

Original Paper

The Effects of War and Migration Trauma on Southeast Asian Families in the United States

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Abstract

This review article focuses on Southeast Asian (SEA) families, which include Vietnamese, Laotian, Hmong, and Cambodian ethnic groups, comprising about three million people in the United States. Although many differences exist among SEAs, they share experiences of war and migration-related trauma and losses that continue to have long-term effects on their families and individual well-being within and across generations. Research and practice work with SEA families and individuals requires in depth knowledge of their experiences before, during, and after migration to the U.S. This article on SEA families, although not exhaustive in its coverage, highlights the following topics: SEA populations in the U.S., migration history, resettlement and adaptation in the U.S., mental health issues of SEAs, traditional SEA family, migration and family formation, migration and family relationships, migration and family in later life, and implications for research and practice with SEA families and individuals.

Keywords

Southeast Asian families, war trauma, migration trauma, mental health, family changes and adjustment

1. Introduction

There is considerable diversity in the cultural backgrounds and life experiences of Southeast Asians (SEA) who came to the United States as refugees or immigrants in the aftermath of the Vietnam War (1954-1975) and its related conflicts in Southeast Asia, but there remain shared central themes of trauma and losses, as well as remarkable resilience and thriving. The specific groups include Vietnamese, Laotian, Hmong, and Cambodian, and most, if not all, especially those who were refugees, have family histories of trauma before, during, and/or after their migration to the U.S. (e.g., death of and/or separation from family members, genocide and torture, starvation, refugee camp sub-living

condition, poverty, discrimination, etc.)

Research and practice work with SEA populations requires extensive knowledge of pre-migration, migration, and resettlement history and the encompassing and intergenerational impact of these experiences on the family and the individual members of this primary social unit. This review article on SEA families highlights the following topics: SEA populations in the U.S., migration history, resettlement and adaptation in the U.S., mental health issues of SEAs, traditional SEA family, migration and family formation, migration and family relationships, migration and family in later life, and implications for research and practice with SEA families and individuals. This article does not represent an exhaustive discussion of SEA families in the U.S., but rather to illuminate some of the prominent experiences and consequences of war and migration trauma on the family network and on individual family members, and to provide some basic recommendations for working with SEA populations.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Southeast Asian Populations in the United States

“Southeast Asian refugees” typically refer to people from Vietnam, Laos, or Cambodia and prior to 1975, there were few Vietnamese, Laotians, Hmong, or Cambodians living in the U.S. (Takaki, 1989). Now, SEAs are present in every state, thus increasing the opportunities for researchers, educators, and practitioners to work with SEA families and individuals. The following population statistics (i.e., “alone or in any combination”) are based on the 2015 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Vietnamese, approximately 1,980,344 people, comprise the largest SEA group and currently represent the fourth largest Asian population. Laotians, approximately 570,612 people, comprise the second largest SEA group. Laotians include various ethnic groups but the two largest groups in the U.S. are the Highland Hmong (299,191) and the Lowland Lao (271,421). Cambodians, approximately 330,259 people, comprise the third largest SEA group.

2.2 Migration History

The Vietnam War is synonymous with SEA refugees in the U.S. and in other host countries because the end of this war in 1975 prompted the beginning of a lengthy mass exodus of Vietnamese, Laotian, Hmong, and Cambodian refugees and immigrants. Although the Vietnam War was centralized in Vietnam, this military conflict expanded into Laos and Cambodia, also devastating these neighboring countries (Karnow, 1997).

