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## **A constructivist inquiry of the bicultural experiences and social support systems of Southeast Asian refugee youth**

Emilio Russ Layon Bermejo

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A CONSTRUCTIVIST INQUIRY OF  
THE BICULTURAL EXPERIENCES AND SOCIAL SUPPORT SYSTEMS OF  
SOUTHEAST ASIAN REFUGEE YOUTH

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A Project  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Social Work

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by  
Emilio Russ Layon Bermejo

June 1996

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THE BICULTURAL EXPERIENCES AND SOCIAL SUPPORT SYSTEMS OF  
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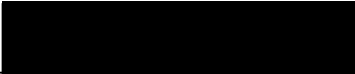
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by  
Emilio Russ Layon Bermejo

June 1996

Approved by:

  
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Dr. Teresa M. Morris, Project Advisor,  
Chair of Research Sequence, Social Work

6/12/96  
Date

## ABSTRACT

This constructivist study explored the bicultural experiences of Southeast Asian refugee youth who have settled with their families here in America. In addition, the study examined their transactions with various key support systems and agents. For the purposes of collecting data, the researcher conducted a single round of interviews with a set of informants who provided their own constructions, or views regarding these issues. By drawing attention to multiple perspectives, the researcher attempted to gain a deeper understanding of refugee youth within their environment.

The study identified culturally-sensitive and linguistically accessible support agents in the school and ethnic community who performed critical preventative and restorative functions to help youth cope with the stressors of the bicultural environment. Moreover, the ability to translate key cultural values into adaptive strengths reflected a certain bicultural competence of refugee youth.

The implications for social work practice include the need for workers engaged in cross-cultural practice to possess cultural-relevant knowledge to assist particularly in the identification of adaptive cultural strengths. At the level of community intervention, workers must recognize the multi-facets of social support and identify key ethnic support agents to help refugee youth facilitate bicultural adjustment and coping skills.



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## INTRODUCTION

### Literature Review

Since the American evacuation of South Vietnam in April 1975 and the collapse of the governments in Cambodia and Laos, well over 2 million refugees have fled their homelands due to intolerable human rights violations and subsequent deteriorating economic conditions (Tenhula, 1991). Over 1 million refugees from these areas came to the United States with the assistance of the federal government and in accordance with existing U.S. immigration law (Rumbaut, 1995). They represent a wide range of distinct ethnic, cultural, and linguistic groups of people often referred to as *Southeast Asian* or *Indochinese*.

As refugees, these are not immigrants who adhered to particular annual immigration quotas and restrictions, able to prepare for their departures. Rather, many Indochinese refugees had little choice but to leave their homes, possessions, and sometimes family behind, and escaped with little else but their memories, dreams, and talents. The theme of forced migration is part of the Southeast Asian refugee narrative. Even today, large numbers of people continue to flee that region (Rumbaut, 1995).

For the children of refugee families, the migration experience is particularly difficult. Many of them have lost close relatives or friends or suffered other trauma from war atrocities and political violence and destruction.

Some refugee young people entered the U.S. as young children without parents, siblings, or extended kinsperson who were lost during the escape or journey or separated during the asylum-camp experience (Freeman, 1989).

This generation of young people is growing up in a society unlike the one their parents were raised. In traditional Southeast Asian families, children are often required to obey and respect their parents; and parents are responsible for providing for all the children's needs and socializing them (Tran, 1988). The assimilation experience, however, has challenged the traditional roles and values held within the family. It is not uncommon for families to experience structural changes because of the differing language abilities between the generations. Learning English at a more rapid pace than many of their parents, the children, by default, are relied upon by parents for support in difficult language situations (Rutledge, 1992). This reliance creates a role reversal from traditional society, and sometimes results in conflict within the family.

As they come in contact with new behaviors and perspectives throughout their school experiences, Southeast Asian youth become more "American" in many ways, ranging from tastes and preferences of food, dating practices and modes of dress and speech to their increasingly individualistic orientation toward life (Rutledge, 1992). As the older generation hang onto their traditional culture

and values and urge their family to do the same, the youth are quickly learning the new culture and adopting new values. Consternation of the child or adolescent grows as he or she continues to live in two cultures: the Vietnamese culture of the home and the American culture of society (Freeman, 1989).

Further exacerbating the depth and significance of these cultural changes is the growing inability of families to control the young or to slow down the pace of assimilation. Many parents are too busy working and have little time to teach their children the native language and culture. In most situations, they also do not have enough knowledge about American culture to help them effectively deal with societal and educational demands (Tran, 1988). Consequently, these children, who are facing a world unfamiliar to their families, are presented with the responsibility of forging a path towards belonging in the new environment.

As a result, many parents are losing their obligative and moral authority in educating and socializing their children. They have difficulty understanding their children and do not know how to communicate with them (Tran, 1988). By the time their children reach adolescence, they have difficulty coping with the bewildering youth culture in American society and sometimes their reactions range from excessive strictness to virtual neglect. Disorientation



among parents is common, and at a time when their children need special guidance and attention, parents find themselves unable to effectively fulfill their roles (Freeman, 1989).

Placing great value on education, parents may have high academic expectations for their children. Consequently, many refugee youth work diligently to achieve success in the school system. This work ethic which aids their adaptability, however, has also served as a two-edged sword - though parents are extremely proud as their children succeed in school, they are also concerned of the distance created by their child's growing American identity (Rutledge, 1992).

The educational success of Southeast Asian students, however, have been hampered by a number of factors. The disruptions of the refugee experience bring major gaps in schooling and academic development to refugee children whose present and future plans are unsettled and insecure (Vuoung, 1995). The school dropout rate among Southeast Asian youth is steadily increasing (Huang, 1989). When asked about problems related to school, Southeast Asian youth have reported cognitive and language difficulties. Ethnocultural factors within the school system, such as the racial/ethnic composition of the class and the entire school may also have a significant impact on the outlook of Southeast Asian youth (Tran, 1988).



Some young Southeast Asian youth also felt the actual school environment to be a significant barrier to academic success. Findings from a recent survey of Southeast Asian youth reveal that relations with peer groups were problematic. When Southeast Asian students were asked to state their most significant problem, over 50% cited problematic social interaction with peers, many of which included physical altercations. These findings were similarly expressed by California researchers in testimony before Congress (Asian immigrants..," 1987). They reported that racial tension had become a regular aspect of school life for Asian children in California; with common occurrences of Asian youth being punched, mimicked, harassed, or robbed by non-Asian fellow students. Some have compared the school environment to a "war zone" in which they are continually harassed and called a variety of names, such as "Yang," "Nip," "Chink," and "Jap" (Kibria, 1993).

Many Southeast Asian students have consequently found safety by exclusively keeping within the circle of fellow Southeast Asians. A high degree of ethnic segregation characterizes the social structure of most ethnically diverse high schools (Kibria, 1993). Unfortunately, this has isolated many Southeast Asian students and has hampered valuable opportunities to interact and build relationships with other peers. This dilemma reflects the difficulty they

have in forming a secure identity in an environment they feel they cannot participate in (Vuong, 1995).

In their need and desire to belong and be further accepted, many Southeast Asian youth have found apparent fulfillment in ethnic gangs. An increasing number of Southeast Asian youth groups have become entangled with the law, engaging in a wide range of anti-social activities, from truancy to drugs, car theft to robbery, even murder. Youth diversion programs, particularly those dedicated to gang prevention and job training, are non-existent, even in communities in which Southeast Asians make up a large percentage of the minority group (Vuong, 1995).

From an ecological perspective, the developmental task of identity formation is intensified for the refugee adolescent, who must negotiate between family, peer, and societal expectations to resolve the question "Who am I?" (Huang, 1989). As Southeast Asian youth attempt to assimilate to the host culture and internalize "being American," the rejection they experience from members of the dominant group may complicate the formation of an identity and positive self-concept (Huang, 1989). Confronted by disapproval and rejection around them, Southeast Asian youth may have a particularly difficult time integrating a bicultural identity. In their attempts to maintain an apparent balance between the demands of two worlds, they may realize that they fit in neither, while deep down they want

to be in both places. Consequently, they are often marginalized in key systems (e.g. family, school, peer) that they are to be involved in.

### **Focus Of Inquiry**

This study focuses on the bicultural experiences of Southeast Asian youth who have settled with their families here in America. The challenges of all newcomers may involve common elements, but the refugee experience, specifically that of Southeast Asians, are quite different than those of other immigrants. Likewise, within American society, refugee youth may face many of the same problems as other American youth face, yet their experiences are different given the refugee experience. There is a need to understand the refugee experience on their terms, particularly in the midst of investigative studies that exposes and emphasizes its problems, followed by a call for immediate solutions; or narratives that often cast immigrants and refugees as part of a heroic folk tale in which they arrive in total destitution and in a very short time succeed beyond everyone's wildest expectations (Tenhula, 1991). Approaches to inquiry which aim to gain a better understanding of the experiences of these groups must accommodate the rich and descriptive oral histories which tell of their experiences.

Similarly, the dominant narratives and forms of inquiry of youth have been limited to people talking *about* them, or

to them. Oftentimes, they are denied the opportunity to explain their points of view and to speak for themselves on their own terms (Gaines, 1991). And when given the opportunity, their views or constructions are oftentimes misconstrued or not considered valid or meaningful.

Armed with the assumption that outsiders, including adults and peers, do not understand them, immigrant groups and youth respectively have expressed the need for people to talk *with* them. An inquiry about the present concerns of Southeast Asian adolescent youth is essentially worthy of research, based on the assumption that many youth and minority groups today are "not being heard." Therefore, this study establishes essentially one goal: to give various individuals the opportunity to express for themselves how they perceive and understand their situation and to be understood on their own terms.

Although this study aims to achieve a deeper understanding of the present concerns and issues facing Southeast Asian youth, the task of inquiry and exchange of ideas present certain challenges. According to Mandel (1988), it is very difficult for Vietnamese students to talk about themselves, not only because of the complexity of their experiences but also because of certain cultural traits. In general, Vietnamese young people are polite and sensitive and are careful to avoid hurting or embarrassing

others. Their innate shyness and sense of modesty may inhibit a free exchange of ideas (Mandel, 1988).

The researcher has thus chosen to utilize a broader focus of inquiry to include the perceptions of other key stakeholders to gain a better contextual understanding of the experiences of refugee youth. Utilizing an ecological perspective, which focuses on interconnected systems dynamically interacting with an individual (Germain, 1991), the researcher elicited various constructions of reality held by those in their social environment. Furthermore, by taking on an approach to inquiry which utilizes a "person-in-environment" perspective to the research problem, the findings of the presenting inquiry will have significant implications for the fields of social work practice, particularly in the levels of both direct practice and community intervention. Moreover, this study will not ignore or exclude the distinguishing perspectives of the social work profession, including person-in-environment, ecosystems, and strengths perspectives.

## **METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

### **The Constructivist Paradigm**

Over the past decade or so, a scholarly battle has been fought between advocates of classical empiricism and those who have come to be called social constructivists over what philosophical approach should guide social work research and practice (Atherton, 1993). The fundamental question that

underlies the basic dimensions of this debate is as follows: *What is the nature of reality as we know it?* (Atherton, 1993). Classical empiricists claim that truth about the world is "out there" and independent of the individual. Social constructivists, on the other hand, believe that truth about the world is not independent of the individual but depends on his or her perceptions, thoughts, and beliefs (Atherton, 1993). In a misguided attempt to become as scientific as the natural sciences, social work research has traditionally embraced the logical positivist paradigm (Heineman, 1981). Unlike positivist inquiry, constructivist research welcomes the notions of contextual inquiry, mutual and cooperative interaction, and empowerment which have all been part of social work's abiding focus. The constructivist paradigm was therefore determined to be appropriate for the investigation of the research problem. Some of these issues are outlined in the proceeding discussion.

### **Studying the Research Problem in its Context**

The complexities of human settings and social phenomena necessitate a paradigm that allows for deep understanding and explication of social phenomena as they are observed in their own contexts. Whereas traditional positivist inquiry has blinded the researcher to other ways of seeing, the interactive process of constructivist inquiry does not ignore the unique shaping forces that exist in each context,

but rather focuses on the context-specific interrelationships that give data meaning (Heineman, 1981). Constructivist inquiry is dependent upon context, which provides great power for understanding (Erlandson, et al, 1993). "Real problems always appear in particular contexts and while relevant data leading to resolution may come from many sources, their solutions are always bound by those contexts" (Erlandson, et al, 1993).

