

# UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

## Research at Birmingham

### Life Courses of Amerasians in Vietnam

Ho, Bernice; Bartels, Susan; Lee, Sabine

*License:*

None: All rights reserved

*Document Version*

Peer reviewed version

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*

Ho, B, Bartels, S & Lee, S 2019, 'Life Courses of Amerasians in Vietnam: A Qualitative Analysis of Emotional Wellbeing' VNU Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities.

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

Checked for eligibility: 26/06/2019

**General rights**

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

**Take down policy**

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact [UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk](mailto:UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk) providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.

# Life Courses of Amerasians in Vietnam: A Qualitative Analysis of Emotional Well-Being

**Abstract:** The Vietnam War left a legacy of mixed-race children fathered by American or other foreign soldiers and born to Vietnamese mothers. These Vietnamese Amerasian children often had difficulty integrating into their post-conflict societies due to stigmatization and they were typically economically disadvantaged. To address the paucity of knowledge about life courses of Amerasians who remained in Vietnam, we used SenseMaker®, a mixed methods data collection tool, to interview adult Amerasians living in Vietnam. Qualitative analysis of first-person narratives categorized by participants as being about “emotions” identified five major themes: discrimination, poverty, identity, the importance of family, and varying perceptions of circumstances. Experiences of discrimination were broad and sometimes systemic, affecting family life, the pursuit of education, and employment opportunities. Poverty was also an overarching theme and was perceived as a barrier to a better life, as a source of misery, and as a source of disempowerment. The resulting cycle of poverty, in which under-educated, resource-constrained Amerasians struggled to educate their own children, was evident. The negative emotional impact of not knowing one’s biological roots was also significant. Although there was a decrease in perceived stigma over time and some Amerasians were satisfied with their current lives, years of experiencing discrimination undoubtedly negatively impacted emotional well-being. The results highlight a need for community programs to address stigmatization and discrimination and call for support in facilitating international searches for the biological fathers of Vietnamese Amerasians.

*Keywords:* Amerasian, children, Vietnam, war, identity

## 1. Introduction

The Vietnam War (1962-1975) left behind a legacy of mixed-race children fathered by American or other foreign soldiers and born to Vietnamese mothers (Bemak and Chung 1997). Earlier evidence suggested that Vietnamese Amerasian<sup>1</sup> children (i.e. children fathered by foreign soldiers and born to local Vietnamese mothers during the Vietnam war) had difficulty integrating into their post-conflict societies and were disadvantaged in various aspects of life in comparison to similar-aged Vietnamese individuals (McKelvey 1999). For instance, in post-war Vietnam, Amerasian children faced extreme levels of stigmatization and discrimination due to their mixed racial heritage, as a result of being born out of wedlock (McKelvey and Webb 1995) and because they were associated with the perceived political and military “enemy” (Bemak and Chung 1997). In Vietnam, identity is largely defined through patriarchal heritage and thus, the absence of American fathers cast most Amerasian children as misfits

---

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this work, Amerasian is used to refer to Vietnamese Amerasian individuals.

(Bemak and Chung 1997). For African Amerasians, discrimination was further exacerbated because the Vietnamese perceived darker colored skin as being inferior (Ranard and Gilzow 1989). Evidence also suggests that Amerasian children were more vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse than their Vietnamese peers, which commonly led to psychological stress (McKelvey and Webb 1995). In addition to being isolated from mainstream society, many Amerasians were isolated within their own families. This sometimes occurred through deprivation of social and economic support from the mother's extended families, on the basis of their biological origins (Kutschera and Pelayo III 2012).

The ostracism and poverty experienced by Amerasian children were further amplified after the 1975 fall of Saigon because of the newly appointed communist government's harsh treatment of "collaborators" and their children, coupled with the country's severe economic decline (Duiker 1987). In 1986 the American Homecoming Act (US General Accounting Office 1994) acknowledged some responsibility for children fathered by American soldiers in Vietnam and opened an avenue through which Amerasian children and their relatives could apply to immigrate to the U.S. (Mrazek 1987). However, many of the young Amerasians who immigrated to America under this Act continued to face prejudice, discrimination, lack of opportunity, and psychological distress in the U.S. (Valverde 1992). In fact, one study found that Amerasians who immigrated to the U.S. had higher psychological symptomatology in comparison to baseline levels (Felsman et al. 1990). Other studies have identified risk factors for higher levels of distress among Amerasians following immigration to the U.S. including being African Amerasian, not living with the biological mother, no or little formal education, and immigrating to the U.S. as an unaccompanied minor (USCC 1985; Gilzow and Ranard 1990; Felsman et al. 1990; McKelvey, Mao, and Webb 1992).

While numerous studies have examined the physical, social, and psychological outcomes for Amerasians who immigrated to the U.S., literature is distinctly lacking on the life course of Amerasians who remained in Vietnam. Thus, the long-term implications of being an Amerasian child and then adult in Vietnam are not well understood. Furthermore, many published studies have focused on quantitative mental health measurements (Felsman et al. 1990; McKelvey and Webb 1996a; McKelvey and Webb 1996b), which by their very nature are unlikely to capture the broader lived experiences. The current lack of understanding about the life courses of Amerasians residing in Vietnam hinders policy and program-development aimed at supporting them.