The majority of SEA families and individuals confronted varying degrees of war-related trauma prior to their exodus from their countries. For example, it was estimated that at least two million Vietnamese, many were civilians, died during the Vietnam War (Karnow, 1997). In the case of Cambodian refugees, many witnessed the death or killing of loved ones and the destruction of their society and culture by Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge, resulting in the deaths or killing of at least one million Cambodians (Chan, 2004). In the case of Laotians, especially the Hmong, they were recruited by the U.S. Central

Intelligence Agency to fight in a “secret war” that was an extension of the Vietnam War (Vang, 2010). The Hmong and other Laotians who sided with the U.S. military were targets for persecution by the Pathet Lao, an insurgent group that established a Marxist government in Laos (Quincy, 1995). It was estimated that about one-third of the Hmong population died during the war. Hence, the majority of Hmong families in the U.S. experienced the death or murder of family members and friends (Tatman, 2004). Overall, these traumatic experiences are not uncommon among refugees who comprise the first generation of SEAs.

The exodus of refugees and immigrants from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia occurred through various waves. Numerous died or were killed in the process and many had to leave family members behind and/or were separated from family members during their departure from their home country. Those who escaped drowning, starvation, and/or victimization typically ended up in refugee camps in Thailand, Hong Kong, or other neighboring countries, where they spent months or even years before receiving asylum in another country.

It is important to note that not all SEAs entered the U.S. under the status of “refugee”, as defined by the U.S. government. A large segment of the population came to the U.S. through the Orderly Departure Program, a formal agreement in 1979 between Vietnam and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to allow legal emigration of Vietnamese seeking family reunification (Cutts, 2000). This is not to say that the latter group does not have histories of trauma or persecution from their governments in their respective countries. Rather, knowledge of the individual’s and family’s histories is critical to understanding the long-term impact of war and migration trauma.

2.3 Resettlement and Adaptation in the U.S.

SEA refugees faced additional challenges as they began their new life in the U.S. They found refuge and safety, but also were overwhelmed by the stress associated with living in a new culture. Although there were varying resettlement experiences between SEA groups, as well as differences within each group, they shared some common experiences. Unlike the experiences of Cuban refugees who were able to resettle within one central location in the U.S., many SEA refugees were systematically dispersed throughout the country, a policy implemented by the U.S. government to discourage the formation of ethnic enclaves and to minimize the impact of refugee resettlement on any particular geographical area or host communities (Gold, 1999). Thus, many refugee families found themselves in various cities and rural communities across the U.S., with little or no access to other SEA refugees or Asian communities, posing additional short-term and long-term challenges in their adjustment process (Nicholson, 1997). Within a few years of the initial resettlement, what was observed was the beginning of a significant pattern of secondary migration toward regions with higher concentrations of SEAs or other Asians, namely to states such as California, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Texas, and Washington, creating sizable ethnic enclaves in various geographical areas. This was not unexpected and represented an appropriate coping reaction as ethnic enclaves can provide important resources and social support for refugees and immigrants.

Most SEA refugees experienced culture shock although the degree of severity partially depended upon their individual and family characteristics, such as age, gender, pre-migration socioeconomic status, level of education, family structure and intactness, and the extent to which they were exposed to U.S. culture and language prior to emigration from their home country. These and other individual and family characteristics, along with contextual and historical factors, were influential during and beyond the initial resettlement period. The challenges of adapting to U.S. culture and society ranged from simple matters, such as learning how to operate household appliances, grocery shopping, and navigating through public transportation systems, to more complex matters, such as learning a new language, adopting culturally-appropriate behaviors, and searching for employment (Uba & Chung, 1991). Although numerous individual and familial differences exist within and between SEA groups, generally those with higher levels of education and English proficiency and those younger in age were in a relatively better position to cope with the culture shock and adjustment process (Uba, 1994).

