The Effect of Trauma Transmission: Psychosocial Development of Second-Generation Southeast Asian American College Students

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Asian American students have a strong presence in higher education, making up 6% of the overall college population (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). However, these figures hide vast disparities in the cultural and identity development of the 25 nationally recognized Asian American ethnic sub-groups (Hoeffel, Rastogi, Kim, & Shahid, 2012). Southeast Asian American students, in particular, have unique cultural experiences, such as being raised by refugee parents and navigating a bi-cultural identity. Utilizing Kodama, McEwen, Liang, and Lee's (2002) psychosocial development of Asian American identity, this article examines the effects of psychosocial development on second-generation Southeast Asian American college students from their refugee parents' transmitted psychological trauma. With this understanding, student affairs professionals can better assist this student population to explore their identities through the negotiation of the seven psychosocial developmental tasks.

Between 2000 and 2010, the Asian population was the fastest growing racial group in the United States (Hoeffel et al., 2012). The Asian population increased four times faster than the total U.S. population, growing by 43% from 10.2 million to 14.7 million (Hoeffel et al., 2012). By 2050, the population of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) is estimated to reach 40.3 million or 10% of the total U.S. population (Lee, 1998). Between 1976 and 2010, enrollment of AAPI college students increased from 2% to 6% (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Despite their increasing presence in higher education, too often AAPI students are subjected to the *model minority* stereotype, which is defined as students who are academically successful, wealthy, compliant, uncomplaining, and problem-free (Chang & Kiang, 2002). Because this stereotype overlooks their racial identities, AAPI are not viewed as "underrepresented in [American] academic and social structures" (Oyserman & Sakamoto, 1997, p. 437). As a result, this model minority myth overstates AAPI students' levels of educational access and academic achievement.

The model minority stereotype masks the heterogeneity in the AAPI population, which is diverse because of its immigration histories, ethnic traditions, and religious values. The 2010 U.S. Census identifies at least 25 distinct ethnic subgroups within the AAPI race (Hoeffel et al., 2012). For the purpose of this article, Southeast Asian Americans (SEAA) is an ethnic category that includes Vietnamese, Hmong, Cambodian, and Laotian Americans. There are an estimated 2.3 million SEAA in the country (Hoeffel et al., 2012), the majority of whom are refugees who fled from civil

war and political turmoil (Ngo & Lee, 2007). As a result, SEAA refugees were subjected to many traumas during their escape and arrival to the U.S. and are unable to handle many of their traumatic experiences (Han, 2006). Many SEAA are poorly prepared to adjust to American culture (Han, 2006). In fact, SEAA refugees are four times greater than American adults to experience psychological distress (Rumbaut & Ima, 1988). The half-million American-born children of SEAA refugees are directly or indirectly affected by their parents' trauma (Han, 2006).

This article focuses on second generation SEAA students, who are defined as Americans of Southeast Asian descent born in America to refugee parents. Although they have similar Asian cultural values to AAPI students, such as family-oriented interdependence and connection to tradition and heritage (Oyserman & Sakamoto, 1997), their parents' immigration history as refugees becomes an additional burden on SEAA students. This trans-generational phenomenon, called the transmission of trauma (Han 2006), is one in which many SEAA children, who never experienced the trauma firsthand, internalize their parents' psychological distress. Ultimately, this transmission of trauma has a powerful influence on the decisions, actions, and identity of SEAA students. As a result, SEAA students are more complex than the model minority image suggests (Ngo & Lee, 2007) and deserve attention from student affairs professionals to better understand their different academic, social, and emotional development in the college setting (Han & Lee, 2011).

Although there is research explaining the psychosocial development of college students (Chickering & Reisser, 1993), including within the broad category of AAPI students (Kodama, McEwen, Liang, and Lee, 2002), few studies have examined how SEAA students, an ethnic sub-group of the AAPI population, negotiate their psychosocial development and their parents' unique immigration history (Ngo & Lee, 2007). Current literature and research provide a starting point for understanding how SEAA students self-identify when they reach college, as well as the unique challenges they may face in developing their identity. However, there is little empirical psychological research before 2006 about the effect of parental trauma on American-born SEAA adolescents (Han, 2006). Southeast Asian refugees suffered "severe trauma including war-related atrocities, being forced out of their homeland, and encountering life-threatening dangers during their escape" (Han, 2006, p. 28). These stressful events have resulted in minor and major psychological symptoms, such as anxiety, depression, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder for Southeast Asian refugees (Han, 2006). Based on the literature and research on trans-generational transmission of trauma conducted on Holocaust families and their offspring, it is likely that the traumas experienced by Southeast Asian refugees have also negatively impacted their children (Han, 2006). Combined with current literature of trans-generational transmission of trauma, this article

will examine Kodama et al.'s (2002) psychosocial model to provide an overview of how various external factors influence the identity development of SEAA students. Branching from Kodama et al.'s (2002) framework, a new SEAA conceptual model will help student affairs personnel understand implications of trans-generational transmission of trauma on the psychosocial development of second-generation SEAA college students.