The current study aims to fill the knowledge gap around life courses of Amerasians in Vietnam by using a mixed methods data collection tool, Cognitive Edge's SenseMaker® (Cognitive Edge 2019), to understand their lived experiences. SenseMaker uses open-ended prompting questions to elicit stories on a particular topic - in this case, the experiences of Amerasians living in Vietnam. The narratives are recorded and then interpreted by the narrator using a series of questions pre-defined by the research team. Responses to the self-interpretation questions generate quantitative data, which can then be contextualized through the accompanying, linked narratives (SenseGuide 2019). We conducted a qualitative analysis that

focused specifically on Amerasian respondents in Vietnam who self-identified their shared narratives as being about “Emotions”. Our main objective was to improve understanding of the experiences of Amerasians in Vietnam, particularly the economic, social, and health challenges they face, in order to better support them. We hope that the knowledge gained may also be relevant to informing policies and programs intended to improve life outcomes for other children born of war (CBOW).

## **2. Methods**

This qualitative analysis is derived from a larger, cross-sectional, mixed-methods study implemented in Vietnam in April - May 2017. The research was conducted in collaboration with the Department of Anthropology at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities at the Vietnam National University in Ho Chi Minh City and the Vietnam chapter of *Amerasians Without Borders*, a U.S.-based non-profit organization that support Amerasians. Details of the study implementation have been published elsewhere (Author forthcoming).

### ***2.1 Participant Recruitment***

Participants had to be at least 11 years old to participate and had to self-identify with one of the following subgroups: Amerasian, mother of an Amerasian, spouse of an Amerasian, stepfather of Amerasian, child of an Amerasian, other Amerasian family members, communities’ members. A convenience sample was initially recruited through *Amerasians Without Borders* and a snowball sample was then used to recruit additional participants. Although children of Amerasians were eligible to participate as young as age 11, the current analysis includes only Amerasians themselves, all of whom were adults born in or before 1975.

### ***2.2 Survey Instrument***

SenseMaker is an innovative data collection software that couples statistical data with explanatory narratives and minimizes biases that are inherent in traditional surveys by allowing respondents to interpret their own shared narratives. Choosing one of three open-ended prompting questions, participants were asked to share an anonymous story about the experiences of Amerasians in Vietnam. After the stories were audio recorded, participants were asked to interpret the experiences by responding to a series of pre-defined questions. The questions were designed such that there was no one response that could be perceived as being “right” or more acceptable, thereby reducing social desirability bias. By empowering participants to interpret the shared experiences themselves, SenseMaker also reduces research bias. Multiple-choice questions collected demographics and contextualized the shared story (e.g. the emotional tone of the story, how often do the events in the story happen, who was the story about, etc.). The survey was initially drafted in English by team members with collective expertise on children’s health, mental health, and CBOW. It was translated to Vietnamese by a native Vietnamese speaker, and then back-translated to English to check for accuracy. Translation discrepancies were resolved by consensus. All data were collected using the Cognitive Edge SenseMaker application on iPad Mini 4’s.

### **2.3 Procedure**

The data collection team consisted of eight interviewers who were faculty and graduate students at the Vietnam National University. All interviewers participated in a two-day training course immediately prior to data collection. The training agenda included SenseMaker methodology, research ethics, use of an iPad, how to approach participants and obtain informed consent, a detailed review of the survey questions with multiple role-playing sessions, data management, how to resolve adverse events and program referrals.

Interview locations were selected purposefully in conjunction with representatives from *Amerasians Without Borders* based on pre-existing knowledge about where the Amerasians were currently living. Sites included Ho Chi Minh City, Dak Lak, Quy Nhon, An Giang, and Da Nang. At each location, a convenience sample of participants was recruited through *Amerasians Without Borders*. Once an Amerasian was identified, his/her family members were also invited to participate. Interviewers approached potential participants and introduced the study using a pre-defined script. If the individual expressed interest in participating, the interviewer and participant chose a private location whereby participants then shared their stories based on one of three story prompts. Informed consent was explained to the participant and was indicated by tapping a consent box on the handheld tablet. Shared stories were auto-recorded on tablets in private and participants then responded to a series of pre-defined questions to interpret the narratives. All interviews were conducted in Vietnamese. If the participant was uncomfortable having his/her voice recorded, the interviewer first listened to the participant's story and then recorded the story in his/her own voice on behalf of and in front of the participant. Audio files were transcribed and translated into English for qualitative analysis.

### **2.4 Ethical Approval**

All interviews were conducted confidentially, and no identifying information was recorded. Participants were asked not to use actual names or other identifying information in their shared stories, and in the event that they did, the name or identifying information was not transcribed. Informed consent was reviewed in Vietnamese before initiating the interview. Since the study involved minimal risk, written consent was waived. No monetary or other compensation was offered but transportation costs incurred to participate were reimbursed and refreshments were provided. The University of Birmingham's Ethics Review committee approved this study protocol.

### **2.5 Definitions**

For the purposes of this research, Amerasian refers to children fathered by foreign soldiers and born to local Vietnamese mothers during the Vietnam war. While most Amerasians were fathered by American soldiers, it is possible that some were fathered by soldiers of other nationalities. A distinction between nationalities of the fathers is not made in this analysis since the children self-identify as Amerasian (i.e. having American fathers).

## 2.6 Analysis

The first level of analysis involved selecting first person stories of Amerasians in Vietnam who identified their narratives as being about “Emotions” in a multiple-choice question that asked, “What does your story mainly cover?” Participants could choose up to two of the following options: “Family”, “Identity”, “Emotions”, “Equality”, “Education”, “Me in the Past”, “My relationship with family”, “Responsibility”, “Ethnicity”, “Me as a person”, “My relationship with local community”, “Mental Health”, “Economic wellbeing”, “Me in the future”, “Me in the present”, “Physical health”, “Politics”, and “Not sure.”