As Guba (1990) suggests, within these contexts, the researcher can entertain any construction that is proposed by reasonable and well-intentioned persons; and will not reject any construction out of hand. "There is no final truth, only different tellings of different stories organized under the heading of the same tale" (Denzin, 1992). Therefore, multiple constructions are possible and must be told.

The constructivist paradigm also fits well within a cross-cultural awareness framework for social work practice. Cross-cultural social work can use its ethnographic information in planning, delivering, and evaluating social services for particular ethnic groups (Lum, 1996). Within this paradigm, the cross-cultural researcher has the opportunity to learn about another culture in terms of its cognitive beliefs, affective expression, and behavioral relationships. The research experience and its findings also increase ethnic competence, which involves awareness of

cultural limitations, openness to cultural differences, the opportunity to learn about client experience, use of the cultural network of community resources, and the acknowledgment of cultural values within each ethnic group (Lum, 1996).

### **The Mutual and Interactive Relationship**

In conventional paradigm's aim to honor objectivity, the researcher is essentially separated as much as possible from the process of human interaction. The principles of constructivism, on the other hand, facilitate rather than obstruct cooperation between researcher practitioner and respondent. The researcher does not attempt to insulate himself or herself from the setting but seeks to establish relationships through which the mutual shaping of constructions is a collaborative exercise (Erlandson, et al, 1993). The constructivist paradigm "affirms the mutual influence that researcher and respondents have on each other" (Erlandson, et al, 1993). Therefore, even the constructions of the researcher are also considered.

### **Mutual Benefit of Participation**

Guba and Lincoln (1989) provide three considerations of participation - *empowerment*, *education*, and *connection*. One of the characteristics of constructivist inquiry is that the process *empowers* those who are involved in it. In traditional positivist inquiry, subjects have looked to researchers as "experts" for knowledge that actually exist



within themselves. By essentially determining and relating to them an authoritative set of knowledge, the research process undermines and disempowers people as youth, parents, and as a community. Rather than supporting existing power structures, the constructivist researcher seeks to *empower* those who participate in the study by honoring their constructions. The informants themselves remain the experts because it is their own constructions which are considered as the focus of the study.

Participation in the study also aimed to promote *connection* by developing shared constructions among the stakeholders. Such connections reduces the need for justification of separate positions and enables participants to jointly reach richer levels of understanding and insight.

Another central feature of constructivist research is that participation be *educative*. During the inquiry process, both researcher and respondents have multiple opportunities to share, confront, criticize, and learn from one another's constructions. Various constructed realities come into contact with each other, and in turn, no person or group leaves such encounters within the research setting without new constructions of reality (Erlandson, et al, 1993). According to Guba (1990), constructivist research does not intend to predict, control, or transform the "real" world. Rather, it is the mind of the constructor, where subjective reality exists, that is to be reconstructed.

### **The Hermeneutic Dialectic Circle**

In this study, the researcher collected data relative to Southeast Asian youth and their support systems. In choosing a site, the researcher sought to maximize opportunities to engage in a rich mix of constructions, interactions, processes, people, programs, and structures. Instead of focusing on one setting, such as a school, community organization, or agency, the researcher decided that the network of community would be the most appropriate setting. Consequently, the researcher included members of key stakeholder groups within the local ethnic community, such as schools, community organizations, and religious institutions.

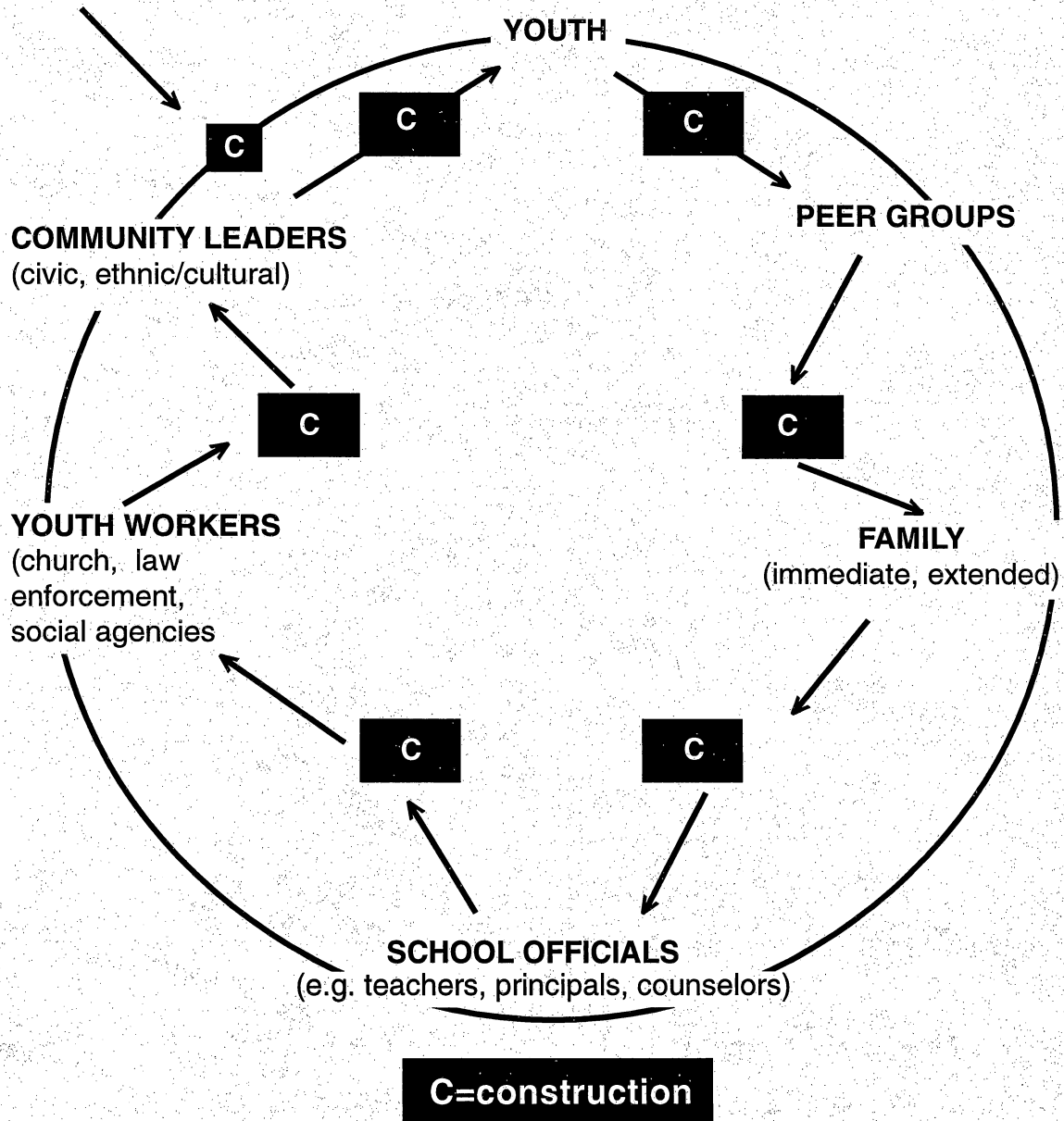
Rather than utilizing a random or representative sampling which aims to achieve generalizability, the researcher utilized a purposive sampling which aimed to explore at greater depth the range of constructions provided by key stakeholders. Sampling was primarily conducted through a referral process which is built within the constructivist paradigm.

In the initial identification of participants, divergent views within the Southeast Asian community were sought. Figure 1 (next page) depicts the hermeneutic dialectic circle originally proposed by the researcher. The identification of suggested stakeholders into this circle was basically determined by their ability to provide a range

**FIGURE 1:**  
The Initial Hermeneutic Dialectic Circle  
(within-circle process)

**INPUTS TO CIRCLE**

- literature analects
- observations
- researcher's construction



of constructions regarding the experiences of Southeast Asian refugee youth.

The emergent nature of the sampling process within constructivist paradigm required that the researcher request participants to identify additional key stakeholders. Through this process, new informants were identified and included in the modified circle. The inclusion or exclusion of stakeholders into this circle was based on their availability and their ability to provide new or divergent data to the emergent themes. As inquiry progressed, the hermeneutic dialectic circle was modified in response to availability of prospective participants and the accumulation of incoming information.

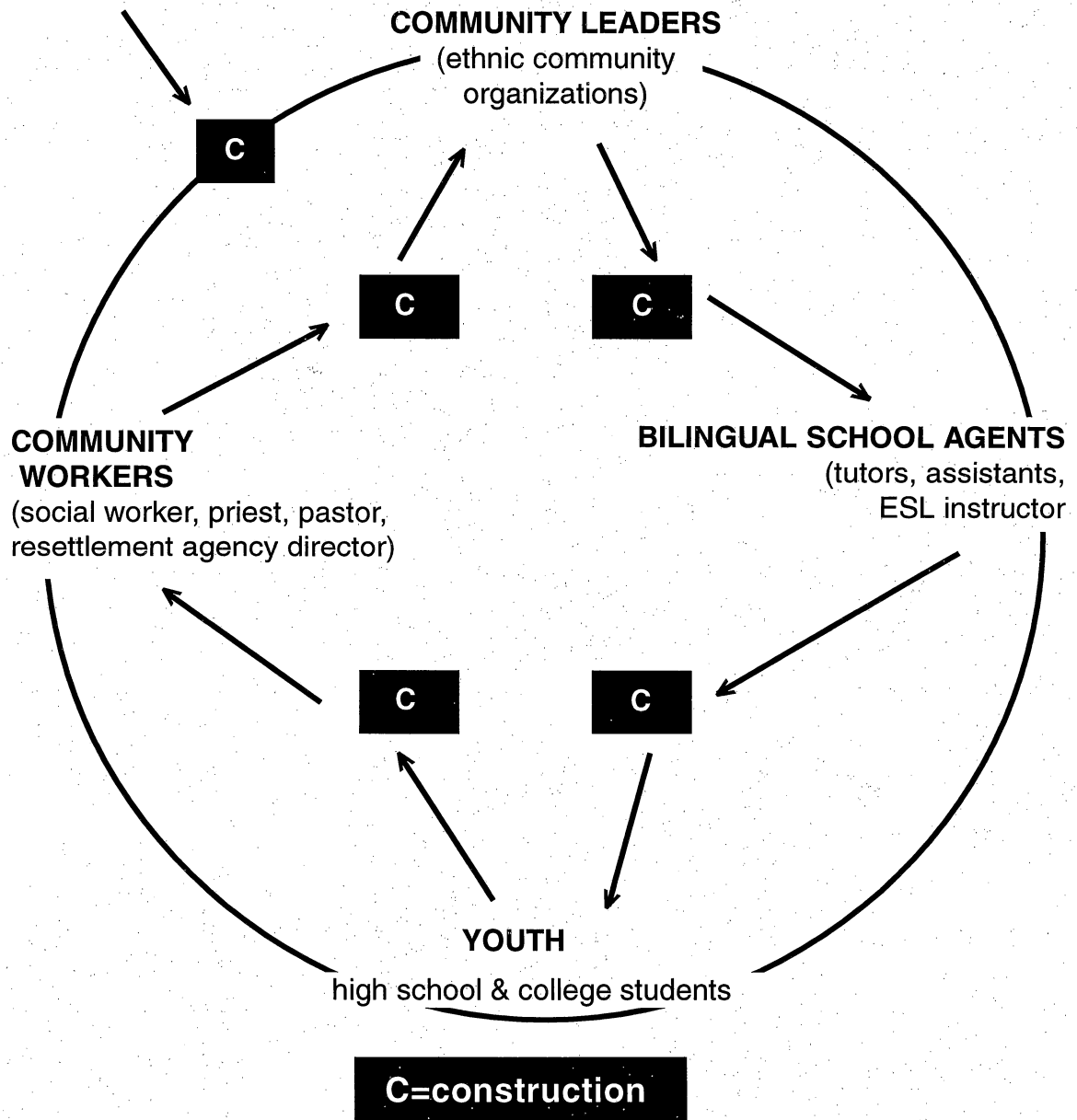
Figure 2 (next page) depicts the modified hermeneutic dialectic circle and serves as a visual construct of the respondents involved in this study. The modified circle involved a total of 23 respondents comprising of four stakeholder or participant groups: ethnic community leaders; bilingual school agents; youth (high school students and college students); and community workers (social worker, pastor, priest, and resettlement agency director). Informants from the youth stakeholder group were either high school or college students between the ages 14-24. The researcher interviewed key support agents from five local schools - two high schools and three middle schools. Each of the participants were born either in Vietnam or

**FIGURE 2:**

The Modified Hermeneutic Dialectic Circle

**INPUTS TO CIRCLE**

- literature analects
- observations
- researcher's construction



Cambodia; twenty informants were Vietnamese, three were Cambodian. All but two informants had arrived in the United States after 1975. All the participants resided and/or worked in Riverside or San Bernardino County. Moreover, all of the interviews were conducted in English; students with limited English proficiency were provided with translation support by their bilingual tutors.