Foundational Theories

One of the most commonly used theories of psychosocial student development is Chickering and Reisser's (1993) model of seven developmental tasks in which college students explore their identities through a negotiation of seven challenges or vectors: developing competency, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, developing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity. Although their model utilizes existing literature that identifies different vector orders for students of color as a general population, they do not specifically examine vector orders for specific ethnic groups (Chickering & Reisser, 2003). Because of this gap in the literature, Kodama et al. (2002) have re-examined Chickering and Reisser's theoretical framework specifically from the perspective of AAPI college students.

The psychosocial journey for AAPI students is not a solely internal process, but one heavily influenced by external forces such as family, peer, and community pressures (Kodama et al., 2002). For AAPI students, identity becomes a process of negotiating between these Asian and Western external influences, thus making identity central to this new AAPI psychosocial model (Kodama et al., 2002). This model also places the developmental task of forming one's purpose in the center since, for AAPI students, identity is shaped by purpose (Kodama et al., 2002). AAPI students pursue higher education for pragmatic, goal-oriented, and job-related reasons (Hune & Chan, 1997). Thus, their purpose entering college is clear and their identity is defined by their academic achievement and personal career goals. Therefore, a change in students' purpose can change their identity (or vice versa) and may also affect other areas of development such as competency, emotions, interdependence, relationships, and integrity (Kodama et al., 2002).

Though identity and purpose are at the center of their development, AAPI students must continually negotiate other developmental tasks. Competency, as defined by Chickering and Reisser (1993), is a particularly relevant developmental task for AAPI students (Kodama et al., 2002). Intellectual competency, rather than the physical, manual, and interpersonal competencies, is heavily emphasized because education is highly valued and is seen as a vehicle for academic as well as career success (Kodama et al., 2002). In contrast, AAPI students may not have the ability to explore their emotional development because emotional discipline is necessary for maintaining peer and familial harmony (Chew &

Ogi, 1987), thus minimalizing the managing emotions vector (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Thus, in a Western college environment that embraces expressiveness, AAPI students may feel uncomfortable articulating their feelings (Kodama et al., 2002). Independence is another Western value AAPI students struggle to negotiate since *interdependence* is central to Asian cultures. Dominant Asian cultural values, such as family harmony and respect of authority, help maintain interpersonal relationships. Often, AAPI parents exert a strong influence over their children's important decisions such as attending college or choosing a major (Kodama et al., 2002). Because of this deference to authority, AAPI students may feel uncomfortable approaching faculty to ask for help or challenging

al., 2002). Finally, AAPI students define integrity as upholding the family name, which conflicts with Chickering and Reisser's (1993) definition of integrity that encourages students to find their own values apart from their families, peers, and society. Thus, AAPI students struggle with finding their individual values apart from family expectations (Kodama et al., 2002).

