Emergent Issues in Ethnic Youth Studies
A Historical and Ethnographic Study of the Vietnamese-Irish Experience

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Abstract

This article traces the history of the Vietnamese-Irish minority ethnic community from their initial resettlement to the present day. Attention is paid to the structural dimensions of resettlement and the pattern of integration that emerged. The central focus is the second and third-generation Vietnamese-Irish. Through an analysis of schooling, family, identity and work/home life I suggest what life is like for minority young people in this context. However, the article aims beyond the specifics of the case study. The broader question is: what can we learn about ethnic minority youth issues in Ireland today through a close, longitudinal and ethnographic exploration of the Vietnamese-Irish example?

Keywords

Vietnamese-Irish; refugees; minority; ethnicity; youth.

Framing the Issues

Data from *Census 2006* present an image of Ireland transformed by immigration. The number of non-Irish nationals living in Ireland stands at close to 420,000 persons, or ten per cent of the population. Central Statistics Office (CSO) predictions suggest that, if present trends continue, by 2030 Ireland will have an 18 per cent foreign-born population – greater than that of the USA or Germany. While the majority of those in Ireland who were born in another country are from the EU, there are now significant numbers from Asia (55,628) and Africa (42,764). The large increase in migration from the recently acceded states is also notable, with Poland alone accounting for 63, 090 individuals. There is, of course, great diversity within these migration flows, from North American high-tech workers to Eastern European migrants to the agricultural labour sector, and from elite sojourners to refugees and asylum seekers. Moreover, *Census 2006* only provides a snapshot of a fast changing and complex migration situation – a picture distorted by enumeration difficulties.[1]

Almost every aspect of Irish society is facing the challenges presented by immigrant incorporation, and many are looking to the future to anticipate the ways in which the economy, social institutions and cultural life will respond to and be reshaped by new versions of Irishness. Significant work has already begun on understanding the youth studies dimensions of the immigrant experience. This was the topic of the 2007 North

South Intercultural Forum, where it was noted that by 2030 up to five per cent of the Irish population may lay claim to membership of a 'minority ethnic group'. Research in the emergent area of ethnic youth studies has largely been framed through either policy work or research on diversity in educational contexts (see Watt and McGaughey, 2006; Lodge and Lynch, 2004). While a number of exemplary studies have been carried out (see for example Devine and Kelly, 2006; see also the important work of Phillips, 2006 on separated children seeking asylum), it is important to note that the 'agency' of immigrant youth is still absent from much of the research literature. Breda Grey has described this as an ironic lack of 'attention in policy documents and integration programmes to how migrants themselves adapt' (2006: 1).

While one may argue that greater attention must be paid to the lives of immigrants in research on incorporation, one must also be mindful of the fact that when one attempts to take a picture of life it may often be a partial one, limited in scope and limited by time – a snapshot. Research on ethnicity in Ireland must also take account of the historical and contemporary dimensions of diversity, and see identity itself as always emergent, changing and fluid. This in turn demands closer attention to minority ethnic youth, for it is in this field of study – in terms of how the identities of young people intersect with and are produced by a variety of social institutions – that the contours of a new Ireland will be shaped.

This article discusses contemporary ethnic youth identity through a historical and ethnographic study of an older ethnic minority, the Vietnamese-Irish. Herein I trace the cultural history of the reception, resettlement and 'integration' of a small number of refugees from Vietnam from the 1970s to the present day. This ethnic population has an established second generation and a growing third generation. The ethnographic account of their stories, world views and hopes for the future may well, as more and more research is carried out, compare or contrast with the experiences of newer immigrant groups.[2]

Conditions for the Creation of Minority Life

In 1978 harrowing stories of the exodus from Vietnam of hundreds of thousands of so-called 'Boat People' were regularly featured in the international media. In May of 1979 the Irish Government, in part owing to their visibility as president of the (then) EEC, offered 100 resettlement places. The opposition spokesperson on Foreign Affairs, Jim O'Keefe of the Fine Gael party, captured a widely held view that the offer was parsimonious when he noted, 'the government would receive the least number of refugees which would enable them to save face abroad' (*Irish Times*, 8 August 1979: 4). From this point until the arrival of the first refugees in Dublin Airport in early August of 1979 the national newspapers became increasingly obsessed with this issue. Members of the public frequently asked questions like, 'did anyone ever stop to think who these people are?' and suggested that the charitable-minded '… look closer to home and cease pontificating about the need and indeed the nobility of helping the Vietnamese' (*Irish Times* 18 July 1979: 10, and 26 July 1979: 11).