The story topics and the subgroup of 26 participants that selected their story as being about “Emotions” are illustrated in figure 1.

What does your story mainly cover? Select up to two choices.

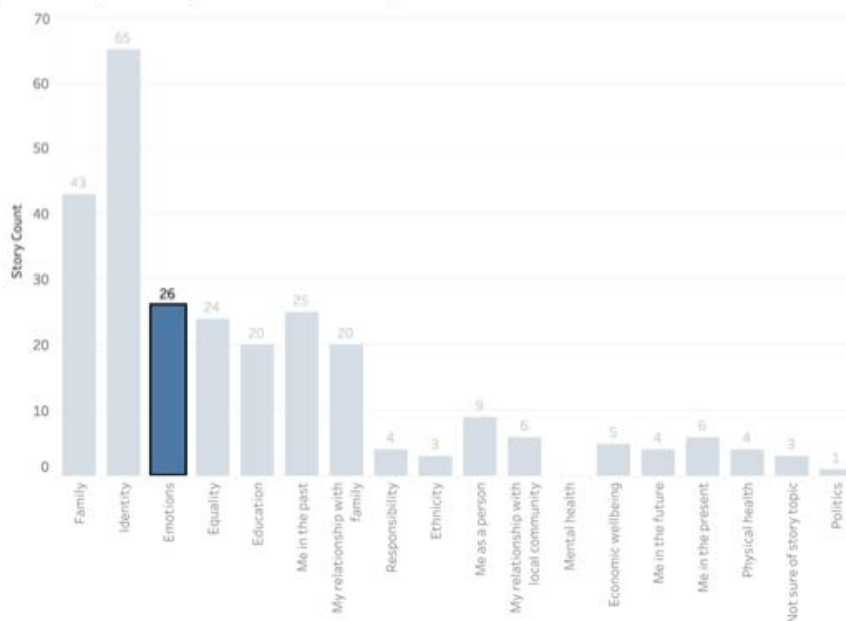


Figure 1. Twenty-six Amerasians indicated that their micro-narratives were about emotions.

This selection provided a sample of 26 narratives. Narratives and demographic data for the defined cohort were exported to a spreadsheet for analysis. Initial open coding of the transcript was done independently by three researchers (XX, XX, XX), each of whom reviewed the entire transcript closely and coded the data line-by-line to identify the many diverse aspects of each participant’s experiences and emotions. These initial, first level codes were generated directly from the text. After individual coding was complete, the three researchers reviewed the entire transcript together and agreed on the first level codes, enabling them to get a sense of the depth and complexity of the data.

In the second level of analysis, codes were organized into five major themes: a) Discrimination, b) Poverty, c) Identity, d) Importance of Family and e) Perceptions of Circumstances. Because of the inherent interconnectedness between these themes, individual stories often fit into more than one category.

The third level of analysis involved examining narratives to identify relevant stories illustrating each of the five themes and then choosing quotes to represent the participants' shared experiences within each of those themes.

Triangulation between researchers was important, and the researchers engaged in critical dialogue around all aspects of story selection, coding, and analysis. The researchers were also sensitive to the literature base in this area, being purposeful about separating what aspects of the data were pertinent to the experiences of Amerasians, and continual comparison to ensure that each code or story was considered in relation to previous and subsequent data, and that each story was considered as a whole. Finally, an audit trail of all levels of coding was maintained.

### 3. Results

Twenty-six narratives in total met our inclusion criteria of being first person stories from Amerasians in Vietnam who identified their narratives as being about "Emotions". The audio files were incomprehensible in nine of these 26 narratives and therefore could not be transcribed. In addition, there was one narrative that was mistakenly indicated as a first-person story being about "Emotions", when in fact it was a third-person story. Thus, it was not included in our analysis, leaving a final sample of 16 narratives.

Demographic characteristics of the 16 participants are provided in Table 1. Most participants had had limited educational opportunities and all, but one participant had been married or were married at the time of the interview.

*Table 1: Demographic data for participants who identified their shared stories as being about "Emotions". VND= Vietnamese Dong (The current exchange rate is \$1 USD to \$23,373 VND).*

Participant	Gender	City	Income (VND)	Education	Marital Status	"Emotion" of Narrative
3	Female	Dong Thap	\$1.2-3 million	Some Primary	Divorced/Separated	Very Negative
27	Female	Ho Chi Minh City	>\$5 million	Completed Primary	Married	Negative
38	Male	An	\$3-5	None	Married	Very

		Giang	million			Negative
47	Female	Ho Chi Minh City	>\$5 million	None	Divorced/Separated	Positive
82	Female	Ho Chi Minh City	Prefer not to say	Some Secondary	Married	Not sure
143	Male	Ouy Nhon	>\$5 million	Completed Secondary	Divorced/Separated	Positive
146	Male	Ouy Nhon	\$1.2-3 million	Some Secondary	Married	Neutral
188	Female	Ouy Nhon	\$3-5 million	Some Secondary	Married	Neutral
190	Female	Ouy Nhon	\$3-5 million	Some Primary	Married	Neutral
218	Female	Dak Lak	\$1.2-3 million	Completed Secondary	Married	Neutral
251	Female	Da Nang	\$3-5 million	Some Post-Secondary	Divorced/Separated	Positive
253	Female	Da Nang	\$3-5 million	Some Primary	Married	Negative
278	Male	Da Nang	\$3-5 million	Some Secondary	Married	Strongly Positive
286	Female	Da Nang	<\$0.7 million	Some Primary	Divorced/Separated	Positive
299	Male	Dong Nai	>\$5 million	Completed Primary	Never Married	Neutral
311	Male	Ho Chi Minh City	>\$5 million	Some Primary	Married	Negative

## **Themes**

### *Theme 1: Discrimination*



Pervasive discrimination as a result of being Amerasian emerged as a prominent theme in this analysis, and experiences of discrimination were broad, affecting family life, the pursuit of education, and employment opportunities. For instance, a male from Ouy Nhon who completed secondary education and was separated from his spouse said:

They kept calling me an Amerasian... Frankly my fellow classmates didn't want to play with me. I used to play by myself during break time, because no one would play with me. They discriminated against me. It was hard back then.

