life, the importance was how the events of the historical date affected them personally and often tragically. By awarding so much prominence to this period they simultaneously marked any history that took place before it as less important—what Eviatar Zerubavel (1997) termed as "pre-history." The women I interviewed did not suppress these experiences or focus on them lightly, but rather wrapped and arranged the rest of their lives according to it.

One possible explanation for such prominence given to these difficult experiences is that the women I interviewed were older—elderly persons tend to have a penchant for nostalgia. Although Beiser and Wickrama (2004) allude to this, they ultimately do not give it much weight. However, my findings indicate the possibility of emphasizing the past—particularly the war experiences—to be a much more common practice among older refugee women. More research needs to be conducted to determine whether this temporal structure holds with other refugee women populations. If so, it could have vast implications with regards to treatment and outreach to these groups. Just how refugee women integrate their memories into their lives and what level of prominence they give certain experiences is important with regards to the treatment and programs administered by researchers, governments and NGOs. As noted earlier, governments and responding NGOs unfortunately focus much of their attention on helping refugees settle in the immediate aftermath of war or natural disaster, offering food and housing as well as mental health services. But older refugees who have lived in their host country for years or decades—such as the women I interviewed—may have begun dwelling and attributing greater prominence to these difficult experiences as they have aged. With age comes their assessment of the past, drudging up traumatic memories which unfortunately have the possibility of causing mental

distress. Although they downplayed the initial level of nostalgia among participants in their study, Beiser and Wickrama do rightly note:

> Health care providers should, however, be vigilant about the possibility that years, or even decades after refugees have resettled and apparently effected a satisfactory adjustment, mental health risk based on past experience may resurface, and that resurfacing may be tied to significant adult developmental periods (2004: 908).

Because these women are viewed as settled in their host country, they are perceived to be mentally healthy. But too often we forget our older populations (refugee or otherwise) and they may just be the ones most at risk and most in need of mental health help.

## Conclusion

At the beginning of my fifth interview—halfway through the gathering of my data for this project—66 year-old Lieu Vo sat next to me in a sterile conference room at CPACS. Dressed in black slacks and a t-shirt with the logo of clothing store Old Navy emblazoned across the chest (evidence of her Western acculturation), she waited intently to begin her story. She took a risk by meeting me as her husband is very controlling and would no doubt bar her from speaking if he knew the level of honesty and detail she would convey. But turning her head—her loose pony-tail of long black hair moving only slightly—she began speaking in Vietnamese not to the translator, but directly to me as if I could understand her. Her dark eyes were intense as she spoke her first words, “I am a Vietnamese woman—a refugee.” Her minimalist declaration struck me because in those first few words of recounting her life, her own labels for herself projected so much: subordination, strength, resilience and hardship. These characteristics—encapsulated by Vo’s statement—came to represent all 10 of the women I interviewed.

Unfortunately, in popular media and even in scientific analyses, refugees are often portrayed as one-dimensional human beings—swarms shown with great drama, but with little substance. This study, though, paints them as more than just persons who have had to flee their homes. Each woman who shared her life with me was shown to have identities and roles within families and communities that uniquely thread together her fabric of life. It was the goal of my exploration to not only highlight refugee process, but, through social psychology, to make its concepts as well as the women's lives more accessible. By using this paradigm intertwined with the focus of one member of the refugee family—the woman—a more comprehensive light was shed.

To best honor these women, I used role theory (with a feminist lens) as well as adhesive adaptation assimilation theory to explore the various dimensions of their lives. I found that the greatest amount of role change and role conflict occurred in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. With the fall of Saigon in 1975, the women experienced great familial and financial instability, forcing them to add the role of head of the household to their lives in the absence of their husbands. And I argued that their entrepreneurial spirit and shrewd resiliency during this period marks them as survival feminists—especially given that that the women were raised to be obedient (and subordinate) to their fathers, husbands and children. Furthermore, I explored just how rooted those traditional roles as obedient daughter, wife and mother are by discussing the women's childhood and early marriage experiences before the war. Lastly, I discussed their struggle in leaving Vietnam and the resulting assimilation process in the United States.

But although they now have thriving lives in the U.S., their struggles are not wiped away like their former surroundings. Instead, their struggles are transferred to their new home where they continue to battle their past. Most surprising, I found that the women structured their life

histories by awarding the period after the war with the most prominence. Most of the women spent the majority of their life history discussing their past difficulties, supporting their families during that unforgiving time. Such instances of reminiscing are not uncommon for the elderly, but it points to a disturbing potentiality. When the nostalgia contains such life upheaval as war, there is a risk of mental distress even though they may have spent years or decades integrating this period into their lives.

This study's main achievement is that it highlights an often forgotten age group that may need just as much help as someone first arriving to the U.S. from whatever upheaval they are escaping. The study also contributes a new voice to social psychology studies because I have successfully applied its concepts to refugees—an area vastly underserved within this specific school of sociology. And it is important to note that by examining refugee women in this way, I have effectively utilized a unique trifecta that includes feminism, role theory and refugee process. However, being a small independent research project, I am aware that I can not generalize these findings to broader populations of refugees. But my research in this area is by no means finished with this one project. Eventually, larger studies can be done to delve even further—perhaps with different age groups and different cultures. Hopefully, such findings can be applied to studying refugees as an entire group while taking away none of the individuality of the many circumstances and cultures from which they hail.

"Don't push too much—just see where life takes you."

Kim Thi Nguyen
75 year-old Vietnamese refugee woman

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