Another common resettlement experience was that the majority of SEA refugees started their new life in the U.S. on public assistance and at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. Many adult refugees searched for employment soon after the initial resettlement with the primary goal of re-establishing self-sufficiency and economic stability for their families. This was particularly important for adult male members, as employment represented a core aspect of male identity, authority, and respectability within and outside the family. As expected, considerable underemployment or unemployment was observed among many SEA adult males, requiring many adult females to attain work outside the home (Kibria, 1990). Economic challenges were and still remain a significant factor in the lives of many SEAs since their initial resettlement in the U.S. of more than four decades ago. For instance, data from the 1990 U.S. Census indicated that 15 years after the initial arrival of SEA refugees, about 34% of Vietnamese, 66% of Laotian/Hmong, and 47% of Cambodian were living at or below the poverty level, well above the poverty rates of 10% and 14%, respectively, for the total U.S. population and total Asian Pacific Islander population (Southeast Asia Resource Action Center, 2007). Twenty years later, data from the 2010 American Community Survey (Southeast Asia Resource Action Center, 2011) showed that about 15.2% of Vietnamese, 16.4% of Laotian, 27.3% of Hmong, and 21.6% of Cambodian, were living at or below the poverty level, as compared to the poverty rates of 15.3% and 12.4%, respectively, for the total U.S. population and total Asian Pacific Islander population. The 2010 ACS also showed that for family poverty status, 13% of Vietnamese, 12.2% of Laotian, 27.4% of Hmong, and 18.2% of Cambodian families were living at or below the poverty level, as compared to 11.3% and 9.3%, respectively, for the total U.S. population and total Asian Pacific Islander population. These census data, 20 years apart, indicated remarkable progress and resilience among SEAs while highlighting the continuing socioeconomic challenges, especially for the Hmong and Cambodian groups, which may have both positive and negative long-term consequences for individual and family well-being (e.g., Dinh, Weinstein, Tein, & Roosa, 2013).

The systematic dispersion of refugees across the country, limited access to SEA or Asian communities,

and experiences of discrimination further intensified the acculturative stress faced by SEA refugees and their families (Rutledge, 1992; Yamane, 2012). The different waves of SEA refugee and immigrant resettlement and the varied circumstances of their emigration from their home countries pointed to numerous dimensions of diversity among SEAs. They include those who have been in the U.S. for more than four decades as well as those who have just arrived, those who came with family members as well as those who came alone, and they all confronted varying degrees of difficulty and trauma in their departure from SE Asia and in their resettlement in the U.S. Knowledge of migration and resettlement history provides a contextual backdrop for understanding the diverse life experiences of SEA individuals and families and their adaptation to the U.S. society within and across generations.

2.4 Mental Health Issues of Southeast Asians

Southeast Asian refugees confronted various traumatic events, such as exposure to years of wartime and genocide, fear of persecution and internment, the sudden and chaotic nature of departure and escape from their home country, separation and/or loss of family members during flight, rape and violence, and/or years of horrendous living conditions in refugee camps. Because of this traumatic history, the risk has been greater among SEA refugees to suffer from mental health problems (e.g., Hsu, Davies, & Hansen, 2004; Wagner et al., 2013). However, experiences of trauma do not necessarily lead to mental health problems or other negative outcomes. Other factors, such as personal coping capacity and resources, family network and support, English language proficiency, educational level, age, gender, along with historical, contextual, and resettlement variables, may serve as protective or risk factors in the development of mental health problems and other adverse life experiences (Chung, Bemak, & Wong, 2000).

Various mental health issues were initially identified within SEA communities, including depression, suicidal ideation, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), alcohol abuse, and/or domestic violence (Hinton et al., 1993). One of the earlier studies on mental health problems among SEA refugees found that 71% were diagnosed with PTSD and 81% with depression (Kinzie et al., 1990). Another study showed that 50% suffered from PTSD and 71% from mixed anxiety and depression (Mollica, Wyshak, & Lavelle, 1987). These studies, involving clinical samples, indicated high rates of mental health problems among SEA refugee populations. Even in non-clinical samples, one study reported 36% with depression, 96% with anxiety, and 16% with PTSD (Gong-Guy, 1986), also indicating high rates of mental illness. It was observed that among the different SEA groups, Cambodian and Hmong refugees exhibited the highest rates of mental health problems, pointing to the importance of intergroup differences as they relate to the extent of trauma severity exposure (Mollica et al., 1987; Rumbaut, 1985).