The State also came under pressure from the Catholic Church in the form of Bishop Eamonn Casey. He denounced the 'meagre response' and demanded an increase in resettlement places in order to keep pace with the UK – an intervention described by one journalist as 'an Episcopal hand across the puss' for the Government

(*Irish Times*, 4 August 1979: 3). Despite this, when 212 Vietnamese refugees finally did arrive little more than an *ad hoc* resettlement process greeted them. Describing his arrival to *Magill* magazine's Chris McIvor, Quang Van Vu remembered that:

> … none of us knew very much about where we were going or even exactly where it was. When we arrived in Dublin Airport we thought it was only a stopping off point. We did not believe that a national airport of a country could be so small (McIvor, 1987: 44; see also RTE, 1979).

The reception phase of the resettlement process fell under the remit of the Irish Red Cross (IRC) and they initially housed the refugees in a private wing of a Dublin Hospital and in a Christian Brothers' school. This phase was not without problems, and the reports of the IRC that were circulated to other non-government organisations at the time are suggestive of an attempt to build an efficient administration of the situation without consultation with those being administered – according to one memo that detailed attempts by the refugees to organise themselves, 'because we had got to know them and their devious methods, control was maintained' (Irish Red Cross, n.d.: 4).

The few hundred refugees who arrived in Ireland represented identities as diverse as ethnic Vietnamese, Thai, Sino-Vietnamese, Hmong and Cao Dai, not to mention differences in class and religion. Reducing refugees to flat categories of identity is, therefore, always problematic and tends to be underwritten by what Lissa Malkki (1995) has termed the national order of things. In other words, one must be careful of assigning the homogenising label of 'community' onto a population such as the Vietnamese. In the same way, to talk today of a Chinese, Polish or Nigerian community in Ireland is to miss the heterogeneity that such labels cover over. This is important for youth studies also: for young Vietnamese-Irish people it is family background and interactions with society that are of the greatest importance, as we shall see.

Following their initial reception the refugees were dispersed to 'strong provincial areas'. In an unpublished postgraduate thesis completed in 1990, Frieda McGovern quotes a governmental working party that argued it was 'desirable to try to ensure that refugee families did not congregate in one small area in such a way as to diminish the incentive for them to integrate quickly and fully into the community' (1990: 170).[3] While many Vietnamese-Irish people look back on their early years in Ireland with great fondness, dispersal did prove to be traumatic for many, particularly the younger generation. A Vietnamese-Irish man in his thirties spoke to me at length about his experiences 'down the country' in the 1980s. 'When I was a child', he noted,

> *there were no other Asian children in the school and I thought I was the only one in the country! I spoke no English and would sit in class with the teacher saying things I couldn't understand. When I got homework, I had to take out the dictionary to understand the questions.*

He further recalled that 'every break, when the kids went out to the playground they would all gather around me, hundreds, in a circle and eat their lunch watching me— I was an alien to them!' These memories would certainly find a resonance with the experiences of others who participated in this research project. Indeed, an early newspaper *exposé* by Ronit Lentin suggested that the dispersal approach was something of a disaster when it came to integration. 'Ireland's 303 Vietnamese are housed, but not

settled, not hungry, yet not integrated,' she noted (*Irish Times*, 25 April 1984: 11). By the mid 1980s most of the Vietnamese had re-migrated to Dublin's poorest neighbourhoods. This was facilitated by their entry into the Chinese fast-food business, where the more mature young people provided much of the labour. This often required the children to absent themselves from school or, at the least, assist in the family businesses on a part-time basis.

One of the key problems facing this minority was language proficiency. Circa 1980 an early resettlement report noted: 'Formal instruction in English ceased when the refugees left the reception centres. It is not considered that schoolgoing [*sic*] children will need further special instruction in English' (Sub-committee on Resettlement of Vietnamese Refugees, n.d.: 3). Simply put, the older generation received little or inadequate language support; the younger generation often received none as they were required to attend school classes populated by children considerably younger than them until their language skills improved. On top of this, many young people had to contend with learning the Irish language together with acquiring English, and this from a starting point at which many were functionally illiterate in their native language. According to one Vietnamese-Irish adolescent interviewed by Frieda McGovern:

> We were all told when we came here that we would have to learn English, change our customs … in order to get on. Well some of us have learnt English and have changed our customs, and nothing much has happened to us. All my brothers who have left School … are on the dole (1990: 186).