All participants were asked to read and sign an informed consent (Appendix A) form which explained the purpose and methods of the study; youth informants under the age of 18 were required to have a parent's signature as well. At the conclusion of the interviews, participants were also given a debriefing statement (Appendix B), which informed them of the voluntary nature of participation and phone numbers if they had any concerns regarding the study or their involvement.

#### **Data Collection and Recording Modes**

Interviews are valuable tools in collecting qualitative data, since they are useful in discovering what people think, how one person's perceptions compare with another's, and in putting those varying responses in the context of common group and beliefs and themes (Fetterman, 1989). Though the interviewing process has been traditionally portrayed as one person asking the questions and another person answering them, in constructivist inquiry, the interview takes more the form of an interactive dialogue, or

as Erlandson, et al, (1993) describes "a conversation with a purpose."

This study utilized *semi-structured interviews* as the primary approach to data collection. Within this approach, the interview is guided by a set of basic issues to be explored, but neither the exact wording nor the sequence of questions is predetermined. The researcher avoided from being bound or overly structured by prepared questions, but instead allowed a natural style of inquiry or interaction to elicit information (Erlandson, et al, 1993). This informal interviewing process involves the researcher and respondent engaged in a dialogue that is a mixture of conversation and embedded questions; or as Fetterman (1989) suggest, in a manner in which "the questions typically emerge from the conversation." In other words, the researcher may have a series of questions to ask participants, but will wait for the most appropriate time to ask them during the process of dialogue.

One of the keys to getting rich data from dialogue is in asking good questions (Erlandson, et al, 1993). Patton (1980) outlines six basic kinds of questions that can be used to get various types of data: *experience/behavior* questions elicit descriptions of experiences, behaviors, actions, and activities; *opinion/value* questions ask people to reveal their goals, values, and desires; *feeling* questions are aimed at understanding emotional responses;

*knowledge* questions elicit factual information; *sensory* questions determine sensitivity to various sensory stimuli; *background/ demographic* questions elicit basic information such as education, past experiences, age, and residence. The presenting study posed various questions, many of which were delineated using these six categories (Appendix C).

Since constructivist inquiry aims to collect thick, descriptive data, the nature of the analytic process requires accurate descriptions or records of interviews. For the purposes of maximizing *fidelity* (Erlandson, et al, 1993), or *accuracy* of data recording, the researcher used an audio tape recorder to provide an accurate record of what was said. By recording the interview, the researcher was free to personally interact with the respondent. Note-taking was limited to outlining major themes that were beginning to evolve, and provided a clear and concise way for member-checking techniques, constant reflecting, and review. By using a combination of both recording methods, the researcher aimed to maximize the accuracy of the interview situation yet facilitate the interpersonal qualities of inquiry.

### **Instrumentation**

Unlike the instruments of conventional research, the human instrument is the most important tool in constructivist inquiry. In the presenting study, the researcher was the primary instrument for data collection.



Therefore, the researcher took various steps in preparation for inquiry. These strategies aimed to enhance the quality of the data-gathering process and facilitate interaction between researcher and respondents.

Firstly, the researcher became familiar with the ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions of the constructivist paradigm, namely concepts of *relativism, subjectivity, and hermeneutic dialectic* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Secondly, the researcher attempted to gain greater sensitivity to the respondents' social, cultural, and environmental contexts by seeking out information through reference material (e.g. newspaper articles, novels, textbooks, essays, videos). As an outsider coming in, the researcher was presented with certain challenges as he attempted to become aware of the divergent meanings and cultural understandings of various cultural groups, such as youth culture and Southeast Asian ethnic groups. Through such preparation, however, the researcher was able to broaden his understanding of the realities and experiences of the respondents and bridge the sociocultural dissonance between the researcher and the participants.

Though the constructions of the researcher will not be identical to those of respondents, they must be compatible so that communication can take place (Erlandson, et al, 1993). It is imperative that the researcher communicate

with the various stakeholders in a manner that makes sense, or "reflect the respondents' world view" (Patton, 1980). The bicultural, or Asian-American identity of the researcher conducting the presenting inquiry provided a certain basis of commonality with Southeast Asian informants. Though no immigration and acculturation experiences are identical, this common ground enabled the researcher to better understand their constructions, as well as provide the researcher the motivation for investigation of the research problem. An attitude of genuine interest and the ability to engage with informants guided much of the data collection process.

Underlying this preparatory approach to constructivist research is the *learning attitude* that the researcher must acquire and convey during the entire inquiry process (Erlandson, et al, 1993). Therefore, prior to entering the research setting, the researcher conceded that no one is more of an expert on what they know, understand, and feel than the stakeholders themselves. By adopting a learning attitude, the researcher avoided imposing, even inadvertently, his own interpretations or constructions. Since the researcher was necessarily intrusive upon participant's environment, he aimed to adopt a personal style that invited trust, dissipated suspicion, and conveyed genuine intrigue, interest, and sensitivity. These mutual and interactive qualities enabled the researcher to access

the rich storage of data within the research setting and obtain the fullest picture communicated by respondents' relevant constructions of reality (Fetterman, 1989).

### **Quality Control**

Guba and Lincoln (1985) suggest various ways the researcher can establish "trustworthiness," which enables the study to make reasonable claims to methodological soundness.

In this study, the trustworthiness of observations was established through *triangulation*, which is the process of comparing and testing one source of information against another (Erlandson, et al, 1993). Triangulation strips away alternative explanations, and improves the quality of data and accuracy of findings. In this study, each piece of significant information was expanded by at least one other source by conducting another interview or through review of the literature.

Trustworthiness was further established through the *hermeneutic dialectic process*. Within this process, the important technique of "member checking" verified data and interpretations with those from whom they were collected from (Erlandson, et al, 1993).

The dependability and confirmability of the study was also determined through an *audit trail* developed by the researcher (Erlandson, et al, 1993). These include records

kept during the study, such as notes regarding the inquiry process, procedures, and decisions.

### **Phases of Inquiry**

#### **The Initial Phase: Orientation and Overview**

The researcher started with ethnic community leaders as the initial stakeholder group and elicited their constructions about their experiences, concerns, and perceptions of Southeast Asian youth. Initially, the researcher allowed respondents freedom of expression. However, when subsequent respondents did not add further information, the interviewer introduced themes from earlier respondents and elicited their responses to them. At the end of each interview, the researcher solicited nominations for other respondents. The major purpose of this phase was to maximize the range of divergent constructions, which provided an *overview and orientation* to the setting (Erlandson, et al, 1993). Due to time limitations, the presenting study completed the initial phase of inquiry as the researcher conducted a single round of interviews, and was able to begin a second round of interviews with only three informants. Given more time, the researcher would have conducted subsequent rounds of interviews with the same set of informants, which would have focused on the emerging claims, concerns, and issues previously shared by relevant constructs. Ideas that were only a blur in the initial

phases would have then taken on a sharper focus (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Member Checking**

Before analyzing the data, the researcher conducted a *member check*, which allowed members of stakeholder groups to verify, challenge, or correct interpretations, categories, and conclusions of the researcher. This technique is most important in establishing credibility and trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checks may be conducted continuously in a formal or informal manner throughout the data collection process (Erlandson, et al, 1993). In this study, the researcher routinely conducted member checks throughout the duration of the interview by giving the informant an opportunity to verbally verify interpretations and data gathered earlier. The researcher also formally conducted member checks by furnishing copies of summarized analyses of interviews to stakeholder groups. A final member check was conducted by furnishing copies of the entire study to each of the participants.

### **Data Analysis**

The principles of the *constant comparative method* as presented by Glaser and Strauss (1967) were utilized as a method for data analysis in this study. This method involved the comparison of the most recent responses with previous responses in a search for consistencies. Unlike traditional research paradigms, constructivist research

involves an inseparable, interactive, and ongoing relationship between data collection and data analysis. In this study, this ongoing process provided direction for subsequent interview questions and data collection-analysis procedures.

Beginning from the very first interview, the researcher responded to the first available data and immediately formed tentative inferences from the context. The researcher then *unitized* the data by dividing it into units that were relevant and uniquely interpretable. Next, "incidents" were tentatively assigned to provisional categories on a intuitive "look-alikeness" or "feel-alikeness" judgment.

The process of coding these incidents was conducted through direct data entry into computer using a word processing program. Much like the system of index cards suggested by Glaser and Strauss (1967), the system of computer entry involved placing single entries into larger categorized folders. Before new incidents collected in subsequent interviews were integrated with existing incidents, they were judged on whether they exhibited the category properties that had been tentatively identified. The constant comparing back and forth gave the researcher confidence that he was converging on some stable and meaningful category set. As these provisional categories began to accumulate substantial numbers of "unit cards," the



researcher placed a category label that served as the basis of inclusion/ exclusion criteria for new information.

The data collection process was informed by what the researcher had previously learned through prior analysis and collection. Categories thus changed over time; some disappeared and merged under more general labels. Consequently, categories soon "emerged" as ones constructed by the researcher or as categories used by the respondents. The data collection and analysis process continued until all identified informants had participated.

Moreover, this continuous process also provided a means for deriving theory. The constant comparison of incidents began to generate theoretical properties in each of the categories and a conceptual frame of patterns, themes, and connections between them. From these categories, grounded theories were developed.

### **FINDINGS**

The researcher asked key adult informants to share their perceptions of Southeast Asian youth living here in America, and youth informants were asked to share their own experiences. In the process of inquiry, the researcher was provided with a range of information. There were major constructions that emerged from the interviews: the experiences of living in a bicultural environment, namely the American schools and ethnocultural traditions of home; the bicultural skills that helped them adapt and function in

these environments; and key support systems that further assisted them cope with its various demands. From these various constructions, there were specific areas of consensus and divergence related to various themes.

### **School Experience**

Education was described as the principal endeavor for refugee youth. The school experiences of refugee youth were particularly significant, given the cultural importance placed on education, and the fact that the school system was also an institution that refugee youth interface and interact with the most. The constructions of their school experiences were thus the overriding focus of the presenting study. The researcher sought to capture various perspectives of their school experiences by eliciting the constructions of those in the school environment, including both students and key support agents.

### **Sense of Powerlessness and Loss**

As newcomers, refugee students enter a social environment that is foreign to them. When the researcher elicited from informants what the "refugee experience" meant to them, they often described it in terms of force or loss. As one key informant stated:

"It means that you came to this country against your own will. You came here because you were forced to leave your own country and come here. That's why you are called a 'refugee.'"



Another informant stated:

"When you come here because you were forced to come here, you leave behind your own family members, all your culture, your history, your ancestors' place."

Informants also described the refugee experience as a handicap or loss of basic functioning and abilities. As a key informant stated: "You are totally a stranger here. You have eyes, but you don't see. You have ears, but you don't hear. You have a tongue, but you cannot speak."

Key youth informants described their loss in terms of social support. Responses describing such loss ranged from leaving family and friends behind to the profound sense of loneliness here in America, particularly in times of distress, confusion, or fear. As one college student stated:

"When I first came, oh, man, I miss my friends over there. Because anytime I get in trouble, like those people that want to mess around with me, and laugh at me, that makes me upset and miss my friends more in Vietnam. That's because they were already friendly and there's family over there."

These experiences of fear, confusion, loneliness, and sadness were in stark contrast to those who had previously gone to school back in Vietnam. To these informants, they described the school life as like family. As one high school student stated: "Over here at school, it is not like family. In Vietnam, we communicate - all students are really friends. We miss them when we come over here."