Although it was commonly believed that mental health problems, as well as other problems in living, among SEA refugee populations would improve and eventually dissipate with time in the U.S. (Beiser, 1988; Rumbaut, 1991), other research findings illuminated a more complex pattern. As it turned out, traumatic events experienced before, during, and after migration can have long-term effects on the

adjustment of many SEAs, even 10, 20, or more years beyond their initial resettlement in the U.S. Nicholson (1997), in a non-clinical sample of SEAs with an average U.S. residency of almost 10 years, found past traumatic experiences to be primary predictors of individuals' coping capacity of current life stressors, which, in turn, strongly predicted current mental health problems. Marshall and colleagues (2005), in their study of a community sample of 490 Cambodians who have resided in the U.S. for more than 20 years, found high rates of PTSD (62%) and depression (51%), which were predicted by previous traumatic events experienced before and after migration. Wagner and colleagues (2013), in their research with Cambodians and Vietnamese, found high levels of trauma symptoms even after 20-30 years in the U.S., which, in turn, were associated with various physical health problems, such as heart disease and hypertension. These studies suggest the importance of attending to long-term effects of pre-migration, migration, and post-migration stressors and the need for more long-term investigations of mental health and other life outcomes to provide a fuller temporal picture of adjustment and adaptation among SEA refugees and their families.

2.5 Traditional Southeast Asian Family

Although the SEA population is comprised of different ethnic groups with varying characteristics, such as language, migration experiences, and specific cultural practices, some common cultural values, particularly those pertaining to the family, have been observed across groups (Uba, 1994; Ying & Han, 2008). Indeed, SEAs come from cultures that have been greatly influenced by Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. These religions or philosophies are ubiquitous within the cultural traditions and values that dictate family structure, hierarchy and roles, and one's place in society (Min, 1995). The descriptions below do not necessarily apply to all SEA families but rather serve as a reference point for understanding the potential changes and challenges that many SEA refugee or immigrant families, including subsequent generations, might have undergone or are currently facing in the U.S.

The traditional family in SEA cultures is characterized by a patriarchal and patrilineal structure as well as a certain order in family life (e.g., Bankston & Hildalgo, 2006; Lee & Tapp, 2010). For instance, gender, age, and birth order determine one's role and authority within the family. Therefore, grandparents, especially the grandfather, are revered, the husband has more power than his wife, sons have more privileges than daughters, and the eldest son is considered the most important child in the family. The family as a whole and its social status takes precedence over the identity and needs of individual family members. However, this family unit and its structure have been challenged for many SEA families in their adjustment to the U.S. culture that differs in language, values, beliefs, and traditions. Many SEA families have faced these cultural challenges, which led to changes in family formation and dynamics across the life cycle, including changes in the family hierarchy, as well as changes in family relationships and the specific roles of family members (Dinh, 2009; Ying & Han, 2008).

2.6 Migration and Family Formation

Migration and acculturative experiences can affect all aspects of life for SEA refugees and immigrants,

both in the short-term and long-term. One area that is obvious is the impact on the family and social network. The significant change in cultural context presented considerable challenges to many SEA families. These challenges were exacerbated by the fact that most, if not all, refugees came to the U.S. with non-intact nuclear families and/or limited extended family members. It was not uncommon to hear stories of a parent, a spouse, a sibling, and/or a child who were left behind in SE Asia, died during their departure or escape from the home country, or were victims of genocide or war (Landale, Thomas, & Van Hook, 2011). For example, numerous Cambodian women were heads-of-household in single-parent families due to the death of their husbands or male family members during the Pol Pot era in Cambodia (Boehnlein, Leung, & Kinzie, 1997) and among Vietnamese, 14.2% of families were headed by women due to the death of or separation during flight from their spouses (Rutledge, 1992). The circumstances of family migration events can have long-term impacts on the size and formation of many SEA families, as well as the dynamics in family relationships. The traditional multi-generational pattern of kinship was disrupted, which consequently led to an incomplete system of family support and further intensified the stress associated with the adjustment process to the U.S. culture. For instance, research with SEA young adults who reported having family members left behind in their country-of-origin indicated a lower quality of social support and family relationships (Dinh, 2016). Yet, there is evidence of effective coping and adaptation among SEA families as demonstrated by their inclusion of extended relatives, however distantly related, and non-relatives into the primary and extended family unit (Gardner, Robey, & Smith, 1985; Landale et al., 2011).