McGovern's unpublished thesis was primarily concerned with language support and the policy of holding children back in junior classes until their English language competence improved. Borrowing the phrase from a Government memo, she described this as a 'sink or swim' policy (1990: 196). She carried out research in four secondary schools, and her conclusions make for grim reading:

> There were only 9 Vietnamese pupils in the four second-level schools in … 1989–90. Of the remaining 18 Vietnamese pupils between the ages of 12–18 in the study areas in 1989, 1 was in another secondary school (1990: 205).

By the late 1990s, according to one report, only 50 per cent of Vietnamese-Irish judged themselves to have functional English language abilities (O'Regan, 1996). But language support is just one dimension of the range of supports that ethnic minority young people require. Much springs from the educational philosophy that surrounds how schools, in particular, manage diversity. In the Vietnamese-Irish case, ignoring differences seems to have been the approach taken. To take but one example, when discussing the intersection of religion and education in her school one young Vietnamese-Irish woman (aged 17 at the time of this recorded interview) described her youth to me thus:

> *My family are Buddhists but they sent me to a Catholic school. I even did my communion. Other Vietnamese-Irish girls did that as well, I know my cousin did. She said that she was Irish and all the Irish girls did it, so why not? Then the school wanted me to do my confirmation and I said, 'No, I can't, I'm Buddhist' – and that's the first they knew about it! My other cousins are 'Catholics' now as well. …*

A number of countries have come to realise that respect for the history and identity of the children of migrants means far more than compliance with a 'multicultural' policy: it is a positive act of encouragement for diversity of all sorts, and a mark of recognition for the relationship between culture, self-esteem and educational achievement (see Lee and Zhou, 2004, and Bankston and Zhou, 2002; and for a contemporary discussion of equality policies and cultural diversity in Ireland see Crowley, 2006). As we progress and see further qualitative evidence of how Vietnamese-Irish young people interacted with the Irish education system it will become clear that the experience of the young woman just quoted is not an isolated example.

The Vietnamese-Irish Population

The 1999–2000 *Annual Report of the Refugee Agency* gives the following data on the Vietnamese-Irish population:

Table 1: *Basic Demographics*

| Year	Intake	Family Reunification	Birth	Death	Emigrants	Total
1979	212		1		4	209
1980			16	1	4	220
1981		36	7	2		261
1982		20	12		3	290
1983		12	13		7	308
1984		8	10	1	1	324
1985		7	10	2	4	335
1986		4	12	2	10	339
1987		3	8	2	33	315
1988		58	10	2	13	368
1989		47	9	2	19	403
1990		19	9	3	1	427
1991		15	9	3	8	440
1992		10	10		8	450
1993		38	15	2	2	500
1994		32	11	2	1	526
1995		30	12	1	15	561
1996		18	10	4	6	577
1997		21	8	2	8	604
1998		4	8			616
1999		180		1		795
2000		29		1		823

**Source:** *Refugee Agency Annual Report, 1999–2000*

The annual reports of the Refugee Agency (now Reception and Integration) remain the only officially generated source of census-style data on the Vietnamese-Irish. Furthermore, the table above outlines the last year for which new data was added to records. This owed to the fact that it followed a period (1999) during which a large number of family reunification claims were processed, and it was envisaged that few such claims would be made in the future. Thus, growth in the Vietnamese-Irish population would be accounted for by natural increases, i.e. the birth of Vietnamese-Irish citizens whose affairs were beyond the remit of care of the Refugee Agency.

There are a number of reasonable judgements that may be made about the above data. Firstly, we may note that the bulk of the population, 591 persons, arrived through the Family Reunification Scheme. The rounded average number of secondary admissions from 1979 to 2000 was 27 persons per annum. The average birth rate per year between 1979 and 2000 was 9 per annum. One may assume that this will remain steady until the second generation begins to produce a significant third generation, giving rise to a multiplier effect. If we assume that our estimates of the birth rate are probably low rather than high, and if we think about the emergent third generation, then a conservative estimate would put the current population well over the 1,000 mark and likely over the 2,000 persons mark.