## **Language Ability and Social Interaction**

Another consensus that emerged among youth informants when describing their school experiences was limited language ability. Student informants made references to handicaps due to language proficiency, such as one high school student who stated: "The first time I came here, I cannot hear, because they speak very fast, and I cannot hear what they speak. The teachers too, when they spoke, I cannot hear."

When asked about the nature of the relationships between Southeast Asian students and rest of student body, students and teachers did not report serious racial or ethnic conflict in the school environment. In fact, the responses ranged from "there's no big problem with racism" to "we all get along beautifully here." Many informants confirmed that any harassment or conflict that did exist in the school environment occurred as a result of language. Informants stated that attempts to speak English were sometimes received by ridicule. As one high school student stated:

"When I first came, I did not speak much English, just basic communication dialogue--like 'how are you?' or 'hi'--not much at that time. And I got a problem with my pronunciation. A lot of people were making fun of me, just because the way I talk...it was just a really really hard time."

Another high school student similarly stated: "When I spoke English, they would make fun of us, joking, saying you're speaking another language."

Language acquisition not only impacted the learning experience, but the development of social and interpersonal skills as well. Their ability to speak English was an important factor in the extent to which they interacted with peers outside their ethnic group. Key informants stated that this lack of language proficiency, particularly during their first years in American schools, contributed to the fear, loneliness, and sadness within the school environment. Out of protection, fear, or confusion, students reported that most of their friends were primarily students from their own ethnic group. As one college student explained, "We can speak to each other and understand each other because we share the same experiences." Consequently, the students were "linguistically isolated," limiting their interactions with those who spoke their own language. As one tutor stated, "We have problems with kids who are new arrivals..they do not speak English fluently. So that is why sometimes they are afraid to make friends with other kids."

Students were also reported to be unable to participate in certain activities, such as student clubs, due to language ability. These clubs were identified by student informants as something they wanted to be part of, but were

unable to join because of limited language skills or the lack of club members from their particular ethnic group.

There were various factors from their family that also limited their opportunities to fit into the mainstream. These included parents' attitude towards teaching approaches and their perception that the school system seemed to be allocated for play since extra-curricular activities were considered an important part of the school program. According to one informant,

"The problems arise when mom and dad are more traditional and don't let them participate in after-school activities. And the kids want to blend in. But most parents don't allow them to participate. The parent's own way of thinking is 'well, you go to school, you learn, you go home and do homework, and you go back to school.' That's it."

Another Cambodian tutor believed that the educational level of parents was an important factor in their child's academic success. "If the family has some education, then the kids will learn faster. If the parent's don't have some education, the kids will have a lot of problems learning English."

It appears that the ability to speak and understand English was a critical key to establishing themselves academically and socially in the school environment. Given that language ability was critical in these areas, some informants spoke how it also impacted the students' sense of self esteem. As one bilingual tutor stated:

"They feel down, they feel like they're not succeeding..Their level of self-esteem changes. At first they come over, they feel so down because back home they took high classes in chemistry and in physics. And over here, when they first come over, because the language is limited, I say, 'Well, you cannot take that class.' Their self esteem is very low."

On the other hand, for those students who had a greater ability and confidence to communicate and interact, their circle of friends were reported to widen to include peers outside of their ethnic group. This ability to interact with the mainstream, however, was not without its consequences, as noted by a bilingual tutor:

"They lose their own language. And so if they hang around their own Vietnamese students, and if they say something in their native tongue, and they say it wrong, they may become ridiculed. So they'd rather be with their American friends. Now they make mistakes in English, but their American friends understand that that's not their native language. So they can laugh at their mistakes. But if they make a mistake in their own mother tongue, it's like a disaster."

Presented with the challenge of learning a new language to succeed in school, along the with the desire to make friends, it appears that Southeast Asian students must find opportunities that build both academic and social skills. However, unable to use their new English language skills with confidence in socially safe situations, namely in

friendships, refugee students found that the task of language acquisition was made even more difficult.

### **Language Assistance**

One of the greatest challenges for refugee children is that they must learn English not only quickly, but fluently enough to use in an English-taught classroom for their academic subjects. According to key informants, refugee students received assistance to address their language needs either through placement in some structured program or received individualized help through bilingual tutors. The shelter English class served as a means of providing both English language development and content instruction to secondary students who would otherwise be lost in the regular English taught curriculum. Other available means of assistance included translation of core text materials, assistance in note-taking and studying for exams, in-class translation or out-of-class of support, cooperative learning formats, and after-school ESL support.

Refugee students, however, often felt pressure to make it out of shelter classes and be reclassified into the mainstream. As one tutor stated, "They want to take the highest class level, like the honors class, even though they have to struggle. But they're willing to work hard." Some students were reported to feel embarrassment over being labeled "ESL" or "shelter class" students. As one tutor

stated, "If they take low class or take shelter classes, they feel down, they feel like they're not succeeding."

The desire of Southeast Asian refugee students to succeed in school may be met with the various challenges of learning a new language. The role of language assistance programs played an important part in helping students deal with these areas of their school experience. The functions of these assistance programs and key support agents were thus prominent themes during inquiry and will be discussed later in greater detail.

#### **Differences in Educational Systems**

Some of the difficulties experienced by refugee students were simply related to the differences between the educational systems in their native homeland and in the United States. Students were reported to feel overwhelmed by these differences, which ranged from the structure of the school systems to the behavioral and attitudinal differences between students. A Vietnamese tutor stated that education in Vietnam is formal and structured; learning is passive as teachers lecture and students listen, watch, and imitate. Consequently, the refugee children may be unaccustomed to the American way of relating and informality. Another tutor stated that perceived attitudinal differences among students may foster resentment for refugee youth. As one Vietnamese tutor stated, "They feel like why they have to perform their



best when they're looking around at all the other students who kind of kick back."

In summary, the researcher found that the school environment presents the refugee student with numerous opportunities and challenges. As newcomers, their school experiences were generally characterized by conflicting demands as high expectations and hopes collide with the realities in this new environment.

### **Home Life**

Whereas the school represented a new environment with its various challenges, the home for Southeast Asian youth represented a place with its own unique expectations and challenges. The constructions of home life reflect how refugee young people experience their families as a source of support as well as a high expectations. The responses of both youth and adult informants reveal a range of perceptions that reflect this ambivalence.

### **Family Structure and Function**

The numerous challenges and difficulties of the refugee experience and adjustment process inevitably exert certain stresses upon the family. Divorce and marital distress within their families were reported by several informants. Changes in sex roles, financial hardship, and other stresses of resettlement were reported to be some of the factors attributed to spousal divorce, which is a relatively rare occurrence in their culture. As one college student



reflected: "The stress really affected my family. Asian families are usually really tight and they stay together, but there was so much stress, it was just overwhelming for my parents."

Other reported changes within the family structure included changes in well-defined roles which guided behavior and attitudes. Changes in family roles and hierarchical structure were often attributed to the fact that the youth were assimilating to the American culture at a much different pace than their parents. Key informants specifically stated that refugee youth usually learn English more quickly than many of their parents. This often placed refugee children in a difficult situation; they must learn the language to succeed in school, yet are often relied upon by parents to translate in difficult language situations and help guide their family through strange systems, such as school and social service agencies. Though youth informants did not report specific conflict due to this reversal of roles, adult informants did mention that this reliance created a role reversal which strays away from well-defined family roles of traditional Vietnamese or Cambodian society.

Related to the changes in family structure was the impact of the resettlement process upon the sense of collectively among Vietnamese and Cambodian newcomers. Informants recalled how the migration and resettlement experiences had split-up families and other collective

support systems. Due to geographical separation during resettlement and an increasing sense of self-reliance, families were less able to look towards the support of the collective structure of family and the community whose supportive functions included that of consultation, validation, criticism, and moral guidance. The absence of such supportive functions were attributed to marital distress and divorce, school dropouts, gang membership, youth runaway, and lack of morality.

### **Value Divergence and Conflict**

When asked to describe the experiences within the family, one of the common themes that emerged was that of perceived differences between ethnic values and those they believed to be dominant American values. Both Cambodian and Vietnamese informants outlined common key values or the rules of social conduct for children. These included filial piety, respect for authority, high regard for elders, self-control and restraint in emotional expression, shame as a behavioral influence, and the centrality of family relationships and responsibilities.

In concert with other family members who are introduced to unfamiliar customs in the social environment, Southeast Asian children and young people come in contact with new behaviors and perspectives throughout their experiences in mainstream society. The context, of course, in which much of this exposure takes place is within the social context of

the school system. The relationships among students and teachers and the atmosphere of accepted social attitudes and behaviors were reported to create a "hidden curriculum" which may clash with existing cultural belief systems. The wide range of influence exerted upon the refugee youth included the informal and seemingly disrespectful way students interact with teachers, lack of discipline, and the way students were taught to express opinions and ask why, whereas at home, parents expect strict obedience and respect. The mainstream structure of education was also reported by informants to have a wide range of influence over individual lives of young people, ranging from clothing, dating practices, attitudes towards education and peers, to language.

This process of change was perceived and identified as becoming or acting "more American." When asked what this meant, references were made regarding increased autonomy, freedom and independence, and lack of respect for authority. Clearly, the values and behavior identified to be American were not part of the cultural framework of the ethnic group.

Consequently, the potential for generational conflict exists in the families and communities of newcomers to America, as the children take on its values, norms, language, and teenage behavior, including autonomy and self-direction. As one high-school senior stated:

"Sometimes I feel like I want to do something and my parents are like 'no, you have to depend on your parents for your future.' In America, you can do everything what you think, how you feel, you can do it. That's what my teachers say. But my parents say 'no.' You have to tell your parents before you do something. I have to fight for it, to do whatever I want."

Refugee students are thus caught in between loyalty to the family and its values and the need to adjust as they learn new ideas in their social environment. This places young people in a difficult situation, as one teenage informant expressed: "If I have to act like American, what will the Vietnamese people think of me? And if I act like Vietnamese, what will my American friends think of me?"

#### **The Family as a Haven**

Southeast Asian youth, like most children, look to their families for support and protection in surviving in the world. When asked if they felt any pressure or resentment as a result of educational, cultural, or family expectations, youth informants responded by focusing rather on the supportive functions of their family. In fact, the responses of youth informants did not include any references of what would be perceived as criticism or negative comments, whereas, adults informants were more candid in their descriptions of the pressure children experienced as a result of these expectations. The focus of youth informants upon family support rather than conflict may demonstrate cultural values of deep respect and tremendous loyalty to

their family and parents. One Vietnamese college student recalled how this loyalty motivated him to study and stay out of gangs:

"My mom and my dad support me, so they say whatever I do, they will support me, but they say don't join a gang. I can't be educated when I join in a gang, and it would be out of the goal of what they want me to do. My goal is to be educated, so that's why I try to keep myself out of gangs."

Another Cambodian student recalled the struggles and suffering of his family's escape after the Pol Pot invasion. His memories of these experiences included witnessing great suffering, including an older brother who died from starvation and grandparents who died from diseases. Yet he reflects upon the strength and closeness of his family:

"We struggle through many conflicts, political and economical problems. Even though we came here, we still have something like a souvenir, like memory..so we think of each other, so that gives us a close relationship. My parents are still alive, and all the children want to be around with them. Most of the weekends, we get together. Instead of going out with all our friends, we get together, cooking food, and then we become close."

In summary, it appears that the refugee youth, amidst the influence exerted by the new social environment, still experience their families as a source of acceptance, support, and security. Furthermore, as refugee youth negotiate their new environment, they stay close to their families to ensure a secure home base that is familiar.

Perhaps as a result of the migration and resettlement processes, the youth maintained a sense of unity or as a Cambodian youth simply, yet eloquently stated, "The time we live make us become tight, we like form as one."

### **Support Systems in the Social Environment**

The researcher identified informants from key support systems in the social environment. The characteristics of these social support systems were initially constructed through informants' responses in terms of the availability and accessibility of school-based and community-based support.

#### **School Support Systems**

The availability of support system within the school environment was critical, particularly in the areas of academic assistance, social interaction, and language development that builds not only intellectual, but social skills as well.

In this study, the researcher identified key bilingual support agents from the five schools included in the study. Each of the bilingual informants identified some program at their respective schools to assist students with limited language ability. In one middle school, an ESL class, which was led by a Vietnamese instructor, consisted of students from different cultures. Instruction in this class was directed towards communication and literacy in English; the child's native language was not used.