A female from Ho Chi Minh City without any formal education and was separate from her spouse also reported being discriminated because of being Amerasian, "Some people like me, yet other people do not like me because I am an African Amerasian. They do not care about me because I have dark skin." With the introduction of the Orderly Departure Programme in 1979 (US General Accounting Office 1990) and the Amerasian Homecoming Act in 1986 (US General Accounting Office 1994), several participants noted improved acceptance and a decrease in felt stigma. This observation was supported by a male from Ouy Nhon who completed secondary school and was separated from his spouse:

When there was a departure program for Amerasians that was when I started to fit in the life with the Vietnamese. Before that year, my neighbors, or my classmates, this whole society in general, they didn't like me very much, they avoided contact with me.

A female from Ho Chi Minh City without any formal education and was separated from her spouse also believed that prior to the Programme, she was not accepted by her community: "Moreover, only when they have money, do they talk to me? If not, they do not want to talk to me." Education also featured prominently in the discrimination theme. While education was viewed as a privilege by all participants, Amerasian children often faced discrimination from teachers and classmates making it difficult to continue with their education, as described by a married female from Ho Chi Minh City with some secondary education:

I sometimes was laughed at by my friends and also by the teachers (...) I felt hurt every time discrimination appeared among my friends and me (...) people laughed at me just because I was an Amerasian.

In some cases, such as for a married male from Da Nang with some secondary education, discrimination was so extreme that it led participants to stop attending school:

I quit school when I was in the 7th grade. Since then, I've been through many difficulties in life. When I went to school, I was treated badly by my classmates. At the 7th grade (...) I did not want to continue because I recognized that I was not treated as equally as other people.

The increased difficulty in finding employment was not only associated with the lack of education among Amerasians but was further amplified by societal discrimination. Both barriers prevented Amerasians, such as for a married male from An Giang without any formal education, from obtaining more desirable jobs.

They kept seeing me as an ‘American’ (...) so my education was incomplete. When I grew up I could look after myself, working as a hired labourer to pay bills. I couldn’t get better, permanent jobs because they didn’t give me a chance. They considered me a bad person with a bad background.

### *Theme 2: Poverty*

Poverty was also an overarching theme discussed by nearly all participants. For most Amerasians in the study, poverty was perceived as a barrier to a better life, as a source of misery, and as a source of disempowerment. Although present in a number of stories by both men and women, poverty-related disempowerment seemed to be more prominent among female participants. This includes a married female from Ouy Nhon with some primary education, who said, “In the past, my life was so difficult. My mom loved me but both of us were poor so we had to accept everything”. For a female from Da Nang with some post-secondary education and was separated from her spouse, her impoverished conditions forced her to reluctantly marry a much older man:

I was married to my [much older] husband because my mother compelled me to marry him. At that time, I was 19 years old. My mother forced me because she was so poor while my husband had a good job (...) Because I married him, I quit school (...) I didn’t have any job. I couldn’t find a decent one because I hadn’t completed my formal education.

Poverty was also a barrier to obtaining formal education for many Amerasian children. The resulting cycle of poverty, in which under-educated Amerasians without financial security struggled to educate their own children, was evident in some of the narratives. For instance, a married male from An Giang without any formal education stated,

I could go to school but then I was really poor; sometimes nothing to eat let alone paying my tuition for education. Most of the other Amerasians here didn't have education like me. It is very miserable!

### *Theme 3: Identity and Knowing One’s Biological Roots*

Sense of identity and the importance of knowing one’s own roots including one’s biological father, emerged as another important theme. Some participants believed that knowing their ethnic identity would solve many of their issues. For other participants, the void of not knowing their biological parents brought misery, a married female from Ho Chi Minh City who completed primary education:

I wanted to know whether she was my natural mother or not? After my adoptive mother told me the story in the past, I knew surely that she was my adoptive mother. I confided my story to my husband after we got married. I often felt sad, I also cried a lot whenever I thought about this story.

The greatest desire of many Amerasians was to find their biological parents. A married female from Ho Chi Minh City with some secondary education said,

Everyone had their own father, but not me, knowing this fact made me sad (...) My only hope was to know who my father is (...) I have dreamed many times of being able to go the US in order to see my father (...), deep in my soul, I still want to meet my father once for my entire life.

Some participants believed they could be connected to their biological parents through the support of higher authorities, such as a married male from Ho Chi Minh City with some primary education: “I hope that someone in power may help me to find my father and move to live with him”. Participants questioned their true identities including what made an Amerasian different from other individuals. This was experienced by an unmarried male from Dong Nai who completed primary education:

I do not know who I am. My mother left me to a nanny. In the liberation year of Vietnam, the nanny was afraid of having an Amerasian child in her family, so she gave me to a man whom I call Uncle Four.