In the research project on which this article is based, the author had the opportunity to build up a database on 527 individuals across 99 household units. This data consisted of census-style information, which became the basis for the interviews quoted from in this article. It quickly became clear that the Vietnamese-Irish were a largely Dublin-based population living in and through large familial networks. The basic spatial pattern is represented below:

Figure 1: *Settlement Pattern*
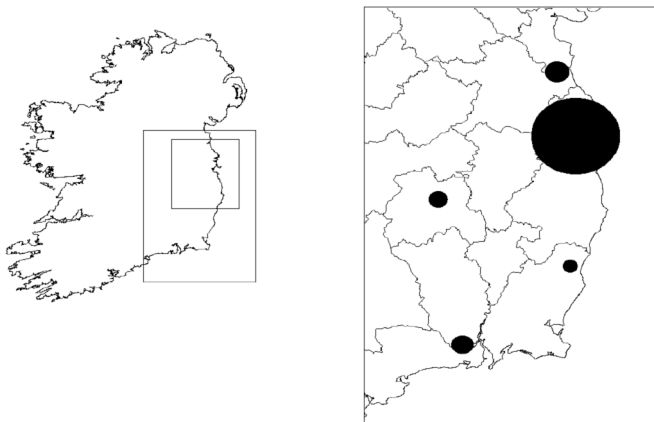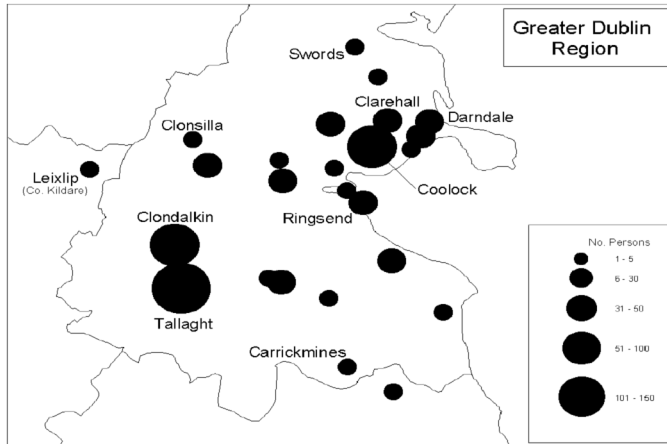
As we can see, the majority of Vietnamese-Irish persons are living in the Greater Dublin region. Within Dublin, the majority reside in areas such as Clondalkin, Tallaght or Coolock and Clarehall. Many live in local authority homes, while others have purchased private homes. With the tendency towards large families, residence is in extended units, with a mother, father and children often living with grandparents or the spouse of a young adult in the same house. House sizes then have an effect on household composition, with families spread out across several homes in the same geographical area, or across Dublin city depending on upward mobility.

There are also clear patterns specific to the second generation (a term referring to the children of at least one foreign-born parent in a given country). As noted above, the 1979–2000 figures published by the former Refugee Agency suggest that the majority of the Vietnamese-Irish population migrated through the Family Reunification Scheme, as secondary admissions. This would suggest that many young adults were born in Vietnam or, perhaps, in refugee camps and that they migrated to Ireland after 1979. My own data, drawn from a sample of 527 individuals, indicates that there are 279 persons of 35 years of age or less within this sample; 64 are under 18 years of age. The relatively small numbers under 18 years of age suggest that the sample is not as representative as it might be. Nonetheless, one may distinguish between those born in and outside of Ireland as a meaningful set of categories, a point underlined in the words of the people themselves. When discussing education one Vietnamese-Irish man noted:

> My eldest kid is nearly 30. He was born in Vietnam. I have 3 boys and one youngest girl of 12. The two youngest children are in school. The eldest, he starts working now in the takeaway. … [The] younger one is in final year: he going to college in year. Other boy doing Leaving Cert.

> My kids tell me that they wouldn't like when they grow up to be in Ireland. When they get a job they tell me they want to go somewhere else. They getting on in Ireland very well, they have friends here you know. To me it is a different culture. …

My eldest son he never like school and he always want to work. He was only a kid when he came to Ireland but he thinks he is Vietnamese. I would love to take … him to Vietnam to see. He [would] like to go and see what it's like, and he wants to see how different it is – people eating snake and that kind of thing. My other kids speak English; they have Dublin accents, just like the Irish. I not worry about their English; I worry about their own language. They cannot speak Vietnamese.

Thus, even within one family we may see a spectrum of identities. This is important to note because there remains a large social-scientific literature that sees culture as a hard-shelled identity into which immigrant minorities are sealed (see recent work in the Journal *The Future of Children*, for examples), and as children mature in a new society they inevitably come into conflict with the more static world-view of their parents. Clearly, there are not just two worlds for Vietnamese-Irish people, sealed into their own particularity; rather the 'Vietnamese' and the 'Irish' intersect with one another while displaying great internal diversity.