In each of the two high schools, key informants identified a "shelter class" program which provided academic content instruction to students who would be otherwise lost in the regular English-taught curriculum. These shelter classes also provided an important haven for the Southeast Asian student--a place to try out English without fear of being laughed at, a place where the teacher took the time to be sure they understood what was occurring.

In each of the other schools, there was not a formal language assistance program for students. Instead, students had access to bilingual assistants who were able to assist them in the academic content of regular classes. In one of the middle schools, a Cambodian support agent worked as a language assistant in the mornings, and in the afternoon, worked out of the school's Healthy Start program as a community liaison for the Cambodian students and their families. Through this program, the school serviced families of students and provided them with various services, such as translation support, health screenings, and referrals to community services. In the other middle school, a Cambodian support agent was employed as a teachers assistant; his tasks involved translation support, as well as teaching Cambodian culture, history and art to Cambodian students through the learning resource center.

Although informants in this key stakeholder group had different titles, such as "bilingual tutor," "language

assistant," and "ESL instructor," they all expressed and demonstrated a willingness to help refugee students. As key support agents, these were individuals who made themselves accessible and available to the students by providing in-class support and observation, in-class assistance in note-taking, to after-school support in completion of homework and studying for exams. Each of these informants seemed to demonstrate an attitude that was inviting as they presented themselves as a resource for the children to utilize. As one tutor simply stated: "Whatever the kids need help in, we are there to help them. Another tutor similarly stated,

"I want to be here to help the ones who first come to this school, know no English, and scared to death. And I'm here, and say, 'come see me whenever you have a problem' or guide them, teach them a lesson, or teach them so they can pass a test, and keep their sense of success so they won't give up in school."

In return, the student informants spoke highly and affectionately about bilingual support agents, stating that they were very nice and helpful. In fact, both tutor and student informants described the support of bilingual tutors or assistants as "family-like" As one tutor stated, "It's just like family, whatever problem they have, sometimes they just come up to you, and sometimes you can just tell." These responses indicate that the stress placed on the refugee student is thus mitigated by the presence of a bilingual tutor in schools. The responses further indicate that the



assistance programs, such as shelter classes, importantly provided greater individualized attention, a slower pace, a focus on language development and acquisition, and most importantly a "safe" environment for the refugee student.

In summary, the study identified key support agents in the school system who showed a high commitment to helping students and providing them the necessary support. Given the fact that the educational system is the one that refugee youth interface with the most, the potential impact upon the lives of these students is tremendous.

### **Family Support Systems**

The availability of family support was particularly an important issue among key informants. The majority of informants emphasized the importance of family support in terms of involvement and supervision for refugee youth. In fact, without such support and supervision, the children as well as the family unit was vulnerable to undesirable outcomes, which were reported to include maladaptive behavior, such as running away, dropping out of school, and youth gang activity.

Although key informants stressed the importance of parental involvement in school, they confirmed that there is a general lack of parental involvement in the school system. Factors that were reported to impact the availability of parental support ranged from work schedules, changes in well-defined family roles, to cultural and generational

divergence. This gap between parents and school created problems for both parents themselves and their children. As a few of the informants stated, some parents do not know what is going on with their children, ranging from their whereabouts during the school day to their academic progress.

Recognizing the importance of parental involvement in the school system, key school support agents extended their availability to the family and similarly demonstrated an inviting approach that alleviated fear and confusion. A Cambodian community liaison demonstrated this by stating:

"I would suggest (the parents) to find out more about school. I had a meeting with them last time. I had two meetings before; I called them up, and wrote a letter and sent it to them in Cambodian. I told them - 'Don't be afraid of the school, you can ask any question. I can help you. I'm here. If you have a question, call me. When you call, just mention my name, and they know it. I'll be here. And if I don't have the answer, I can ask the principal or teacher. So don't be afraid.'"

In summary, it appears that both students and their parents had access to bilingual support to help them function or deal with the school environment. Given the cultural and social importance of the school experience, such support was particularly critical for the refugee family.

### **Support Within the Ethnic Community**

The existence of support systems within the community can also be essential in the resettlement and adjustment processes. Although new arrivals are presented with the challenge to develop new support systems, key stakeholders stated that recent arrivals have the benefit of a more developed social support infrastructure formed by earlier arrivals. These included existing support networks of established refugees within the ethnic community. These support networks included resettlement programs, social service agencies, ethnic community organizations, and religious institutions which all provide essential services to refugee families, including employment, financial, housing, and educational assistance. Existing support systems also included the network of family or relatives who had already settled in the United States. Those refugees without the benefit of such established support were less fortunate and were reportedly left to deal with the resettlement and adjustment processes alone for themselves.

When asked about the existence of local ethnic community organizations, key informants made comparisons between the immediate area of San Bernardino and Riverside counties and those in surrounding areas, namely Orange and Los Angeles counties. Though not to the extent of the infrastructure of "Little Saigon" established in Orange County, the local Vietnamese community were described by its

community leaders as continuing to develop in its services and organization. In contrast, there is not an established Cambodian organization in the local community, according to the two Cambodian informants. The lack of organizations such as those reported to be in Long Beach was attributed to the relatively smaller number of Cambodians in the local area. Sensing a need for greater local organization, however, one of the Cambodian informants has begun developing a beginning framework for a Cambodian community association.

#### **Factors that Impact Acceptability**

The notion of acceptability of social support was also an important theme for informants. A few informants stated that Southeast Asian families may have low acceptability of available support services. Responses regarding low acceptability ranged from distrust of public social service agencies to cultural coping patterns and perceptions which may not fit within with the interventive purposes of established programs, such as child protective or mental health services. As a Vietnamese social worker stated:

"I think the program of services provided by mental health are very alien to people who always resolve problems within the family...You don't go to the outside to tell them you have a problem. To tell someone we have a problem, that means it's the end, a place where you have nowhere else to go. So Vietnamese families usually wait for the last moment when things really get bad."

Families were thus reported to respond with greater acceptance for those services which were provided by individuals or agencies from their particular ethnic community.

### **Key Functions**

After identifying key support systems in the social environment, the researcher attempted to gain a greater understanding of their supportive functions. Informants were thus asked to describe their interactions and transactions with Southeast Asian youth. As support agents, these interactions were primarily aimed to help refugee youth cope with the educational, emotional, and social stressors. By eliciting the constructions of these transactions, the researcher was able to identify key functions or roles in the social environment - *mediator, liaison, case advocate, and enabler*. Though key support agents did not explicitly delineate these roles, the researcher was able to identify these key functions through informants' descriptions of their transactions with refugee youth.

### **Mediation: Resolving Conflicts**

One of the important roles for key informants were mediating the various conflicts that existed in the student's social environment. The skills of mediation included neutrality and the ability to understand the situations of both sides. Mediators were also able to

effectively convey and transmit ideas with the aim of reconciliation of differences.

Key informants stated they provided mediation when intergroup conflicts involved refugee students within the school. In response to an incident of harassment of a refugee student, a high school bilingual tutor stated: "I met with the Mexican and American kid, and try to understand them, and say 'You have to help him. If you guys went to my country, and you can't speak Vietnamese, how would you guys feel?' So I try to make them understand each other."

Another situation in which key informants functioned as mediators were conflicts within the context of the family unit. At the root of these disputes were reported growing cultural schisms between the generations as well as the reported decline in the authoritative power of parents. One informant reported that parents often complain that their children were becoming "American" in many ways, ranging from modes of dress to being increasingly independent, outspoken, and individualistic. Further exacerbating the depth and significance of these changes was the reported growing inability of parents to effectively control their children.

Mediation was thus needed to resolve or reconcile differences. The leader of an ethnic community organization described his interventions as a mediator in family conflict, which typically involved parents extremely frustrated with a child who failed to adhere to family

rules. Presented with such conflict, he stated that he usually talks to the child first, and finds out what the problem is. In the process, he often finds himself pointing out to the child his or her role within the family structure. In one particular incident, he recalled saying to a teenage son, "Well, you are one family, if you don't help, what will happen?" and reminded the him that it was his parents who took care of his needs, and "without them, what would you do?" He further states that during these home visits, he often uses physical objects, such as a plant, to illustrate his point. "If nobody takes care of the plant on the table, the plant will die. But if each person takes a little of their time to water it, the plant will grow if everybody helps." This support agent then stated "I bring all the information they gave me and get both parties together to straighten things out." He further states that sometimes he also finds himself encouraging parents to make necessary adjustments in their expectations of their children.

Recognizing that the self-image is intricately woven into the family image, key support agent focused intervention on the family as a whole rather than solely upon the individual. Such interventions also had a restorative quality by reestablishing an orderly network of hierarchical family relationships, while at the same time teach new roles and modify traditional family functions

### **Liaison: Making Connections**

Another key function conducted by support systems was that of liaison. This role was usually assumed in the context where a lack of connection, relationship, communication, or mutual understanding existed. This type of situation was often described when key informants discussed the relationship of refugee families with the school system, which was often characterized as lack of close connection for both students and their parents.

Key support agents discussed various ways in which they sought to connect linguistically-isolated students with the rest of the school. Students were often encouraged by key support agents to interact with other students. As one bilingual tutor stated, "I encourage them to speak out, don't hold back. I always give them advice 'You're a foreigner, but don't feel shy.'" Interaction was also facilitated through more formal activities. In one of the schools, an Asian student club was described by students and tutors as particularly helpful in providing peer support and a context for greater involvement in the school program. As a co-sponsor of the club, a Vietnamese bilingual tutor stated "The Asian kids are real shy..when they can't speak English, they're afraid to be in contact with others. So we opened this club so they can enter communication with what's going on with others and in the school." It appears that these activities forged connections with other students,



promoted cultural diversity, and supported a strong ethnic and cultural identity.

Informants identified a need to also establish and maintain greater communication and mutual understanding between parents and the school system. As a high school bilingual tutor stated,

"When the parents first come over here, they feel intimidated so they stay home most of the time, they hardly come to school. And with our system over here, we don't require them to come. It's kind of like volunteer. And they feel like 'Well, it's volunteer, I will not come because I don't want to show up and embarrass myself.'"

Key informants pointed to situational or cultural factors rather than a lack of concern to explain the lack of parental involvement. Explanations ranged from fear and embarrassment due to a lack of English ability; reluctance in criticizing or questioning the schools due to respect for teachers; work schedules that make it difficult to come; and uncertainty about how to actually get involved. Given these factors, key informants spoke of the importance of necessarily taking the initiative in connecting with parents. As one tutor stated, "It takes our initial step, and if we don't do it, they're not going to volunteer to come."

Familiar with both cultural (Vietnamese or Cambodian and American) and social systems (family and school), these key support agents also aimed to achieve a mutual

understanding regarding certain issues of concern, such as school practices of disciplining and policies regarding dress codes. For example, several key informants stated that parents are particularly disturbed by what they view as a general lack of student discipline and respect for teachers. The parents have asked them why the American teachers do not physically discipline students and apply the kinds of pressure with students that are common practices back in Vietnam and Cambodia. Parents were reported to be similarly frustrated by their limited ability to discipline their children here in America due to child protective laws.

Presented with these perceptions, the researcher elicited the interventions of key support agents. These individuals took on the responsibility to clear up misunderstandings and to communicate with the parents appropriate ways to express their authority. As a Cambodian community liaison stated:

"I say, 'No, no (that type of disciplining) doesn't work that way (here in America).'. . . . One thing that I tell the parents is what I got from the vice-principal, and some ideas from teachers. In America, you can hit your children, but in certain places, and in a certain way - not the head, not the face, but on the butt is OK. Another thing they can do is ground them. If they like to watch TV, don't let them watch. . . until they do what they are supposed to do, then they can watch-- that's the American way."

Presented with a lack of understanding and frustration of parents, these key support agents had the opportunity to

educate them about specific issues of concern. These opportunities mostly occurred in informal situations, although there were some reports of educational exchanges which took place in more formal, organized settings, such as informational meetings with parents conducted by the community liaison. Engaged in the liaison role, key support agents were able to facilitate an exchange of cultural differences and clarification of norms and values which fostered a greater understanding of the school system.