Some participants also seemed to associate being Amerasian with shame. A married female from Ho Chi Minh City with some secondary education said,

To be honest, I didn't know what an Amerasian is. I just knew people laughed at me because I was an Amerasian (...) ‘Your father is American’. Because of it, [my mother] was quite reserved, and didn't want to declare that I was an Amerasian. But still, the fact is that I was an Amerasian, and she just couldn't hide it.

#### *Theme 4: Importance of Family*

##### *Relationship with Foster Parents*

Many participants valued the importance of family and having supportive, healthy relationships. Some were put up for adoption as young children or were raised by foster families such as a married male from Ouy Nhon with some secondary education:

I was raised by my adoptive parents ever since I was two years old. They adopted me in Gia Lai, Pleiku, after that they applied for my birth certificate, then raised me up as their son.

Many participants reported a positive relationship with their adoptive/foster parents and acknowledging the positive influence this had had in their lives, like an unmarried male from Dong Nai who completed primary education:

Although I am an adopted child, I was loved by my family members very much. They loved me as their own child because they raised me since I was a baby. I had no difficulties with my adopted family.

Adoption was perceived as a better option than leaving Amerasian children at orphanages, where emotional and financial support was considered more likely to be lacking. A married female from Dak Lak who completed secondary education recounted being adopted by a couple her mother encountered on the way to the adoption center:

They persuaded her that it would be good for me to have parents. It would be a pity for me if she had given me to an orphanage (....) My newly adopted parents treated me well.

#### *Relationship with Stepfathers*

Several participants who were raised by their biological mothers and stepfathers described an unhealthy relationship with their stepfathers, including being deprived of the necessities of life. A married female from Da Nang with some primary education stated,

I didn't receive any love from my [step]father (...) My father [said], 'If you cannot [herd buffaloes], you will not have anything to eat' (...) I lived with my [step]father, but he did not love me.

#### *Relationship with Adoptive/foster siblings*

Some participants were also disliked by their adoptive/foster siblings. In fact, in some cases the adoptive/foster, parents were far more accepting of the Amerasian child than were the siblings, such as a male from Ouy Nhon who completed secondary education, and was separated from his spouse:

Why are my [siblings from my adopted family] friendly on the outside but quite opposite inside? Because my parents liked me, took me in, cared for me, didn't mean my siblings accepted me. But they have to live it anyway, even though they don't really appreciate my presence in the family.

For participant a married female from Da Nang with some primary education, abuse from her foster siblings pushed her to marry early as a way to be freed from the maltreatment:

I realized my [step] siblings did not love me; they always scolded and hit me. When I was 19 years old, I told my sister in-law 'I just want to get married and go out of this house.

### *Relationship with Partners*

Marital relations were also highlighted by the participants in this study. Some of the marital relationships were positive and contributed to the participant's overall sense of well-being and satisfaction. This was exemplified by a married female from Ouy Nhon with some primary education, who said,

I grew up and got married. About my husband, generally, he loves me. At that time I was poor while the family of my husband was richer. After I failed my application to go abroad, he still loved me.

For others, like a female from Dong Thap with some primary education, and was separated from her spouse, the relationships were abusive in nature:

Whenever [my husband and I] had a quarrel, he always yelled at me that 'You're the same as your mom, you're mixed race. Your mom had affairs with the Americans and gave birth to you.' I was so heartbroken, thinking that he lived with me but he didn't trust me, he insulted me like that.

Some participants, including a married female from Ouy Nhon who had completed some primary education, also described ill-treatment by their parents-in-laws: "My husband's family treated me differently but then they treated me better when I had a child".

### *Relationship with Children*

Among participants who were parents, there was a unanimous expression of love and a strong desire to create a better future for their own children, including working tirelessly to provide for them. For instance, a female from Dong Thap with some primary education, and was separated from her spouse stated,

I try my best to do things for my wife and child because I love them so much. I always give [my child] all my love and the best things I can. I often get seasonal job during Lunar New Year so that our child's living conditions can become better.

There was no mention of discrimination faced by the children of Amerasians, although the complex socio-economical barriers their parents had faced still had an impact, as voiced by a married male from Da Nang with some secondary education:

Now all I wish is that my children would not be the same like me, they would be better-off. Otherwise, they will carry on the same condition like me to the next generation.

### *Theme 5: Perception of circumstances*

Some participants expressed negative feelings related to how they were treated as Amerasians in post-war Vietnam. Misery and suffering were commonly described emotions and these

experiences were often perceived to have resulted from discrimination and/or the challenges that arise from living in extreme poverty. A married female from Ouy Nhon with some secondary education stated,

After leaving school...I was hired to do small things. But later, more heavy things as I grew older. And then, I got married. My husband also had a miserable life. We had a child and we tried to work hard. Our life is so miserable.

Similar experiences were shared by a married female from Da Nang with some primary education:

My life was so miserable. I lived with my parents and did not know about my identity. I did not receive any love from my [step] father... When I was a child, my life was so miserable.

Other participants provided more positive outlooks on their life circumstances while acknowledging the challenges and difficulties that they had faced along the way. In fact, several participants expressed satisfaction with their lives and some rated their stories as having positive or strongly positive emotional tone. This observation was supported by a quote from a female from Da Nang who completed some primary education, and was separated from her spouse:

I am a blind mother. My husband left our family and remarried. However, I have two good children. They are very dutiful to me. Although my husband left us, he was still responsible for us. Every month he sends us some million [VND] dong<sup>2</sup> for my children and me (...) One of my children has a stable job. The other has not got a job yet. He is living with me. I hope that the second child will find a good job. Thus, I will feel secured.