Kodama et al.'s (2002) psychosocial model examines the different vector order for the general AAPI population. The model, however, does not take into account the unique challenges that specific AAPI ethnic sub-groups encounter. SEAA students must negotiate these seven developmental tasks while also experiencing emotional conflicts that arise from their parents' history as
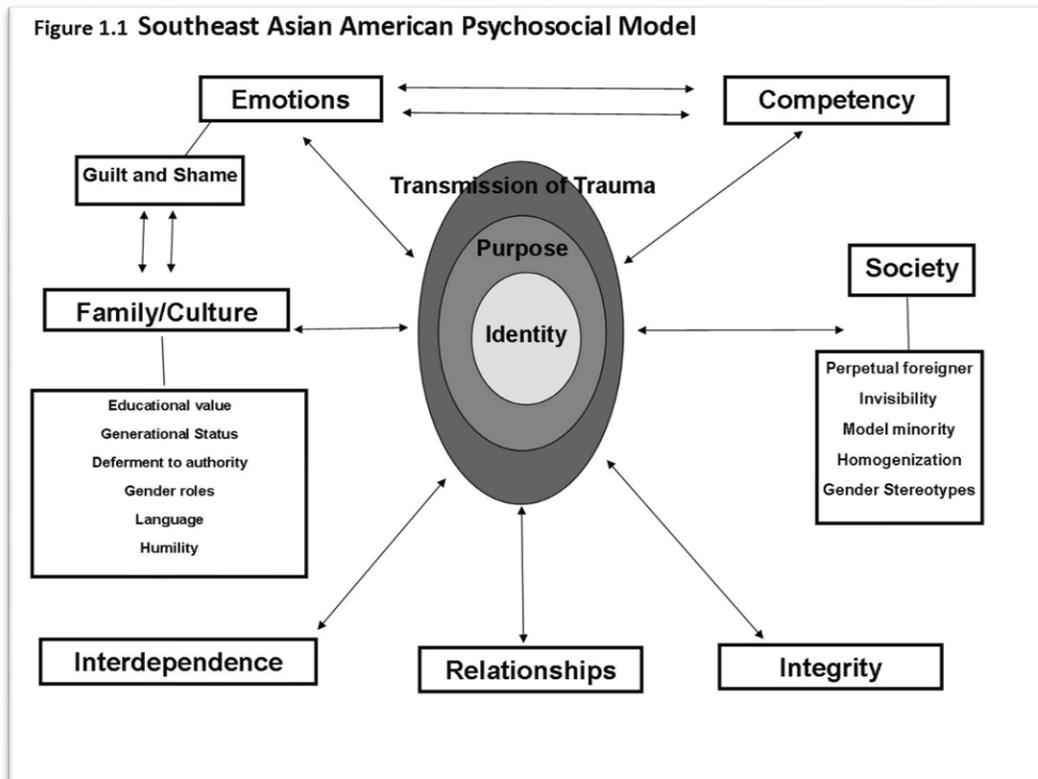

Figure 1.1 **Southeast Asian American Psychosocial Model**

Figure 1. Southeast Asian American Psychosocial Model: Negotiating Identity, Developmental Tasks and Transmission of Trauma. Adapted from Kodama, McEwen, Liang and Lee (2002)

this model as a framework, the author has created a new model (see Figure 1) that specifically reflects the identity development of SEAA students.

The Transmission of Trauma on Second-Generation SEAA Psychosocial Development

The composition of the U.S. AAPI population is a result of the immigration histories of people from Asia (National Commission on AAPI and Pacific Islander Research in Education, 2008). Within this population, there are different forms of immigration. *Voluntary immigrants* are people who willingly choose to move to the U.S. in the hopes of better opportunities, such as well-paid jobs or greater political or religious freedom (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). In contrast, *refugees* are not voluntary immigrants because they are forced to leave their country as a result of civil war or political turmoil (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). A majority of the estimated 2.3 million SEAA in the U.S. are refugees (Han & Lee, 2011). Many years after fleeing from their country, refugees still have difficulty expressing or vocalizing the significant traumas they experienced. As a result, these traumatized refugee parents are unable to form positive and secure attachments with their American-born children (Han, 2006). Many psychological empirical studies demonstrate that parental attachment is a strong predictor for many college adjustment issues, including mechanisms for coping with stress, social competence, personal development, and academic success (Han & Lee, 2011). Thus, having a weak parent-child attachment may affect the psychosocial development of SEAA students. The transmission of trauma is interrelated with identity and purpose (see Figure 1) and, consequently, affects a number of the developmental tasks for SEAA college students. For example, in Chickering and Reisser's (1993) managing emotions task, SEAA college students may find it more difficult to explore or understand emotional cues because their refugee parents have modeled minimal emotional awareness and expression (Kodama et al., 2002). This lack of parental emotional expression can also hinder SEAA students from the developmental task of forming social and interpersonal competency (Kodama et al., 2002).

Refugee parents, who have difficulty resolving their traumatic experiences, have high levels of anxiety and helplessness (Han, 2006). Furthermore, many SEAA students come from households in which their refugee parents have little to no formal education and have limited English proficiency (Um, 2003). In response, these refugee parents become dependent on their children to assume the role of an authority figure (Han, 2006). Essentially, SEAA students become cultural brokers helping their parents navigate through the dominant culture, deal with outside authorities, and assume adult responsibilities, such as paying bills or filing taxes (Ngo & Lee, 2007). This power shift from refugee parents to SEAA students is a complete contrast to the valued Asian cultural behaviors in which the elders are viewed as the authority figures. Thus, in Chickering and Reisser's (1993) relationships vector, SEAA students are constantly

negotiating their conflicting roles as the authority figure and the obedient child. Also, with limited English proficiency, refugee parents do not understand the American education system and cannot effectively advocate for or guide their children through the college application and financial aid process (Um, 2003). SEAA students, who are forced to navigate the college environment on their own, might not know how to approach faculty or staff for help or how to find and use college resources such as academic advising (Um, 2003). Furthermore, with dependent parents, SEAA students (particularly those who serve as cultural brokers) feel obligated to choose family over individual identity (Kodama et al., 2002). This heightened sense of familial interdependence may encourage SEAA students to attend college closer to home and to live at home rather than on campus (Yeh, 2002). However, living at home can make it difficult for SEAA students to integrate into the campus culture and develop friendships or support networks outside the family (Yeh, 2002).