Translation support provided by bilingual support agents was another form of liaison activities. Translation support was particularly crucial, given the profound cultural and lingual barriers that existed between refugee families and mainstream structures. Such support was provided through various activities, ranging from translating school notices and newsletters into Vietnamese or Cambodian, to providing translation during formal and informal meetings, such as teacher conferences and school activities. At one school, the researcher observed a bulletin board which had posted school notices, newsletters, and important information which were both in English and Cambodian. The same Cambodian assistant who devoted his efforts to these activities was also observed translating and guiding Cambodian parents through the exhibit of student projects at the school's science fair. By providing translation support in these various ways, the bilingual

individual, who is indigenous to the ethnic community, importantly served as a processor of key information for systems at the individual, group, and community levels.

Overall, the ability of key support agents to connect with refugee students and parents helped change the perceptions of themselves as being disconnected to being informed and effective agents within their environment.

**Advocate: On the Child's Behalf**

Whereas the mediator and liaison roles took on neutral positions in social situations, certain situations required that support agents take an aligned position of support with students. Case advocacy refers to activity on behalf of a single case, employed in situations where the individual is in conflict with another system. Though there were no reports of widespread racial or ethnic tension at the schools, both student and school informants reported isolated incidences of prejudice or racial harassment. In these situations, key support agents aligned themselves with students and took necessary actions on their behalf. As one high school tutor stated,

"When we hear about (acts of prejudice or harassment), I'm the one that talks with the other students, and if they cannot settle down, I'm going to talk with a teacher who belongs to that student. Then if we cannot do something, I have to go to the principal, like a counselor, and tell about that."

It appears that key support agents were able to provide much needed concern, assistance, and protection for refugee youth in the face of such conflicts.

**Enabler: A Means to an End**

Inextricable in each of the key functions previously mentioned is the function of empowerment or enabling. As they are transplanted into an unfamiliar culture and society, refugee children and their parents experience a sense of powerlessness. Responses of key informants regarding factors that contributed to this sense of powerlessness included language barriers; unfamiliarity with American customs, rules, and norms; physical attributes; subtle discrimination and prejudice; and the loss of social support networks, status, roots, and the sense of "connectedness" that were readily available in their native environment. Empowerment thus involved enabling students as well as their parents to achieve desired goals, which included enhanced skills to exercise interpersonal influence or perform valued social and cultural roles. Perhaps the most basic approach of empowerment involved language assistance for refugee students. This was particularly critical, given the importance language was to achieving so many goals, such as fitting in the mainstream, social interaction, academic achievement, and self-esteem.

Empowerment was also critical for parents who sought to exercise more effectively their parental authority.

According to key informants, one of the main implications of reported cultural and generational divergence was a loss in the parents' ability to exercise influence and authority over their children. Within this context of diminished family power, it appears that key support agents aimed to strengthen the role of parents, particularly in areas of effective parenting and greater involvement in school system. Provided with such knowledge and assistance in these areas, parents were better equipped to effectively exercise the socio-cultural mandates of parenting.

Overall, it appears that the adjustment or transition process of refugee students in school can be facilitated by the availability and assistance of key support agents within the school environment. In the presenting study, these key support agents were individuals who spoke the same language and explained things to them, and were willing and took the time to provide the orientation and assistance needed by these students and their families. Furthermore, these individuals demonstrated the ability to move across system boundaries - cultural, social, institutional - as they addressed the various concerns of refugee youth.

### **Bicultural Competence**

In describing their perceptions of Southeast Asian youth, there was an overwhelming consensus that these young people faced great challenges in having to live in different, sometimes conflicting systems. Though the

constructions of having to live in two worlds have been previously discussed, the issue of *how* youth functioned in duality is in itself an important theme. The theme of "bicultural competence" thus emerged as a way to describe how Southeast Asian youth functioned and responded to the various demands in their social environment. This theme emerged in a variety of contexts - in the school, in the home, and ethnic community. The following constructions were elicited and reflect how refugee youth cope and deal with their realities.

#### **Educational Success as a Principle Endeavor**

There was an overwhelming consensus among key informants that education was one of the most important values within Southeast Asian families. Student informants stated that the reason why their families came to America was for them to get an education. Other informants similarly stated that the chance to go to school in America represented a greater opportunity that did not exist in their native countries. As one high school student stated:

"Because in my country, they don't have a chance to study. Some of the poor families don't have money to pay for it. Over here we have to pay nothing. So that's why our parents are always telling us, 'You have a chance to study, so do good for yourself.'"

Given the importance placed upon education, young people were presented with the challenge of succeeding in this endeavor. Consequently, key informants further agreed

that there were family and cultural expectations to succeed. As one informant stated, "The family pushes them a lot and their belief is that if you have no education, you cannot get anywhere."

Informants from the school environment reported that students bring tremendous adaptive qualities to succeed in school. These included a deep motivation and determination to fit into the mainstream. One high school senior described how she felt after she and her friend were teased about how they spoke. She stated "It's good because when some people are joking at us, it makes us want to try more. We go 'OK, make fun of me, but later, I will be like you.'" By studying hard and succeeding in school, refugee youth believed they were able to fit into the mainstream school environment.

The determination of refugee youth was further constructed as they described their willingness to struggle to make it to the highest class level. Students were reported to possess incredible diligence. One tutor recalled how one student used a Vietnamese dictionary to translate words in his U.S. history text book. "You open one page, and you saw like one hundred Vietnamese words."

Another quality that enabled refugee students to succeed in school was their deep respect for teachers. The authority of teachers was characterized by key informants to be equal to that possessed by parents. As one informant



stated "the teacher is very important. At school, they are more powerful than parents." The perceptions of many informants indicated that students in American classrooms do not have respect for the teachers; they openly disagree with teachers, talk back freely and do not always obey directions or commands. Refugee students, however, were reported to show tremendous respect for American and bilingual teachers by listening intently to their advice and instruction. Students also sought to please those in positions of authority, as one student noted: "Whenever I do good, my teachers tell me 'You're doing very good' and it makes me proud. So I want to study more to make them impressed, to make them proud of me." The cultural notion of shame and pride thus served as motivation for students to succeed in school. Educational success not only enabled a child to obtain "appropriate standing" in school, but within their families, culture, and community as well. Other motivational factors provided by key informants included the desire to achieve certain goals in the future, such as attending college, getting a good job, and taking care of their parents.

Overall, Southeast Asian students were reported to have made tremendous progress in their education. Through dedication and hard work, it was not uncommon for students to initially enter the school with no English language skills, work hard while placed in a language assistance

program, and then enroll and succeed in the honor classes. For those students who did not progress as quickly, diligence and determination still characterized their efforts.

It is clear that despite the challenge of adapting to the various educational demands of school environment, their ability to succeed was tied to existing cultural values. Bringing with them a tremendous respect for education and a discipline and motivation for learning, students were able to translate these values into a catalyst for adaptation to a new and "strange" system and succeed in one of their principal endeavors - education. The ability to translate these cultural values into adaptive strengths in the new environment reflects a certain bicultural competence possessed by refugee youth.

#### **The Family as Home Base**

When the researcher elicited perceptions of their family experiences, youth informants also described the disparity between the school environment and their family life. This construction was reflected by a high school senior, who simply stated: "In school, I act American. But when I come home with my parents, I act like Vietnamese." Another student stated it is like having "two faces."

As previously discussed, these children are often caught in the familiar conflict between disparate cultural

norms. A female high school senior reflected upon this difficult position as she stated:

"Americans don't care about anything but freedom -- you can do anything you want, anything you like...(you) don't have a lot of respect. But (my) parents at home - we have to respect very much. It's really hard for me. Sometimes I don't know how to deal with it. If I have to act like Vietnamese, what will my friends think? It's really hard."

Although some informants believed that acceptance of new values by youth inevitably decreased ties to traditional or cultural precedents, there was a general consensus that it was important for young people to create a middle ground. Responses by key informants indicated that some of the new customs were readily accepted, some they participated in but did not particularly adopt, and some they rejected outright. It was clear among the youth interviewed that they had rejected forms of extreme independence which would have been exercised through specific actions, such as dropping out of school, moving out of the home, unacceptable dating practices, and a disregard for their parents or culture. In fact, the responses of various informants indicated that the value of obeying one's parents was not discarded by refugee youth. Furthermore, the youth were reported to be able to recognize what was expected of them by their parents, namely respect and discipline in both school and at home.

In the midst of this disparity and conflicted instructions, the youth maintained a respect for the family

and parental authority. Again their ability to translate cultural values, such as respect for education and authority, into adaptive strengths in their social environment reflect a unique bicultural competence that enables them to function in both worlds.

### **Bilingual: Foundation of Bicultural Competency**

The various constructions of language were critical to many of the responses of informants. As previously discussed, proficiency in English served many functions for refugee students. Just as much as language was an important tool for positive adjustment, key informants also believed that language was an important component of cultural identity.

Concerns were thus raised by key informant regarding young people, who while growing up here in America, would begin to lose valued aspects of their culture, such as their native language. This concern formed an important construction and emerged specifically into an important theme: speaking Cambodian or Vietnamese was a critical aspect of ethnic identity.

As a community leader passionately stated: "Language is not a way of expression, thinking, feeling, emotion. Language is emotion, and feeling of a culture." He further added that "Once you forget your language, you think with an American way and you will lose your culture. So that's why we believe that language is a very very important cultural

norm." He proposed specific ideas on how the community can help achieve the goal of language promotion, which included language classes for Vietnamese young people, which would be sponsored by the organization.

### **Fostering a Bicultural Identity**

Although key informants held various positions within the social environment, there was an overwhelming consensus among them that it was necessary for students to have the skills to live in both cultural systems - Vietnamese or Cambodian and American systems. Almost every informant, including students, discussed the need to keep and maintain their cultural values. This was communicated in various ways, as previously indicated in the preceding discussion.

Informants agreed that true success and happiness cannot be achieved by having only adapted in one system. Rather, true success and happiness, according to informants, can be found in developing the skills to maintain a balanced and integrated identity to live in both worlds. As a community leader stated,

"What's the happiness? They can swim either way. That's what we want. (Without a bicultural identity) the children will be unhappy, they will be totally lost in the future. They might think like American, they might speak English language as their own language, and totally forget their own language. But they will never be fully an American."

A developing bicultural identity thus emerges as a result of increasing competence in both worlds, as reflected

by the same informant above, "I am not an American. I am not a Vietnamese. I am *Vietnamese-American*. This is what we also want for our children."

The complex task of building bicultural competence and identity was not something that youth were left to do solely by themselves. This concern and responsibility was shared by key support agents and systems in their social environment. This was done in various ways, depending upon support agents' particular position or role in the environment.

One Cambodian tutor was able to implement Cambodian history and culture into a class he taught through the school's learning resource center. Through this kind of instruction, he aimed to create for young Cambodian students a sense of reality and importance about their cultural heritage and history. Ideas and activities learned within this class, such as cultural dance and art, were shared with the rest of the student body, thus developing among all students an awareness, tolerance, and skills for living in a diverse social environment. According to this Cambodian key support agent, this opportunity to foster cultural promotion and awareness for all students reflected an overall philosophy of their particular school, stating that "the school believes in this purpose also."

Another collective concern shared by key informants was the loss of a moral identity that was closely tied to the adjustment process here in America. Loss of morality was



described by various informants as an increasing focus on materialism, cheating, dishonesty, and antisocial behavior, such as drug use, delinquency, gang activity, and violence. Responses from both Vietnamese and Cambodian key support agents reported concerns over increasing gang activity, drug abuse and crime among refugee youth in their respective ethnic communities. Among the factors that were cited as contributors to these activities included break-down in the family, changes in discipline and authority patterns, problems in dealing with new-found freedom, pressing economic conditions, tremendous family pressures to succeed, and the stresses of resettlement. Other concerns included the mentality of needing to survive and succeed at all cost. One tutor spoke of how this mentality runs in both the younger and older generation. For the students, this survival mentality has led to cheating; for adults, an over-emphasis on work and various forms of dishonesty were reported.

Given that the decline of a moral identity was a concern shared by adult informants, the need for greater moral instruction and guidance was equally emphasized. Though moral instruction was the prominent theme among key religious informants, it was also a significant concern spoken by community and school informants as well. In fact, moral instruction was discussed as one aspect of cultural preservation and building a bicultural identity. Drawing

from certain values from their ethnic culture, moral instruction was aimed to teach youth how to appropriately adapt to the new environment. One Cambodian informant stated that parents have come to him and requested that he teach "manners" to their children and has thus included this in his instruction through the student resource center. He described "manners instruction" as important ideas for students, ranging from cultural values of respect to ways of keeping them from joining gangs and using drugs. Moral instruction also seemed to be part of the school curriculum which aimed to promote "citizenship" which was described as teaching immigrant students proper social skills in the new environment. Moreover, the development of a moral identity was characterized by a several informants as "picking up the good and leaving the bad."