In some narratives, participants made the point that their lives today are similar to everyone else's and that they do not feel disadvantaged as a result of being Amerasian. A married female from Ouy Nhon with some primary education reported:

Now, my skin has become lighter but at that time, I was black. Now I'm still working in the field but it's more comfortable than the past. In the past, people said that I was mixed-race (...) they treated me little differently in comparison with other sisters-in-law. It is not like that nowadays. Today, it's normal. In the past, my life was so difficult.

Similarly, a married male from Ouy Nhon with secondary education summarized his perspectives as follows:

---

<sup>2</sup> Current exchange rate: \$1 USD = \$23,273 VND, so \$1,000,000 VND is currently \$42.97 USD

I'm currently staying with my wife and kids, four of them. That's it for my story, mostly about my adoptive parents. As for living with my neighbors or the local authority, everyone likes me the same way as any other good citizen, there's nothing really special to tell.

Finally, a married female from Ho Chi Minh City with secondary education shared a similar view:

So many people can live in poverty, and so can we. It depends on our industriousness in working. Nothing more. We can be citizens like other people (... ) Since we moved to Saigon, we have lived and earned our living normally.

#### **4. Discussion**

This study presents personal narratives from 16 Amerasians living in Vietnam who identified their shared stories as being about "Emotions", with findings highlighting their experiences and perspectives as mixed-race children in post-war Vietnam. Several overarching themes emerged from the stories, illustrating common experiences within this group of highly visible and vulnerable individuals. The most prominent themes included discrimination, poverty, identity, the importance of family, and varying perceptions of circumstances. Poverty and discrimination were experienced by the participants, and often had a negative impact on their access to education. A lack of education and resources combined with societal discrimination often resulted in limited employment opportunities. These hardships were commonly linked to negatively expressed emotions such as misery and suffering in the earlier years. In contrast, some participants describe satisfaction and more positive outcomes later in life. Finally, the narratives reveal a pervasive insecurity around identity and a sense of shame about not knowing one's' origins. Of note, none of the participants had been raised by a single mother; all Amerasians in this sample had been either raised by an adoptive/foster family, or their biological mother had married and they had grown up with a stepfather. While some participants had loving relationships with their biological or adopted families, some participants were ill-treated by their stepfathers and foster siblings. Narratives with a positive or neutral outlook often focused on the future, and on providing better lives for their own children.

Consistent with other research (McKelvey and Webb 1995; McKelvey and Webb 1996a; McKelvey 1999), Amerasians in this study faced extreme poverty and experienced considerable societal discrimination. However, because participants reflected on their experiences over the years, some narratives suggest a decrease in felt discrimination over time. This improved acceptance perceived by participants coincided with the establishment of the Amerasian Homecoming Act, because unlike previous departure programmes, the Act allowed Amerasians to bring family members. Thus, while Amerasians were previously despised for their looks, which set them apart from the broadly homogenous mainstream Vietnamese

society and clearly associated them with the enemy (Lee 2017; 137ff), they now became a passport to America for mainland Vietnamese individuals. As one Amerasian summarized: 'Suddenly everyone in Vietnam loved us. It was like we were walking on clouds. We were their meal ticket, and people offered a lot of money to Amerasians willing to claim them as mothers and grandparents and siblings.' (Lamb, 2009). Overnight, they turned from 'Dust of Life' (McKelvey 1999) to 'Gold Dust' (Valverde 1992). Concurrently, after a tense post-war decade following the fall of Saigon in 1975, Vietnam's relationship with the major players on the world stage (the Soviet Union, China and the United States) began to change. Thus, the late 1980s marked a more constructive dialogue leading not only to a change in tone in the political rhetoric but eventually to the normalization of relations under Bill Clinton (Brown 2010). With this changed political climate, the association with the former American enemy may no longer have been deemed as disgraceful as previously (Yarborough 2006; 46).

Our finding that most Amerasians retained a strong desire to find their fathers is consistent with a study carried out by McKelvey and Webb in the mid-1990s, who reported that their participants also strongly desired to meet their fathers, yet 62.8% had either no information about their biological fathers or only few knew their surnames (McKelvey and Webb 1996a). As the Vietnamese society upholds great value in knowing one's origins and identity (Bemak and Chung 1997), our study not only confirms that the overwhelming majority of Amerasians wished to find their fathers, but also presents a better understanding of the mental and emotional impact of not knowing one's father or biological roots in post-war Vietnam.

In contrast to other research describing negative relationships between Amerasians and their families (McKelvey and Webb 1995; McKelvey and Webb 1996a), this study identified a substantial number of positive family relationships. In particular, most of the participants expressed they had healthy relationships with not only their biological mothers and adopted parents, but also with their spouses and children, a finding that has not been reported elsewhere in the literature. This may be because at the time of the Act, Amerasians averaged 18 years of age, so only a few had families of their own. Much of the previous research, was conducted around the time of migration, when the Amerasians were younger and mostly unmarried. In contrast, our study was conducted at a point in time when the Amerasians had had the opportunity to respond to their circumstances, to make decisions about their own family (i.e. spouse, children) and were in a position- albeit limited by inequality of opportunity- to make choices and use their own agency. This difference between educational and socio-economic disadvantage on one hand, but satisfaction with one's life on the other hand suggests that the absence of healthy childhood families may have played a part in the significance Amerasians later assigned to good family life. Future investigation is required to better understand the extent to which the Amerasians' past family experiences influence how they value family, including marriage, later in life.

Several studies have reported negative life outcomes for Amerasians including one that identified higher alcohol use, more hospitalizations, more childhood trauma, more severe perceived effects of trauma and fewer years of formal education (McKelvey and Webb 1996a).