2.6.1 Southeast Asian Family Households

Statistics from the 2010 ACS showed that 80.1% of Vietnamese, 80.1% of Laotian, 87.9% of Hmong, and 82% of Cambodian households comprised of family households, higher than the percentages for U.S. and Asian overall family households, respectively, at 66.4% and 73.3% (Southeast Asia Resource Action Center, 2011). Family households with children under age 18 constituted 44.7% for Vietnamese, 47% for Laotian, 66.2% for Hmong, and 46.3% for Cambodian, as compared to 29.7% and 37.9%, respectively, for U.S. and Asian overall. Female householder families with no male spouse present represented 12.4% for Vietnamese, 19% for Laotian, 17% for Hmong, and 23.2% for Cambodian, as compared to 13.1% and 9.8%, respectively, for U.S. overall and Asian overall. The average family size for Vietnamese was 3.97, Laotian, 4.20, Hmong, 5.80, and Cambodian, 4.14, which were all higher than the U.S. and Asian overall family sizes, respectively, at 3.23 and 3.59. These statistics were consistent with the higher fertility rates reported for SEAs as compared to the general U.S. and Asian populations (Landale et al., 2011). They might have reflected an adaptive strategy among SEAs to re-establish their family network, which typically experienced losses due to migration and war trauma. Overall, the U.S. census data showed that SEAs were more likely to reside in family households, and these households were more likely to be larger in size, have children under the age of 18, and headed by women, in comparison to the general U.S. and Asian populations. The higher prevalence of SEAs in family households indicated greater importance of family as the primary source of social and financial

support, given the stressful circumstances of their past refugee, migration, and resettlement experiences. The higher prevalence of SEA women as head of family households, even decades later, pointed to the potential long-term effects of war and migration trauma on subsequent family formation, size, and structure.

2.6.2 Marriage and Inter-marriage

According to an analysis by the Pew Research Center (2017), marriage across racial and ethnic lines continued to be on the rise among the newlyweds in the U.S., with Asians at the highest rate of 29%, as compared to the national rate of 17%. An examination of the interracial and interethnic marriage rates among the Vietnamese, for which data were available (we were unable to locate data for other SEA groups), showed that the rates varied according to specific demographic characteristics, such as gender and generational status (Le, 2012). For all existing and new marriages among Vietnamese Americans, 15.4% of women and 7.4% of men married outside their ethnic group. These rates were considerably lower than the overall rate for Asians in the U.S. However, the intermarriage rates dramatically increased among the 1.5 generation (i.e., individuals who came to the U.S. at age 13 or younger) and later generations of Vietnamese, with women at 59.4% and men at 41%, which were consistent with statistics for U.S.-born Asian Americans overall (Cusido, 2017). According to Le (2012), interracial marriages with White spouses were the most common (41.3% for women and 21.9% for men), followed by marriages with spouses of other Asian ethnicities (12.2% for women and 13.7% for men). A major factor for these higher interracial or interethnic marriage rates was generational status, potentially reflecting underlying factors, such as changes in family cultural values and traditions, gender roles, acculturation modes, and level of education.