The notion of cultural conflict is related to the notion of intergenerational conflict. In a great variety of texts within migration studies and sociology the ethnic minority family is seen as a site of conflict, as if the minority family is in need of therapeutic intervention *a priori*. However, one may well ask whether the tensions found in Vietnamese-Irish homes are of a greater level or intensity than those found in the majority of homes in a city like Dublin and whether the issues over which conflicts arise are particular to those homes? If one carefully analyses the above quotation one can observe a complex view of raising children in Ireland. For the parent, his children are at one and the same time integrated into Irish society through friendships and somewhat disassociated from society, as expressed through their desire to migrate elsewhere. The youngest children identify with being Irish, while his eldest child, a man of 30 years of age, owing to his early upbringing in Vietnam, manifests a more diasporic world-view and a stronger link with the standard Vietnamese-Irish enterprise of the take-away business.

Nuances of identity associated with age and family structure are in dialogue with the environment in which these families live and work. For example, one Vietnamese-Irish father whose children included a boy of 12 and two girls aged 15 and 17 respectively, was clear that arguments in his household had as much to do with the neighbourhood in which he was residing as anything 'cultural' or generational:

There is so much drinking here, and the area I live in has drug-taking as well. When they go out … with their friends I get worried because there is so much drinking and drug taking. I always tell my kids to remember that their parents are the most important thing – we stay up late worrying about them …

Thus, what first may be perceived as cultural differences in terms of ethnic identity may often have much more to do with the particulars of locality. As I have noted, the Vietnamese-Irish were a population that engaged in a secondary migration to Dublin's poorest neighbourhoods in the 1980s. While a small majority of families now own property, most families acquired homes in neighbourhoods that are still disadvantaged. Integration for them is a daily journey through a challenging socio-economic environment, which has very discernable effects in terms of how they see Irish society and their own families. This was expressed to me in numerous conversations, such as

when a young mother living in a fairly disadvantaged Dublin city suburb, explained to me that her children simply did not interact with others in the neighbourhood. My kids are 'not open wide in themselves,' she remarked. This is consistent with much of what is known about so-called 'model minorities' in other contexts. For example, James Watson's classic study of the overseas Chinese in the UK noted that a nexus between involvement in the catering trade, residence in poorer neighbourhoods and reliance on large familial networks, which promoted educational achievement and a strong work ethic, tended to produce a minority with voices that were muted in society and a presence that was invisible in localities (Watson, 1977: 181–214).

But these are the voices of parents. What of the younger generation? How do they see the worlds of part-time work, education and family? Hereafter, I will discuss second-generation Vietnamese-Irish people's lives through their own words. My focus here is on how the different domains of Vietnamese-Irish life connect with each other rather than looking at each separately. What emerges from this approach is an image of the cultural world in which Vietnamese-Irish young people live – an image that can offer an insight into the particular ways in which they behave in school, choose careers or relate to family members.

Vietnamese-Irish Young People

As one might expect, during weekends – the busy times – Vietnamese-Irish takeaway businesses often draw on the labour power of young relatives. This is sometimes given grudgingly. As one younger generation girl (aged 15 at the time of the interview) noted:

> They tell you to study, but you're supposed to be working as well. I don't mind helping out but it's just that it's, like, all the time … You go to work in the afternoon and you're back in the middle of the night. And if you're not working you're supposed to be studying. The last time I went to the cinema with me mates I was snoring after the lights went down!

This tension between fidelity towards one's family and a slight sense of injustice in the light of the experiences of friends and peers in school was evident in the words of several young people in the study. As a further example, a young woman of 17 described her part-time work in a takeaway as she grew up thus: 'it was never about us, about being, like, an ordinary part-time job for pocket money. Everything I made I gave to my mother'. These businesses draw from the resources of labour across the lines of age and gender; they make use of the family, and without the family they could not operate. But fidelity towards one's family is not just tested by feelings of exploitation. For most Vietnamese-Irish young people with whom I spoke (informally or in formal interview) much of their identity and sense of difference was sharpened against the verbal and physically threatening world of fast food catering in Dublin's poorest neighbourhoods. The following are the words of a young Vietnamese-Irish woman who was aged 18 at the time of the recorded interview:

> When I was in school I worked part-time in my family's restaurant – all the time really. … My cousins, uncles, my father of course, sisters, brothers, they're all in the takeaways. Not that anyone complains. … I started work when I was fairly young, just messing around really, behind, in the kitchen, and then, as I got older, I learned

how to work out in the front at the counter and I did that for most of the time I was growing up. When I learned to drive [a small engine motorbike for deliveries] I used to do the deliveries as well, or at least I used to help out. …

Working on the counter was horrible at times. Some drunken people are ok, but some of them are just horrible really. There was this one guy, he was fairly old, and he used come in to the shop every day nearly. I didn't know him but I used to see him there all the time and he was always trying to get me to give him stuff for free. I'd say, 'I can't', and then he'd get all grumpy. But the worst thing is the kids: they're always hanging around. …