In contrast, in the current study, despite educational and socio-economic disadvantage, many Amerasians had positive views on their current circumstances and more positive outlooks for the future. These findings are more consistent with those of McKelvey and Webb who reported that Amerasians adapted equally well after immigrating to the U.S. when compared to similar-aged Vietnamese who had also immigrated to the U.S., owing to similar levels of social support (McKelvey and Webb 1996a). One additional study found that DSM-II psychiatric disorders were less common among Amerasians prior to immigration in comparison to Vietnamese refugees living in the U.S. and Australia (McKelvey et al. 1996). However, a direct comparison between studies cannot be made because the current research did not diagnose or screen for mental health disorders, substance abuse or experiences of childhood trauma. The more positive perspectives described in the current analysis are possibly reflective of the resilience and adaptation of Amerasians after unfavourable childhoods and may also reflect a current living environment that is more accepting of Amerasians and/or mixed-race children more broadly.

The experiences narrated by Amerasians in this study echo and in some cases amplify the experiences of children fathered by foreign soldiers in other geopolitical and historical contexts. The core themes of identity, the significance of searching for one's roots, as well as experiences of discrimination and disadvantage with regards to educational and economic opportunities, are known to have been encountered by many CBOW (Mochmann and Larsen 2005; Lee 2017). Given the high level of psychosomatic morbidity reported in many other groups of CBOW, but also in research focusing on Amerasian emigrées who have settled in the US, this study's focus on the narratives of Amerasians who remained in Vietnam and specifically the narratives that dealt primarily with emotions, give important pointers to the key issues that need to be addressed in order to advance CBOW wellbeing:

*Facilitation of international search for fathers:* In line with other groups of CBOW, Amerasians identify the search for their roots (Winfield 1992) as key to their well-being. One aspect relating to the life course experience of Amerasians that sets them aside from many other groups of CBOW is the fact that their father's home country, the United States of America, opted to allow them and some of their family members to become American citizens and settle in the U.S. Amerasians in Vietnam are primarily those whose immigration applications had been denied – often as a result of fraudulent activities around the applications (typically not by the Amerasians themselves but by exploitative practice around the young people) (Bass 1997; McKelvey 1999) or, less commonly, they were Amerasians who consciously chose not to apply for a U.S. visa. Evidence suggests that the emotional impact of the inability to uncover their paternal roots is significant; therefore, efforts to facilitate the collaboration between support groups such as *Amerasians without Borders* and the U.S. immigration authorities (Montalvo 2018) with the aim of broadening the use of DNA testing to identify beyond reasonable doubt family ties with American soldiers and their family, should be continued. In line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, national stakeholders ought to support CBOW in their endeavours to identify and find their fathers by implementing provisions that allow CBOW to know and be cared by their parents (UNICEF).

*Community programming to counter stigmatization and discrimination:* Participants of this study reported having experienced widespread stigmatization and discrimination, which impacted their emotional well-being, as evidenced in significant numbers of stories with a negative emotional tone. Family, local community and schools all contribute in varying degrees to this environment. Thus, training offered to community members is needed regarding zero tolerance of bullying on the grounds of a child's parentage, identification of bullying signs, and provision of support for children who are exposed to discrimination and stigmatization.

This study has several noteworthy limitations. First, a majority of the participants were recruited through a single support group in Vietnam, thus introducing selection bias and rendering the results non-generalizable. However, the number of Amerasians living in Vietnam today is estimated to be approximately 500 and the broader study from which this analysis is derived recruited 231. Since almost half of the estimated population was reached, the selection bias may be less significant. Additionally, recall bias may have been an issue given that participants were often recounting events that had happened years earlier. However, the circumstances and incidents described were often significant in the lives of participants and were therefore much more likely to be recalled accurately than everyday events. Furthermore, most participants had low literacy skills, raising some concern that they may not have properly understood the questions. However, all interviews were facilitated by a trained research assistant and all survey content was read aloud to each participant. The use of technology for data collection also introduced a limitation with nine of the 26 eligible stories having incomprehensible audio recordings. It is impossible to know how inclusion of those stories might have changed the study's results. Finally, the narratives were collected in Vietnamese with some of the nuances and subtleties possibly having been missed in translation.

The study also has a number of strengths. To the best of our knowledge, it is the only study to have interviewed Amerasians in Vietnam in the last two decades, and therefore, the results are important in allowing the later life experiences to be shared and understood. Prior to this study, the key source containing the voices of Amerasians in Vietnam was a U.S. government publication (US General Accounting Office, 1994) that interviewed Amerasians soon after immigration. Later accounts, both ego documents (e.g. Bass 1997; Yarborough 2006) and academic research (McKelvey and Webb 1996b) focused on the experiences of those Amerasians who faced the double challenge of pre- and post-migratory adversities in their birth country and the U.S. Thus, this is the first and only study using extensive interview data of Amerasians currently living in Vietnam. Additionally, the use of SenseMaker offered several advantages including the open-ended story prompts which gave participants an opportunity to share the aspects of their lives that were most important to them, thus capturing rich life histories. Also, SenseMaker allows mixed-methods data collection with participants interpreting their own stories and thereby reducing interpretation bias.

## 5. Conclusion

This analysis of emotional well-being among Amerasians in Vietnam offers important insights into the life courses of a unique group of CBOW. Discrimination, poverty, identity, the importance of family, and varying perceptions of circumstances were all identified as prominent themes. The impact of not knowing one's biological roots was significant and the results speak to the need for assistance with international searches for fathers. Although there was a decrease in felt stigma over time for many of the Amerasians, years of experiencing discrimination undoubtedly negatively impacted emotional well-being. Thus, the findings from this study also prompt the development of community programs to address stigmatization and discrimination associated with Amerasians in Vietnam. Given that this is the only recent study focused on Amerasians in Vietnam, such results are invaluable to better supporting Amerasians, their families, and CBOW in general.