2.7 Migration and Family Relationships

2.7.1 Marital Relationship

Changes in SEA families, especially in the dynamics of family relationships, family hierarchy and expectations, and gender roles, have been documented in the literature (e.g., Boehnlein et al., 1997; Leung, Boehnlein, & Kinzie, 1997; Moore, Keopraseuth, Leung, & Chao, 1997; Xiong, Eliason, Detzner, & Cleveland, 2005). Relationships between family members, including the marital relationship, have been altered in significant ways as a result of exposure to new cultural and economic demands, as well as coping with the differential adaptation of individual family members. The changes in the marital relationship might be due to changes in gender roles (Chung & Bemak, 2002; Gordon, 2009; Lee & Tapp, 2010). One aspect of the U.S. culture that many SEA individuals have observed is the relatively more egalitarian status between males and females with regard to educational and career opportunities within the U.S. society. These opportunities helped women and girls to develop a degree of independence and identity beyond the prescribed traditional SEA female roles, enabling them to realize their potential educational talents and career aspirations.

Although many SEA women adjusted well to these changes in their lives, the consequences have been both positive and negative. On one hand, they experienced a sense of accomplishment, especially in

their ability to contribute to their family's economic status that went beyond taking care of the household and children (Chan, 2004). On the other hand, these changes entailed work both inside and outside the home, increasing the stress in their lives, as many SEA men tended to not assume the level of domestic responsibilities as needed by their wives. Additionally, the changes in the wife's status can lead to tension and conflict in the marital relationship, including domestic violence, as the husband might have perceived these changes as threatening to his authority (Kibria, 1993; Lee, 2015; Tran & DesJardins, 2000). Although divorce is highly stigmatized in SEA communities, these marital conflicts may partly explain the increases in divorce rates among SEAs in the U.S. (Chan, 2004; Do, 2017).

2.7.2 Parent-Child Relationship

Another significant change in the traditional SEA family involves the parent-child relationship. The process of adaptation to mainstream U.S. culture typically differed between parents and children, particularly the 1.5 and 2nd generation (U.S.-born) children, leading to potential intergenerational cultural conflicts and dissatisfaction in the parent-child relationship (Dinh & Nguyen, 2006; Xiong, Detzner, & Cleveland, 2004-05; Zhou, 2001). Parents tended to maintain core aspects of traditional cultural and family values while their children tended to adopt more mainstream U.S. values, behaviors, and lifestyles (Dinh, Sarason, & Sarason, 1994; Dinh et al., 2013; McCabe & Dinh, 2018). The extent of differential patterns in adaptation is partly influenced by the extent of differences in age and generational status. Also influential are contextual factors, such as whether the family resided within a SEA or Asian ethnic enclave (Vo-Jutabha, Dinh, McHale, & Valsiner, 2009) and exposure to divergent socializing institutions, namely occupational/public assistance contexts for parents vs. school/peer contexts for children (Chan, 2004).

Within the school context, SEA children learned from teachers and peers the importance of mainstream U.S. values, such as individuality, independence, assertiveness, and questioning of authority. Internalizing these values as part of their psychological and behavioral repertoire facilitated educational success for children (Dinh, Weinstein, Kim, & Ho, 2008), but their transfer into the traditional SEA family context posed potential intergenerational difficulties (Dinh & Nguyen, 2006; Dinh et al., 2013) and challenged the traditional roles and hierarchy of parents and children. Furthermore, the language gap between parents and children exacerbated the cultural gap in which parents and children were unable to communicate with each other about their experiences and the challenges they have faced in their respective lives (Yang, 2008).

Changes in the parent-child relationship also have differential dynamics for sons and daughters (Dinh et al., 1994). Sons, especially the eldest, may question the traditional obligations of sharing the same household with their parents and providing financial support and care to their aging parents, while daughters may question traditional gender roles and hierarchies. Changes in family and gender roles, along with other factors, have altered the dynamics and overall quality of parent-child relationships in SEA families (McCabe & Dinh, 2018; Su, Lee, & Vang, 2005; Xiong et al., 2004-05).