The effects of such interactions on young Vietnamese-Irish people are difficult to gauge. Tensions between responsibilities to family and the threat of racial abuse or violence were ever present. The same young woman conveyed her thoughts in the following words:

But you see that's where we work and make a living in our family, so no matter what the hassle is you just go back. One time when I was working some guy jumped the counter and robbed the place, after the police left we continued working and the next night I was back working at the counter – you just can't be scared of them. It's the same with the kids. I give out hell to them! They're always hanging around, and I just shout at them. Now most of the kids know not to try anything when I'm there. One night a friend of mine came in and said that she couldn't believe how different I was when I was at work – that I am normally so quiet. …

But you have to play them at their own game. When one starts messing – they're always in groups, and they never cause trouble on their own – I just cancel the order on all of them until they say sorry.

The world of part-time work certainly demands that young Vietnamese-Irish people negotiate their way through the categories on either side of the hyphen in dramatic ways. Particularly interesting in the above quotation is the way that the young woman recalls the shock of her friend on seeing her in a different context, as if she maintained different relational identities in two different domains. This was not unusual: Vietnamese-Irish identity, more than anything else, is a result of such negotiations.

In the schools attended by Vietnamese-Irish young people the more attuned teachers noticed that the students most saw as 'polite', 'neat', 'quiet and well behaved', acted in this way because of forces beyond the gates of the school. One teacher noted that 'the pressure of society is such that they keep to themselves … they are harassed outside the school because they are hard-working and are viewed as managing to make a go of their takeaway vans … there is jealousy in the community' (Sheridan, 2004: 1). With newer immigrants arriving in these same neighbourhoods in the 1990s the situation became even more complex.[4] In an interview jointly carried out by this author and the journalist Kathy Sheridan one 24 year-old Vietnamese-Irish woman recalled the racism she suffered in her youth taking on new dimensions:

Oh yeah. They'd call you names, throw stuff at your house; climb up the back walls. Maybe it was just because we were kids but they used to give us loads of abuse. You still find a few like that.

> [More recently] *When my brother and I went to inquire about car insurance, I showed the woman my passport but she still wanted to know had I a card … a card to show you're entitled to live here.*

However, the more generic descriptions of going to school in Dublin were of a time dominated by hard work, interacting well with others – if infrequently so – and enjoying the limited freedom from the regime of family life. As one young woman of 18 years of age noted:

> *I really enjoyed school. The kids were really nice. I think it was because I was different, or something like that. They were much nicer to me. I used to keep to myself a lot as well and stay quiet. It was the same with my cousins they said that they got on well in school and that every one treated them well, and that they just kept to themselves mostly.*

Looking back on what it was like to grow up in Dublin City schools in the 1980s and 1990s young Vietnamese-Irish persons recall being treated differently but not badly. People saw them as quiet, hardworking and different, and frequently they saw themselves in the same ways. The resource of the family was for many something that could be held in the background and something that enabled interaction with others to be rendered easier by the knowledge that family stood just out of view. Family, in this sense, was comprised of the cousins that one might meet at lunch time or walk to or from school with; family was the 'friends' that were both a part of the fabric of home life and a part of school life:

> *My cousins lived next door, so I always saw my own home as being normal, because when I went to my friends I went to my cousins and their home was the same as mine. I did have friends in school, but I didn't think that their lives were that much different to mine – but I sometimes thought that they were afraid to come to my house because things were different there. There was different rules and different food in my house. And when I went to their house they were, like, 'are you ok with just sausages?' And I'd have to tell them, 'that's fine'.*

For many young Vietnamese-Irish people school was a site where the first close relationships were formed with people who were outside of the family. Obviously, it was also a site were the first relationships with the opposite sex began. Four years ago I met a young Vietnamese-Irish man who was working in a takeaway business in Dublin's North Inner City. In a brief conversation about his childhood and school days he pointed out that many Vietnamese-Irish families asked siblings to check up on each other. When groups of boys and girls would delay going home from school to spend time with each other, word would inevitably reach his parents. 'They'd eyes all over the place,' he noted. 'It was like Big *bleedin'* Brother.' For others a sense of being 'good', particularly for Vietnamese-Irish girls, meant that relationships with the opposite sex were late occurring and regarded as something to be avoided in case 'trouble' was caused. One young man offered a less than moralistic explanation, however. He suggested that because neighbourhoods were often 'bad', thus requiring children to go home straight from school, and because most spent their spare time in part-time work, even in adolescence most Vietnamese-Irish simply didn't have the time for a

relationship. Thus, memories of 'rebellion' often seemed to disappoint those who recalled them. Take the words of one 19 year-old Vietnamese-Irish woman:

> *My family did take a lot of interest in my school. They didn't check my homework or anything like that but they were always asking me what was going on and how I was getting on. My parents were strict though. I remember them getting mad when I got my ears pierced.*

Somewhere between leaving school and completing third-level education most second-generation Vietnamese-Irish men and women who are in relationships met their partners. Almost invariably, partners are not Vietnamese-Irish. As one young woman commented:

> *I have an Irish boyfriend. My parents are far easier than other parents. They don't mind me going out with an Irish boyfriend. In fact nobody really minds that. It's more to do with who they are, like, for my parents – like their background, their character and who they are.*

The Spectre of 'Race'

Over several years of cultural history and ethnographic research I met few Vietnamese-Irish young people under 18 years of age who were not in full-time education, and many of those aged between 18 and 24 years are now in full-time third-level education. Those who I know who are in full-time third-level education have tended, with few exceptions, to pursue courses of study in the sciences and in subject areas such as information technology, business and accounting. This bias towards the more 'pragmatic' areas of study has often been influenced by the expectations of parents and their desire to see their children in professional careers.

However, few second-generation Vietnamese-Irish people that I have come to know have actually begun on a professional career path. The weight of expectation placed on the educational system has not yet produced the results that so many Vietnamese-Irish parents have hoped for. Many of those who have recently graduated from universities and colleges are seeking work, are in part-time employment before beginning post-graduate studies or are travelling to visit relatives in countries such as Australia. Much of what the future is and means has been calculated *vis-à-vis* the prospect of children becoming professionals and being a 'success'. Should the individuals concerned find difficulty in meeting such expectations or should the education system not take them in the desired direction quickly enough there will likely be severe problems.

The trends are not fully articulated in practice yet. For many second-generation Vietnamese-Irish the 'Chinese' restaurant and takeaway business has remained a feature of their lives. While some will follow the path towards professional careers and work in business outside of the family, others will choose to make their living in the ethnic food niche, and some will have little choice. However, it is noteworthy that in discussions of family, school and education the topic of racism seems to lurk in the background. For Vietnamese-Irish people from the younger generation their identity intersects with stereotypes and with racism throughout their lives. In simple terms, some younger people still find it difficult to persuade people who don't know them well

that they are Irish – the 'yes, but where are you *from*?' syndrome. But this is not the full story, and one is forced to ask: how can the Vietnamese-Irish example be brought to bear on the wider issue of minority ethnic youth integration in Ireland?

Conclusions

By looking back on the cultural history of an older minority in Ireland it is now possible to learn important lessons. Some of these lessons are straightforward: this example has demonstrated that fears over so-called ghettoisation resulted, as elsewhere, in a misguided policy of dispersing refugee populations. That policy has since been abandoned in favour of a more structured and community-centred model – though not without its own complications (see Halilovic-Pastuovic, 2007). Also, short-term inaction over language support resulted in long-term costs being incurred, from economic costs resulting from welfare dependency to social effects in terms of lack of incorporation into mainstream society. This is worth situating in the context of language support programmes today: the 2007 North South Intercultural Forum asked participants to reflect on data suggesting that since 2004 the numbers of minority children in schools needing English language support have increased by 30 per cent. It is an indictment of early failures to record that today many older Vietnamese-Irish do not have a functional level of English.

In terms of ethnic youth issues there are also clear lessons. The Vietnamese-Irish example certainly shows us schools ill prepared for dealing with cultural differences. But too often schools become the machinery for acculturation, and criticisms of already disadvantaged schools are more properly directed towards the State and society at large. In 1990, when Frieda McGovern interviewed young Vietnamese-Irish students, one noted: 'we were all told when we came here that we would have to learn English, change our customs … in order to get on.' This is not an education policy; this is a failure in society.

However, the Vietnamese-Irish example is also important in offering a more measured and longitudinal view of migration to Ireland. Many of the challenges posed by migration to Ireland are perceived to be entirely new – most are not. The story of the Vietnamese-Irish is a story of people who left behind war and forced migration – some with tales of torture and loss beyond belief – and who resettled here and raised families. For those new generations the label 'Vietnamese-Irish' seems almost redundant: they are Irish. Above all else, what we can learn about ethnic minority youth issues in Ireland today from the Vietnamese-Irish example is that new versions of Irishness are here to stay and demand a response throughout society.