The role of shame is a prominent mechanism for social control and influence in Asian cultures (Yeh & Huang, 1996). Guilt and shame are frequently used to reinforce familial and cultural obligations, social expectations, and proper behavior (Yeh & Huang, 1996). The trauma that refugee parents experience and the sacrifices they have made to provide their children with better opportunities serve as a constant reminder for SEAA students to uphold the family name (Ngo & Lee, 2007). Because education is so highly valued and seen as an opportunity for economic mobility, SEAA students may experience inordinate amounts of pressure to succeed academically and choose a major that pleases their parents (Ngo & Lee, 2007). This heightened awareness of integrity, defined by Chickering and Reisser (2003), may hinder the ability for SEAA students to form individual values apart from family values and expectations (Kodama et al., 2002). This negotiation between Western and Asian expectations is similar to their AAPI peers. However, the addition of guilt and shame from transmission of trauma further clouds individualistic exploration for SEAA students as well as their social and emotional development in college (Kodama et al., 2002).

Implications for Student Affairs Professionals

This model of psychosocial development for SEAA students is designed to educate student affairs professionals on the ethnic differences that exist within the AAPI racial group. In terms of admissions recruitment efforts, SEAA students are often the first in their family to attend college and may enter with limited resources and peer interactions (Um, 2003). Refugee parents, who are unfamiliar with the college lifestyle, often fear the prospect of their children leaving home, thereby hindering their children's positive peer interaction, integration into the campus culture, and psychosocial development (Yeh, 2002). This understanding of familial interdependence may help admissions and recruitment staffs support prospective SEAA students and their

families by providing information and resources for residing in campus residence halls as well as academic support services and mentor programs (Yeh, 2002).

Because the university environment does not reflect the heritage of ethnic minorities, SEAA students might have different perspectives on values and find it more difficult than White students to integrate into the campus culture (Chhuon & Hudley, 2008). One example of the different cultural values of SEAA students is their interpretation of emotional openness and closeness, particularly if their parents model minimal expression (Kodama et al., 2002). SEAA students may feel they have little in common with the institution and members of the college community, increasing their risk of psychological depression and academic failure (Chhuon & Hudley, 2008). Furthermore, SEAA students, in particular, form their identities based on the guilt and shame of their refugee parents' sacrifices. Therefore, asking SEAA students to talk about their parents' trauma may help in the process of assessing students' needs (Han, 2006). Sanford's (1966) concept of "challenge and support" can help these students shed these feelings of guilt and shame while forming identities outside of their parents' expectations (Alvarez, 2002). To facilitate deep reflection, positive peer relationships, and emotional expression, student affairs professionals can first provide *homeplaces* such as Asian American student groups in which "judgments are suspended, and trusted friends and allies are there not only to listen

but also to encourage individuals to express their feelings and thought processes" (Ortiz & Patton, 2012, p.27). These homeplaces are ideal for self-exploration programs, activities, and lectures while creating positive learning outcomes in the company of trusted allies (Ortiz & Patton, 2012) and provide access to peer or faculty role models (Lagdameo et al., 2002). With time, a stronger self-awareness can encourage SEAA students to engage in risk-taking developmental activities such as admitting to one's mistakes, engaging in honest conversations with peers or professors, or exploring a career field that is not expected by their refugee parents (Kodama et al., 2002; Ortiz & Patton, 2012). The experiences that grow out of self-exploration and risk-taking can help SEAA students form their individual identities separate from their parents' expectations (Kodama et al., 2002). Furthermore, having a community with people who share a similar background will help SEAA students find the emotional and social support they need to form healthy relationships and identities outside their parents' expectations while further integrating them into the larger campus culture.

Conclusion

The transmission of trauma can be a powerful influence on SEAA psychosocial student development. However, college may be the first time that SEAA students have the opportunity to explore their identity apart from their family. With an appropriate amount of academic, social, and emotional support, SEAA students can better understand

themselves within the context of their family, their peers, their college community, and U.S. society (Kodama et al, 2002). There is no one-size-fits-all student development model that can adequately capture the unique experiences of students of color (Kim et al., 2009). However, utilizing this new psychosocial model to understand the unique external influences on SEAA students' identity, student affairs professionals can assist these students to develop self-awareness separate from their parents' expectations and will enable them to form their own individual strengths, values, and purpose.

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