2.8 Migration and Family in Later Life

Census data indicated the SEA populations to be relatively younger than the U.S. overall population (37.2), ranging in median age from 20.4 for Hmong to 27.8 for Cambodian, 28.4 for Laotian, and 34.4 for Vietnamese (Southeast Asia Resource Action Center, 2011). The percentages of individuals under age 25 represented 61.7% for Hmong, 44.5% for Laotian, 44.1% for Cambodian, and 37.1% for Vietnamese in comparison to 34% for the general U.S. population. Likewise, census data showed the percentages of elderly SEA individuals (age 65 or older) to be lower than the percentage for the general U.S. population (13.1%), ranging from 2.9% for Hmong to 5.7% for Cambodian, 5.7% for Laotian, and 7.5% for Vietnamese. These statistics are consistent with the fact that there were more young individuals among the various waves and groups of SEA refugees and immigrants who entered the U.S. (Lew, 1991; Rumbaut, 1995). Nonetheless, these “younger” cohorts, those in their 20s and 30s at the time of migration, have now approached or reached their “golden years.”

The majority of SEAs who were older or elderly at the time of migration came to the U.S. with their families or joined them at a later time through the family unification process (Yee, 2009). The limited available research and clinical observations indicated that older age poses more difficulties in adaptation for elderly members, as compared to younger members (e.g., Carlin, 1990; Detzner, 2005; Shapiro et al., 1999). Language problems represented a major barrier, limiting their ability to interact with people and institutions beyond the family sphere while intensifying their sense of loss, helplessness, and isolation (Faderman & Xiong, 1998). Even within the family, adjustment to changes in family composition, roles, and hierarchy were particularly challenging for elderly members. Although there is diversity among SEA groups and families, aging in SEA cultures is typically associated with increasing reverence within and outside the family (Chan, 2005). However, this may not be the case for SEA families in the U.S. From observations by the first author in her clinical and community practice with Vietnamese elders, they expressed frustrations and disappointments over the rapid “Americanization” of the younger generations, feeling alienated from their children and grandchildren. This is consistent with the second author’s experience in providing mental health services to non-traditional-aged SEA students at a public university. These experiences are complicated by mental health challenges associated with war and migration trauma, as well as anxiety over their inevitable mortality and afterlife taking place in a foreign land far away from their home country. They also expressed anxiety as to whether their family would take care of them as they get even older, potentially with more severe health problems, and honor them through ancestor worshiping customs in their death. These clinical and community observations are consistent with the literature on the adjustment experiences of SEA elders (e.g., Carlin, 1990; Detzner, 2004; Tran, 1991; Yee, 2009).

Although the adjustment experiences have been particularly challenging for SEAs who were older or elderly at the time of migration, the implications for aging are similar, but perhaps with less anxiety, for individuals who migrated at younger ages, in their 20s or 30s, and have now entered their elderly years (Yee, 2009). In traditional SEA families, elders are typically surrounded and taken care of by

multigenerational family members (Chan, 2005), but as the traditional SEA family resembles more closely to the mainstream family in U.S. society, such as adult children, especially the eldest son, moving out to establish independent households, possibly in locations far away from the family-of-origin unit, and increasing rates of interracial marriages in subsequent generations, the extended family network might not be available for elderly parents or members to rely on. Issues about how they will be taken care of in their old age and the possibility of “nursing home” life are some concerns among SEA elders, wondering whether their adult children will be there, in proximity and with resources, to help them until death. These concerns, however, have been shown to not align with research findings on living arrangements of SEA elders because compared to other ethnic or racial groups, they reported the lowest rates of living in either “alone” or “with just a spouse” households and the lowest rate of living in institutions, such as nursing homes or assisted living residences (Himes, Hogan, & Eggebeen, 1996; Igasaki & Niedzwiecki, 2004).

3. Implications for Research and Practice with SEA Families and Individuals

When working with SEA populations, a thorough assessment of pre-migration, migration, and resettlement experiences is crucial in establishing a basic foundation for understanding their potential impact on individual family members, as well as on various aspects of the whole family network and its dynamics across time and generations (Dinh, 2009; Dow, 2011; Nicholson, 1997; Nguyen & Lee, 2012).