Overall, the constructions of bicultural competence allowed the researcher to examine how youth uniquely and effectively coped with the various demands, complexities, and divergence within their social environment. The emphasis on cultural promotion, which included the maintenance and preservation of ideas, customs, skills, arts, and language, reflect not only their desire to embrace cultural pride and identity, but also the realization that these beliefs and values have an important role in their effective functioning in the new environment. The recognition of these demands and challenges of a bicultural



environment have called for innovative ways to translate adaptive strengths and qualities in order to build and foster a unique bicultural identity.

#### **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

Although the researcher aimed to investigate and explore the experiences of Southeast Asian refugee youth, there were various factors that may have limited its depth of understanding. Due to time constraints, this study completed the initial phase of constructivist inquiry, which consisted of only a single round of interviews. Given more time, the researcher would have conducted subsequent rounds of interviews with the same set of informants, which would have focused on participants' emerging claims, concerns, and issues. The subsequent phases of inquiry would have thus allowed a greater understanding of relevant constructs.

Another possible limitation of this study was the broad definition of the population studied. Although this study did not aim to achieve generalizeability to other refugee or immigrant groups, it did attempt to gain a greater understanding of identified Southeast Asian refugee youth informants and key support agents. Bromley (1987) notes that there is a tendency to view Southeast Asian refugees as a homogenous group. This study, like other social work literature, tend to investigate or focus upon Vietnamese refugees. The Cambodian, as well as the Hmong and Laotian populations, however, are not identical to Vietnamese, and

thus warrant their own research (Fong & Mokuau, 1994). Between the Vietnamese and Cambodian participants, there were differences in religion, culture, language, and history which were not outlined in the study. Any study which investigates a group of Southeast Asian refugees but yet does not outline the constructions specific to the diverse refugee populations may inadvertently ignore key differences and inhibit a more accurate understanding of their realities.

### **DISCUSSION**

The presenting study focused on the experiences of refugee youth within their social environment. Although inquiry was mostly conducted within the context of the school system, the researcher aimed to elicit the constructions of others within the social environment. The social environment involves the conditions, circumstances, and human interactions which encompass human beings (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 1993). The social environment also includes all the individuals, groups, organizations, and systems with which persons come into contact. The notion of interdependence and systemic relationships is a way of looking at human behavior and attitudes, and was an appropriate way to look at particular cultural groups, such as Southeast Asian refugees.

### **Transactional Quality of Support**

The findings of the presenting study reflect the transactional quality of social support. As demonstrated in the study, refugee youth are interdependent on other individuals and groups for input, energy, services, and consistency. Social support, whether, formal or informal, is transactional, mediated by what the person does and how receptive she or he is to the efforts of others, the behaviors of those others, and the environment context (Coyne & Holroyd, 1982). Hence, the social support given to and received by refugee youth expresses a person-in-environment relationship. This relationship reflect the notion of human relatedness, which in ecological terms, refers to community identity, competence, and being "in place" (Germain, 1991). Relatedness or interdependence is the essence of any community, which conveys a reciprocity of caring for and being cared about. This idea of interdependence and mutual reliance was particularly crucial for Southeast Asian communities who have had to endure the hardships and challenges of the refugee experience.

By using the social environment as a context of inquiry, a multi-faceted framework of support systems emerged. The Owan and Miranda primary-prevention community model is a prime example of a multi-faceted approach that combines personal, social-support, and institutional units to help refugees improve their adjustment and coping skills.

According to Lum (1996), primary prevention is understood to mean "activities and services, directed at a target population, that will have a positive mental health outcome and will reduce the incidence of mental disorders." Figure 3 (next page) illustrates the interrelationship of these components.

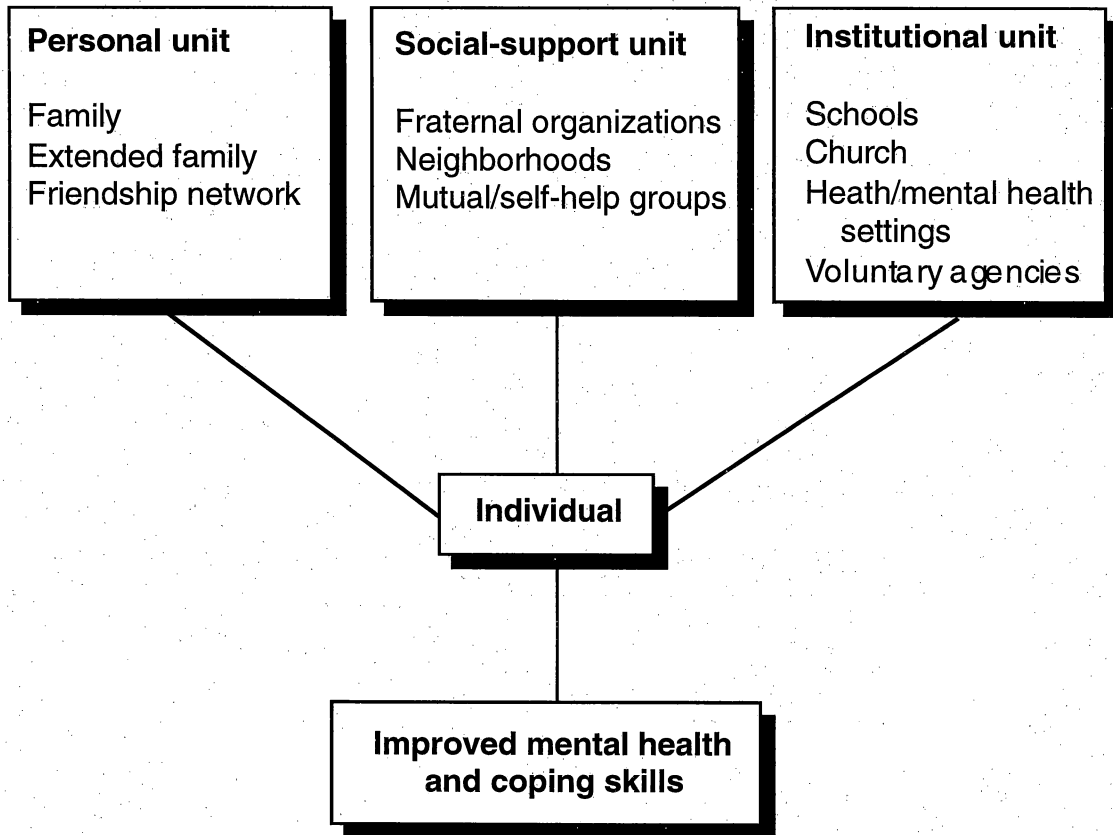
The *personal unit* consists of the family, extended family, and friends, who serve as a natural support system for the refugee (Owan, 1985).

The *social-support unit* consists of social groups, such as educational and cultural groups, religious and spiritual organizations, professional societies, political groups, student clubs, mutual-assistance associations, and emergency refugee-resettlement groups. Aside from meeting their basic needs, these community-based self-help groups strengthen ethnic pride, facilitate coping, and lessen the impact of stress (Owan, 1985).

The *institutional unit* consists of schools, churches, and public and private agencies that provide leadership training to develop client self-determination and coping skills. The institutional unit strengthens refugees' internal network for mutual problem-solving and provides resources to develop educational programs for primary prevention (Owan, 1985).

**Figure 3:**

The Owan & Miranda Primary-Prevention Community Model



Though key support agents of the study were not organized under a structured primary prevention program, the findings do include critical elements of an intervention model aimed to help Southeast Asian refugees cope effectively with their present social situation. Furthermore, the activities conducted or proposed by the key support agents fulfilled the purposes of supportive networks.

The majority of informants or key support agents identified in the study were from the social support and institutional units. Within both local Vietnamese and Cambodian communities there were churches or temples, school-based activities, mutual assistance associations, or other community-based groups which provided cultural maintenance programs to help children retain some link and develop some knowledge of their native culture while developing their new American identity. Though the study did not specifically investigate participation in such programs or its effectiveness, these activities intended to provide much needed support during the transition process. Specific supportive functions include helping young people bridge the two cultures to develop integrated self-concepts and validate a child's dual identity. In the study, preventative efforts at this level included academic assistance, moral instruction in the school through "manners" or "citizenship training," conflict resolution between students, and family mediation. These interventions conducted within the schools and through ethnic community organizations were crucial in helping refugee youth adapt to American life and in minimizing antisocial behavior.

It is important to note, however, that the extent of antisocial behavior, such as gang activity and racial conflict, reported by informants in the study differed from what was conveyed for this youth population in the

literature review. Although it was an expressed general concern by key informants, it was not reported to be a serious problem among the refugee students at the specific schools included in this study. These findings may be in part attributed to the presence and availability of key support agents within the social environment to provide the necessary support and guidance for refugee youth.

Although the study did not include or identify specific support agents from the personal unit, the findings did reflect the importance of recognizing and preserving the natural support systems for refugee youth. The interventions of key support agents in their roles as liaison, mediator, and enabler recognized that the family as the primary source of support for new arrivals. Since the self-image of the refugee youth is intricately woven into the family image, culturally relevant intervention strategies must be centered around or at least congruent with the family support system (Timberlake & Cook, 1984). Restorative techniques were particularly effective at this level of support. The study identified restorative intervention strategies which aimed at (1) restoring an orderly network of hierarchical family relationships; (2) teaching new roles and modifying traditional family functions; (3) restructuring the family's perception of itself from a conflicted unit to an altered but functional family system; and (4) building a sense of belonging to a new community. These techniques were

particularly effective in compensating for basic functioning and performance of well-defined roles, which were impacted by the acculturation process. Restoring refugee youth and the family's self-image and feelings of competence are thus key goals that complement the goal of effective coping (Timberlake & Cook, 1984).

It appears that individuals, families, and the ethnic community transcend the harshness of their conditions by the operation of their natural support networks; their pleasure in language and culture; and shared commitment to moral instruction, cultural maintenance, and social clubs and gatherings. A community laced with natural support systems is more likely to be a community with a firm sense of identity, competence, and self-direction, which were among the key goals of intervention of support agents in the study.

#### **Transactional Quality of Bicultural Adjustment**

The acculturation process, which was another prominent theme in the study, was also described as a transactional process. According to Lum (1996), acculturation is the process of adapting to a new or different culture. In addition to the regular tasks of childhood, the refugee child faces a complicated process of adjustment, particularly in the school environment. Since the educational experience occurs within the context of a social climate, refugee students begin to pick up on new behaviors



and attitudes. The tugs and pulls of cultural identity during the acculturation process described by key informants were an important issue in this study. As refugee youth and their families are caught in between the traditional values of their culture and the new patterns of America, they must learn to make sense out of the demands of their social situations to create a new self-concept which embraces both the old and the new (Timberlake & Cook, 1984). This process involves difficult, perhaps unconscious decisions, such as what is to be saved or sacrificed from the old, evaluating what one wants or needs to adopt from the new, and integrating these into a comfortable sense of self.

The desire of key informants to maintain and promote their culture reflect the notion of "transactional ethnicity" which denotes the ways in which people communicate to maintain their sense of cultural distinctiveness. They also recognized the necessity to learn new ideas as they adapt to their new environment. The emergence of constructions of what it means to be a *Vietnamese-American* and a *Cambodian-American* thus became an overriding theme of the study. The interventions of key support systems demonstrated the importance of developing bicultural attitudes and behaviors, or *bicultural competence*, which refers to "the ability to practice American norms without giving up the traditional norms and values of one's native culture" (Potocky & McDonald, 1995).

Bicultural competency was demonstrated by a strong motivation and ability to succeed and adapt to American culture and society without abandoning their cultural and ethnic heritage, identities, and values.

The findings of the study also reflected important qualities that made the identified key support agents particularly effective. These qualities included a set of attitudes, behaviors, knowledge, and interpersonal skills that were particularly effective in dealing with various systems within the social environment. As individuals from the client system's ethnic or cultural group, these key support agents have also similarly undergone the dual socialization experience with considerable success. As translators, mediators, enablers, or other supportive roles, they were able to share their own experiences and provide information that facilitated understanding of the values and norms of both cultures. In the process of connecting and providing much needed support to refugee youth and their families, these support agents were able to affirm the cultural heritage and identity while also helping them to be effective agents as they adapt to their social environment.