## 6. Acknowledgement

We are grateful to all participants who shared their personal stories in the course of this research. We are also indebted to the Vietnam chapter of *Amerasians Without Borders* who was instrumental in identifying and recruiting participants as well as to the Department of Anthropology at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities at the Vietnam National University in Ho Chi Minh City who implemented the research and conducted the interviews. And finally, we thank the Wellcome Trust for their financial support of this work.

## 7. Funding details

This work was supported by Wellcome Trust, under Grant WT110028/Z/15/Z.

## 8. Data availability statement

The full narratives and demographic information of each participant are openly available from the following eData repository of the author's home institution.

## References

- Bass, T. A. 1997. *Vietnamerica: The War Comes Home*. New York: Soho Press Inc.
- Bemak, F., and R. Chi-Yung Chung. 1997. "Vietnamese Amerasians: Psychosocial adjustment and psychotherapy." *Journal of Multicultural Counselling and Development* 25 (1): 79-88.

- Brenden, M. K. 1990. *Amerasian update*, (Number 24) Washington, DC: Interaction and Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service.
- Brown, Frederick Z. 2010. “Rapprochement between Vietnam and the United States” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 32 (3): 317-42.
- Cognitive Edge. 2019. SenseMaker. <https://cognitive-edge.com/sensemaker/> Accessed April 15 2019.
- Duiker, W. J. 1987. *Vietnam since the fall of Saigon*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Center for International Studies.
- Felsman, J. K., F. T. L. Leong, M. C. Johnson, and I. C. Felsman. 1990. Estimates of psychological distress among Vietnamese refugees: Adolescents, unaccompanied minors and young adults. *Social Science and Medicine* 31(11): 1251-1256.
- Kutschera, P. C., and J. M. G. Pelayo III. 2012. “The Amerasian Paradox”. Paper presented at the Online Conference on Multidisciplinary Social Sciences, Australia, March 29-31.
- Lamb, D. 2009. “Children of the Vietnam War.” *Smithsonian Magazine*, June. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/children-of-the-vietnam-war-131207347/>. Accessed March 2019.
- Lee, S. 2017. *Children Born of War in the Twentieth Century*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- McKelvey, R. 1999. *The dust of life: America’s children abandoned in Vietnam*. Washington, D.C: University of Washington Press.
- McKelvey, R. S., and J. A. Webb. 1995. A pilot study of abuse among Vietnamese Amerasians. *Child Abuse and Neglect* 19 (5): 545-553.
- McKelvey, R. S., and J. A. Webb. 1996a. A comparative study of Vietnamese Amerasians, their non-Amerasian siblings, and unrelated, like-aged Vietnamese immigrants. *American Journal of Psychiatry* 153(4): 561-563.
- McKelvey, R. S., and J. A. Webb. 1996b. Premigratory expectations and postmigratory mental health symptoms in Vietnamese Amerasians. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 35 (2): 240-245.
- McKelvey, R. S., A. R. Mao, and J. A. Webb. 1992. A risk profile predicting psychological distress in Vietnamese Amerasian youth. *Journal of American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 31 (5), 911-915.
- McKelvey, R. S., J. A. Webb, and R. M. Strobel. 1996. The prevalence of psychiatric disorders among Vietnamese Amerasians: a pilot study. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 66 (3): 409-415.

- Mochmann, I., and S. U. Larsen. 2005. Kriegskinder in Europa. *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 18-19, 34-38.
- Montalvo, J. 2018. "Son of U.S. soldier left behind in Vietnam helps other 'Amerasians' reunite with families." *NBC News*. June 15. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/son-u-s-soldier-left-behind-vietnam-helps-other-amerasingians-n882946>. Accessed March 2019.
- Mrazek, R. 1987. *Analysis of the Vietnamese Amerasian situation and the need for congressional action report*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.
- Ranard, D. A., and D. F. Gilzow. 1989. *The Amerasians*. (Issue: In America: Perspectives on refugee resettlement). 4(6). Washington, DC: Refugee Service Centre, Center for Applied Linguistics.
- SenseGuide. *What We Do: Getting Beyond Statistics*. <https://senseguide.nl/en/sensemaker-narrative-monitoring/>. Accessed April 15 2019
- UNICEF. "The Convention on the Rights of the Child". UNICEF <https://www.unicef-irc.org/portfolios/crc.html>. Accessed March 2019.
- United States Catholic Conference. 1985. *In our fathers' land: Vietnamese Amerasians in the United States*. Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference. Migration and Refugee Services.
- US General Accounting Office. 1990. *The Orderly Departure Program from Vietnam*, Washington D.C., 1990, <http://archive.gao.gov/t2pbat10/141353.pdf>. Accessed April 15 2019.
- US General Accounting Office. 1994. *Vietnamese Amerasian Resettlement: Education, Employment and Family Outcomes in the United States* Washington, DC: US General Accounting Office.
- Valverde, C. C. 1992. From dust to gold: The Vietnamese Amerasian experience. In M. P. P. Root (Ed.), *Racially mixed people in America*, (pp. 144-161). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Winfield, P. 1992. *Bye Bye Baby. The Story of the Children the GIs Left Behind*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Yarborough, T. 2006. *Surviving Twice*. Washington: Potomac Books.