3.1 Pre-Migration Experiences

Pertaining to *pre-migration* experiences, we should assess demographic characteristics, such as parental level of education, socioeconomic status, and type of employment prior to migration. We also should assess family background and history, including family composition, structure, and roles, and what family life was like in their country-of-origin. This information can provide insights for understanding the temporal changes in the family network and relationships within the U.S. cultural context. Information about individual family member’s level of familiarity with U.S. culture and language prior to migration, as well as age at the time of migration, is also helpful in understanding the processes of cultural adaptation and adjustment and the extent of cultural gaps or conflicts between family members. Undoubtedly, an assessment of pre-migration war and trauma exposure can help contextualize current adjustment difficulties of individual family members and the way in which individual trauma history has had an effect on the whole family network.

3.2 Migration Experiences

Information pertaining to *migration* experiences or the exodus process is critical contextual information for understanding current family and individual well-being. Assessment of the nature of their departure from their home country, such as the circumstances at the time of departure, why they decided to leave their home country, was the plan to leave well-thought out or a sudden decision to leave, which family members were able to leave and were there family members left behind, did they face difficulties

and/or trauma during their exodus, including life threatening incidents and/or loss of family members, can inform researchers, educators, and practitioners about the circumstances of their migration experiences, including the potential impact on subsequent family formation and composition and how the family has adjusted to these changes over time and generations. It is essential to understand experiences pertaining to refugee camp confinement as many SEA families and individuals spent months or even years in refugee camps. Information about the location of the refugee camp, the living conditions, including hardships or difficulties, and the length of time confined to refugee camp living can further enhance our contextual and historical understanding of traumatic events and their influences on subsequent family and individual developments in the U.S.

3.3 Resettlement Experiences

Finally, knowledge of *resettlement* experiences is another critical component in our work with SEA populations. Information about the location of their initial resettlement, secondary migration, including reasons for their decision to relocate to another area, such as to unite with family members or friends or to be near other SEA or Asian communities, their sponsors and what types of support and assistance did they receive from them, their attitudes and expectations about life in the U.S., difficulties and challenges they confronted in resettlement, whether they were related to simple matters and/or complex ones, and their experiences with discrimination from host individuals or communities can inform researchers and practitioners of the various resettlement stressors that may have had significant ramifications for the family and individual members throughout the life cycle. For example, the ramifications, positive and/or negative, on family formation and adaptation may have differed significantly for families that pursued secondary migration to be near SEA or Asian communities versus those who chose to remain in their initial resettlement, particularly if it was located in isolated rural areas, far away from SEA or Asian groups. Certainly, the former would have had a qualitatively different cultural adjustment experience than the latter, such as more contacts and connections with other SEAs (Vo-Jutabha et al., 2009). Furthermore, knowledge of the intactness of the family unit in their initial resettlement, such as the loss of and/or separation of family members due to death and/or immigration policies that split family members to resettle in different locations within or outside the U.S., might have had additional short-term and long-term impact on the family. These diverse resettlement paths could have led to varying consequences for family members and the family as a whole, such as the extent of changes in family and gender roles, extent of intergenerational cultural conflict, rates of interracial marriage, ease of adjustment for elderly members, and so forth. A thorough assessment of resettlement experiences would further provide a nuanced understanding of their effects on the family and the subsequent changes and adjustment over time and generations.

4. Conclusion

For SEA refugees and immigrants who came to the U.S. several decades ago, the events that unfold prior, during, and after their migration have had a profound impact on their lives and families and will

continue for generations. There is tremendous diversity in their backgrounds and life experiences but war, trauma, losses, and remarkable resilience are central themes when we think about SEAs living in U.S. society. The transformation of the family has been dramatic and still on-going, as evidenced by research, clinical, and community observations, ranging from family structure and composition, to family and gender roles, to marital and parent-child relationships, across the family cycle. We simply cannot ignore pre-migration, migration, and resettlement experiences in our work with SEA families and individuals. This knowledge is a must in our understanding of their life circumstances and family dynamics and in the development and provision of services and programs that can effectively address the diverse needs of SEA populations.

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