Interventions of key support agents importantly recognized that young people are not simply objects of attention and intervention. Rather, they can and do change their environments so they are better able to adapt to it successfully. Therefore, adaptation often implies a two-way

process involving both the individual and the environment. The youth demonstrated their unique ability to adapt to new conditions and circumstances in order to function effectively in their social environment. Effective participation in their social environment, which was facilitated by various key support agents, helped refugee youth and their families develop some degree of personal self-direction, and experience a greater sense of relatedness or solidarity with others, thereby increasing competence and self-esteem.

A key component of building bicultural competence was the goal of empowerment, which also proved to be an important part of supportive efforts. Individuals cannot exert influence over the environment without adequate personal resources (Lum, 1996). Personal resources, which included concrete assistance, such as employment, money, and shelter were reported to be provided by resettlement programs and ethnic community support. Much of the support described in the study, however, were intangible resources which youth were equally in need of, such as positive self-concept, cognitive skills, competence, and supportive social networks.

Overall, in the this study, the existence of resources in the social environment, namely within the school and ethnic community, formed a collective, supportive network for Southeast Asian refugee families and youth. The

findings indicate that effective delivery of assistance whether through organized community programs or through informal means must include culturally-sensitive and linguistically accessible support. Moreover, key support agents performed both critical preventative and restorative functions and served as coping resources for the youth in dealing with the particular stressors of their environment.

#### **IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE AND RESEARCH**

The focus of social work ultimately is to improve the goodness of fit between the client and others in the ecosystem. In the study, the researcher utilized an ecosystems perspective, which provided an enlightened approach to inquiry. Some commonly-used ecological concepts were used to discuss the experiences of Southeast Asian refugee youth, including *social environment, person-in-environment, transactions, energy, interface, adaptation, coping, and interdependence.*

The ecosystems perspective recognizes that there are specific enduring and transient relationships between and among individuals, families, other groups, institutions, and society at large and that transactions between or among these systems have profound effects on human behavior and functioning (Germain, 1991). Because the nature of these transactions is reciprocal, intervention with refugee youth should address the problems created by person-environment

interactions by assessing the entire ecosystem to effect desired change (Caple, et al, 1995).

Because of the emphasis in Cambodian and Vietnamese cultures on family and community loyalty, solidarity, and cooperation, as reflected by both youth and adult informants in the study, it may be more appropriate for the worker to be concerned with empowerment of the family or community as a whole rather than to focus on individuals (De Anda, 1984). Intervention strategies should draw on various resources in the ecosystem, many of which were identified in the study. These resources include families, schools and school-based programs, ethnic community organizations centers, local churches, resettlement agencies, and other social services (Caple, et al, 1995). The findings of the study also indicate that the school system, which is often the first point of contact for families and youth, can be a valuable resource for providing information, support agents, and social support.

The key support agents in this study demonstrated an ability to engage in various supportive functions or roles depending on what type of assistance was needed in a given situation. Sometimes this necessitated moving beyond the boundaries of a particular system (e.g. peer, school, family). As workers move across systems boundaries to address person-in-environment transactions between youth and the ecosystem, they may have to assume various roles -

enabler, facilitator, coordinator, consultant, advocate, mediator, and teacher (Caple, et al, 1995). In the study, many of these roles were assumed by key support agents to assist the refugee student cope within their social environment.

As demonstrated by key support agents in the study, the effectiveness of intervention depends on the agent's understanding of and sensitivity to the client's cultural beliefs, lifestyle, and social support systems. Support agents must use culturally sensitive interactions based on the cultural strengths of the client system (Caple, et al, 1995). Given the rich diversity of history, language, and cultures among refugee and immigrant groups in America, social workers engaged in cross-cultural practice with individuals and collectivities require cultural sensitivity, culture-relevant knowledge, and bicultural training on an experiential base (Lum, 1996).

Social workers who are not culturally or linguistically similar to the community of focus may find themselves particularly effective in what Rivera and Erlich (1995) define as the "tertiary level" of the community. This area is that of the outsider working for the common interest and concerns of the community. The "primary level" of involvement, which is the most immediate and personal with the community, however, requires that the worker possess the same cultural, and linguistic identity to be most effective

in that community. This level of contact intensity and influence is the most intimate level of community involvement where the only way of gaining entry into the community is to have full ethnic solidarity with the community. According to Rivera and Erlich (1995), the most successful community workers are those who can "identify with their communities, culturally, racially, and linguistically. There is no stronger identification with a community than truly being a part of it." The effectiveness of key support agents identified in the study demonstrate how such identification can importantly facilitate the helping process.

Given the social and cultural dissonance that may exist between a social worker and a client population, strategies must be developed to facilitate access into their community. It is thus imperative that social work professionals, who do not possess the cultural or language identity of a particular community, to make contact with key ethnic leaders, or gatekeepers, who are willing to allow access and share important knowledge of the community setting (Timberlake & Cook, 1984). In this study, the researcher similarly utilized this strategy to gain access into the research setting by identifying key ethnic community leaders as the first informant group of the hermeneutic dialectic circle. As the initial stakeholder group and gatekeepers of the research setting, these individuals were able to provide



important information, including the referral of other key informants. Moreover, as demonstrated in the study, these individuals, through their own efforts or through the efforts of their organizations, help achieve social work goals of helping refugee youth cope effectively within their bicultural environment.

In the study, the researcher identified various key support agents who performed important social functions to help refugee youth develop a bicultural identity. According to De Anda (1984), "the availability of certain types of socializing agents is another factor that can determine the extent of the individual's biculturation." To increase successful bicultural competence and socialization, social workers should search out or provide socializing agents, including cultural translators, mediators, and models who can offer guidelines for dealing with problems and conflict as well as provide critical information of the ethnic population (De Anda, 1984). For example, without good translators, language ability and cultural perceptions may impact the accessibility and acceptability of social support and services. Social workers should similarly identify organizations and activities for participation such as cultural school clubs, ethnic community events, and other social or cultural group experiences (Lum, 1996).

Though not of the social work profession, support agents identified in the study spoke directly to the needs,



hopes, strengths, and concerns of refugee youth, and have directed their energies into ways of educating and nurturing youth to make their aspirations into realities. Social workers should thus consider some of the strategies initiated by key support agents in the study. These include facilitating an ethnic-community identity through participation in various activities, linking families and youth to available ethnic-community resources, sorting cultural values and traditions, and stabilizing family beliefs and traditions (Lum, 1996). The intervention strategies of key support agents showed the importance of consistency with the cultural framework that promote environmental approaches to changing problematic situations. Failure by agencies and professionals to recognize vital aspects of their cultural values, behavior patterns and protocols, interventions may violate cultural norms and patterns. By examining social phenomena as it exist in its own context, this study which was conducted within the constructivist paradigm, sought to examine the experiences of refugee youth in the context of key ethnic support systems. Both researchers and helping professionals alike must recognize that "real problems always appear in particular contexts and while relevant data leading to resolution may come from many sources, their solutions are always bound by those contexts" (Erlandson, et al, 1993)

As suggested by this study's findings and the Owan and Miranda (1985) primary prevention community model, intervention should include various strategies at multiple interventional levels from a unique multicultural perspective. The social worker must create an appropriate intervention strategy by drawing on a variety of strategy themes, such as those that emerged from the study - empowerment, parity, maintenance of culture, and unique personhood - and consider micro, meso, and macro levels of intervention (Lum, 1996). The planning and delivery of services by social workers can be further informed by analyzing the research evidence on social support and carefully review various educational-based and community-based support programs designed to respond to the needs of refugee or immigrant youth.

In the study, the researcher, in accordance to the constructivist paradigm, recognized and acknowledged the realities of its participants, which also included tremendous adaptive strengths. Oftentimes, problems may be inappropriately perceived and defined by practitioners or researchers who focus on negative and dysfunctional aspects of culture as a response to the systemic situation. Social work research and practice must be open and receptive to include adaptive cultural strengths within strategies toward the investigation and helping processes. Moreover, the supportive capacity or potential of support systems of

families, schools, and communities to meet young people's needs for must also be recognized and realized.

### **Conclusion**

The implications for both social work policy and practice not only apply to Southeast Asian refugee groups, but to other refugee and immigrant groups as well. The findings indicate the need for creating a social climate that fosters a healthier, more bicultural process of acculturation for all newcomers. The current politicized debate specifically surrounding bilingual education and immigration make this goal particularly timely.

Clearly, social work professionals and helping professionals alike must gain a greater sensitivity to the problems of bias and the need for cultural awareness in intervention strategies, not only as it applies to working with refugee families, but in all their efforts to be more responsive to the children and families that make up our multicultural society.

APPENDIX A

**PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

This study is being conducted by Russ Bermejo, a social work graduate student at California State University, San Bernardino. The proposed research will focus on exploration of important issues involving Southeast Asian refugee youth, which may include perceptions of social support systems, values and expectations, and family and community systems.

In order to obtain information, interviews with various groups of respondents will be conducted. Your responses will be compared and contrasted with the responses of others. The purpose of this process is to identify different views that exist and form connections between them that will hopefully allow mutual discussion between all those involved.

Your name will be kept strictly confidential throughout the study, except in purposes of identifying you as the referral source. Please be aware that the information you provide is not anonymous or confidential in that your ideas will be shared with other participants.

During this study, you will be given opportunities to verify or challenge interpretations of the researcher. You may receive transcripts and/or summaries of interviews and will be asked to review it for accuracy. No data obtained will be included in the study if it is not first verified through these given procedures. At the conclusion of this project, you may receive a written report of its results.

Participation in this project is voluntary, and you may refuse to participate or discontinue participation at any point. If you have any questions regarding this project, you may contact: Russ Bermejo (909) 796-8892 or the faculty research advisor, Dr. Teresa Morris at (909) 880-5561.

**On the basis of the above statements, I acknowledge that I have been informed and understand the nature and purpose of this study and I agree to participate in the project along these terms.**

-----  
Participant's signature

-----  
Date

**\*If the participant is under eighteen years of age, a parent/legal guardian must sign below acknowledging they consent to their child's participation in the study.**

-----  
Parent's signature

-----  
Date

## APPENDIX B

### DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the range of experiences and concerns of Southeast Asian refugee youth. Your responses have given me a greater understanding of important issues, which include perceptions of social support systems, values and expectations among peer group, family and community systems.

In order to obtain further information, interviews with various groups of respondents will be conducted. Your responses will be compared and contrasted with the responses of others. The purpose of this process is to identify different views that exist and form connections between them that will hopefully allow mutual discussion between all those involved.

You will be given opportunities to verify or challenge interpretations of prior interviews. You may receive transcripts and/or summaries of interviews and will be asked to review it for accuracy and validity. No data obtained will be included in the study if it is not first verified through these given procedures. receive transcripts of interviews. At the completion of the study, you will be provided a final written copy of the research.

If there are any further ideas you wish to share, or have any questions or concerns regarding the study and/or your participation in it, you may contact:

Russ Bermejo, Graduate Student  
25825 Hinckley Street  
Loma Linda, CA 92354  
(909) 796-8892

Dr. Teresa Morris, Research Faculty Advisor  
Department of Social Work  
California State University, San Bernardino  
5500 University Parkway  
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(909) 880-5561.

## APPENDIX C

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Six basic categories of questions (Patton, 1990):

- |                        |                           |
|------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. experience/behavior | 4. knowledge              |
| 2. opinion/value       | 5. sensory                |
| 3. feeling             | 6. background/demographic |

• **For key adult support agents:**

Could you tell me about what the refugee experience means to you?  
(opinion/value)

Could you tell me your experiences in helping refugee young people?  
(background)

What do you think are some of the concerns facing refugee youth today?  
(opinion/value)

Could you tell me your experiences working with their parents?  
(experience/behavior)

Do you know of other support networks here in the local area? (knowledge)

Why do you think preserving the culture is so important for young people?  
(opinion/value)

• **For key youth informants:**

How long have you and your family been here in America? (background)

Could you tell me the differences between American and Vietnamese students? (opinion/value)

How did you feel when you first came to school here? (feeling)

Why is education so important to your family? you? (opinion/value)

What kind of help do you get from the tutors and teachers here?  
(experience)



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