Notes

1   *Census 2006* data is problematic for discussions of migration beyond general patterns. And, when discussing specific populations the difficulties are compounded. Firstly, within the broad subject reach of Migration Studies the approach normally taken is to trace populations and carry out research on specific questions by examining the movement of peoples across borders. Categories of 'nationality', 'ethnicity' or, indeed 'race' within census data tend to be treated with caution. The voluminous literature on the Irish diaspora is a case in point. When Donald Akenson came to write his seminal *The Irish Diaspora* he noted that of the 34 (+) million who declare an Irish ancestry the majority are Protestant Irish-Americans – having arrived first, Protestants from the south as well as the north of Ireland have produced more generations and are, thus, a larger element of this ethnic group. And, yet, Irish-Americans are assumed to be Catholic, and the ethnic category of 'Scots-Irish' shows up on the census, but doesn't account for the numbers. Akenson demonstrated with this example the great problem of the census: it only gives answers to the questions it asks. Secondly, enormous disparities exist between the *Census 2006* data and other sources. For example, the *Census 2006* indicates that there are 25,181 persons living in Ireland on the night of the census who were born in the USA; the census also suggests that 12,475 classify their nationality as USA. The problem is clear: are the 12,706 returned Irish-Americans? If so what weight has the category at either side of the hyphen? Also take into account the fact that as far back as 1999 the US Bureau of Consular Affairs put the number of people living in Ireland with a US passport at 46,984, while the US Embassy suggests that 'real' number of persons with US citizenship in Ireland is 100,000.

    The US example in an interesting link to one of the data sources much quoted in recent research on immigration into Ireland, PPS numbers. One should not assume PPS numbers to be a 'clean' data source. For example, US citizens of Irish ancestry are provided with PPS numbers in order to claim inheritance – they may never set foot in Ireland. Workers in the 'informal' economy may never register for a PPS number, or register and return to their country of origin.

    In sum, while *Census 2006* may give some insights into general trends the data in itself has a limited utility (see Martin Ruhs, 2005 on PPS numbers; Piaras MacÉinrí, 2007 on enumeration problems; and Rebecca Chiyoko King-O'Riain, 2006 on the *Census 2006* 'ethnicity' questions).

2   This article draws on an extended period of fieldwork carried out between 2001 and 2004 and funded by a Doctoral Research Fellowship from the National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis (NIRSA) in National University of Ireland, Maynooth. During the first years of that period I spent several days every week learning Vietnamese and informally discussing life in Ireland with former refugees and with those who migrated to Ireland through the Family Reunification Scheme. This work took place in the Vietnamese-Irish Centre in Hardwick Street, Dublin and, occasionally, at the more informal locations of the Chinese-Vietnamese Association in Clondalkin. As the research progressed my attention turned to the youth dimensions of Vietnamese-Irish identity. 2004 marked the 25-year anniversary of the first refugees to arrive in Ireland, and many senior figures in the Vietnamese-Irish community volunteered themselves to assist my research in an effort to mark the occasion with a 'record'. Thus, throughout 2003–2004 I held numerous informal and formal interviews, 25 of which were taped. I was also introduced by people in both associations to members of their family, particularly to members of the younger generation. As a part of this process I drew on the community's own records (the names and addresses of 527 individuals across 99 household units) to build up a database that recorded census-like information, ranging from age to occupation and religion. This data was confirmed by my own visits to many of the households listed and through checking and cross checking the information as I had conversations and held interviews with participants. This data is now the property of the Vietnamese-Irish Association.

3   Across the various examples of Western countries that resettled Vietnamese refugees, from France to the UK and the USA, the policy adopted was generally one of 'dispersal'. There are a variety of reasons, but, more often than not, policy papers are suggestive of an economic logic of lessening of pressure on services in any central area of migrant concentration and reducing the chances of so-called 'ghettoisation' (on the UK example see Robinson and Hale 1989). In the Irish context, perhaps more so than others, the reliance on non-government support was extremely heavy. Therefore, dispersal was to locations of particular NGO and community strength and to locations that could provide ready accommodation.

4   Older migrant populations such as the Vietnamese-Irish now share public spaces and neighbourhoods with newer waves of immigrants, and emerging hierarchies are observable in such situations – particularly as many Vietnamese-Irish are now multiple home owners and landlords. Little has been said on this topic in the literature on migration in Ireland, but one of the ways in which Ireland will likely articulate this issue in public culture is through notions of the so-called model minority. For a treatment of this issue in the Vietnamese-Irish example see Mark Maguire (2007; 2004).

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