

THE SELF IN CONTEXT: REFLECTIONS OF A SOCIAL WORK EDUCATOR'S SEARCH FOR A SENSE OF COHERENCE

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This narrative recounts the author's search for a sense of self, beginning as a refugee in one of the massive outflows of Vietnamese who fled their country in 1983 in pursuit of freedom. He subsequently drew upon personal experiences that showed him how a contextual sense of self developed. By sharing these experiences, the author hopes to offer insight into the resilience of the self in adjusting to drastic environmental changes.

Every March carries a special meaning for me, reinforcing my sense of accomplishment. From a shy city boy, to a passenger on a shaky fishing boat on the Southern China Sea, to a college professor, I contemplate the road I have taken and how my sense of self has evolved in the process. Reflecting on this journey may shed light on multiculturalism in social work practice. My first glimmer that indicated how much the formation of my new self was skewed was when I experienced a lack of assertiveness in social interactions, which subsequently affected my sense of self-efficacy and coherence. Pausing for reflection, I searched for pathways to a true sense of self. These pathways have enhanced my social work practice and propelled me into scholarly work on the reciprocal relationship between a sense of self and the social context.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Vietnam suffered from Hanoi's attempt to rebuild the war-torn country with a vision of "New Economic Zones." These were, in effect, agricultural communes (Zhou & Bankston, 1998), but a lack of infrastructure, coupled with natural disasters and the war with China and Cambodia, destroyed this attempt at renewal. Vietnam subsequently plunged into economic depression and experienced a severe food shortage. Apprehension about an uncertain future was written on the starving faces. "Neighborhood

watch" gained a different meaning of "security"—privacy and freedom of speech were tightly restricted. At the age of 17, amid the physiological turmoil of adolescence, I struggled to comprehend the changing political and social climate of my country. The unpredictability of the external environment and the lack of available resources shook my sense of coherence. My parents were afraid that we would be uprooted and placed in the "New Economic Zones," where ravaged lands were not cultivable due to years of bombing. In addition, I was about to be drafted to serve in the war in Cambodia. In a state of severe discontent and with the backing of my parents' money, I made the decision to leave Vietnam and become part of the second wave of a Vietnamese exodus, later known as "the boat people." Challenging the coastguard and braving the storms of the monsoon season, I finally reached Malaysia along with 96 other people and became "PB822-108916."

Over a few years in the transit camp (a processing center for all South East Asian refugees before heading to the United States) in Pulau Bidong, I learned English as a second language, work orientation, and how to interact with Americans. Like other "boat people," I expected to find differences between my culture and the Western culture. The aim of these programs was to enable the refugees to recognize differences in cultural

values and communication patterns. At the camp, Americanization or Westernization was often equated with one's level of fluency in English and one's level of association with the foreigners. Disconnected from my family and rejected many times for entry to the United States, I lingered in the no-man's land of a transit camp, disenchanting and isolated. I tried to reduce my anxiety about the uncertain future by spending hours in the library listening to audiotapes in English. For me, English was the only ticket to any final destination. Doing this, I came to assume that I had fully acclimatized to a new "American/Western" self, and that I had forgone my "Vietnamese" self.

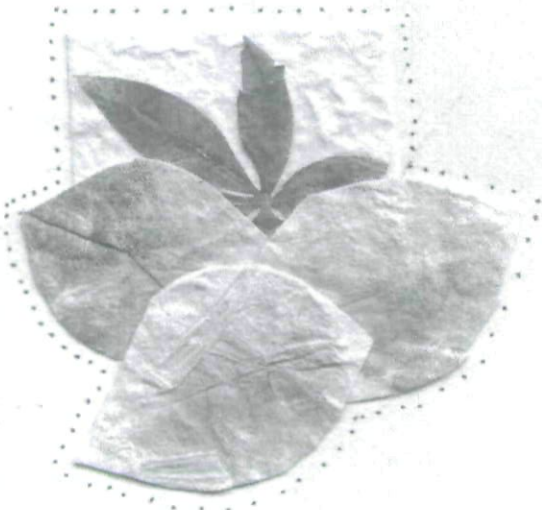
Paradoxically, having lost citizenship and family support, I found strength in my boat-mates and camp-mates who shared the same life experiences. Vietnamese refugees bonded together and transformed this tiny island into a mini-Saigon with Vietnamese shops and bazaars. At the age of 17, having being pampered in Vietnam by my parents and nine older sisters, I learned how to take on greater responsibilities for household tasks. Every day I lined up and carried water with my camp brothers through the treacherous paths of the island and back to our quarter, which was shared with other families and "orphans"

(those rejected by the United States). At other times, I volunteered to teach elementary English to my fellow countrymen and women. When food arrived, all the men on the island, including me, reported to the dock to unload the supply. On one occasion, while carrying a 60 kg bag of rice on an unstable wooden dock, I lost

my balance and threw the bag into the ocean. Without being asked for help, my camp brothers dove into the water and dragged the soaked bag of rice onto the shore. I thanked them for saving me from being reprimanded. These brothers told me: "Don't worry much—we are homeless; we have to care for each other to survive." At nightfall, we gathered and shared our long-awaited letters and delicious chocolates sent by loved ones from Australia, Canada, or the United States. Despite the attempt by the United Nations to promote assimilation, a collective identity of being Vietnamese was fostered and nourished throughout my years on the sleepy island off the coast of Malaysia.

In the sweltering heat and dust of mid-January 1985, after numerous appeals, I finally left the transit camp and headed to Santa Ana, California, to be reunited with two of my sisters. Throughout the dreary camp years, I never entertained the possibility that I would actually get to America: a place I used to think of as a sort of unattainable paradise. I was inspired by the spotless high-tech of the international airport at Seoul, Korea, and ecstatic at getting on an escalator. Turning to my right, I asked the Korean lady sitting next to me, "Mam, would you show me where the trash container is?" She looked at me in confusion, grasped her purse tightly, and moved hastily to another seat on the same row. "I might look like a beggar wearing worn clothes," I thought to myself. "She might not understand what I said, or she thinks I smell." Without knowing that a crisis of identity was brewing and waiting to spill out into my consciousness, I continued to wonder: "Is it that she does not want to respond, or is it because I am with a group of refugees whose faces are filled with surprise and apprehension at their uncertain future in the United States?"

Settling in a crowded Santa Ana apartment shared by my two sisters' families, the aroma of traditional Vietnamese fish sauces mingled with incense from the altar of



Quan Am, a deity of mercy. At home at last with my sisters and brothers-in-law, I reminisced about the past, thanked them for being here, and longed for letters from home in Vietnam. My sisters always reminded me: "We are only three people here in this country. Without family unity, you are nothing."

Overgrown lemon grass, garlic, and mints filled the small space of our patio. A small thatched hut from which a hammock dangled was erected to add a sense of our native homeland. Vietnamese music echoed through the apartment walls. It seemed as if the South China Sea's breeze permeated the air of this tiny garden and brushed the skin of anyone who entered. Inside my sisters' apartment, Vietnam was so evident. I was pulled by the past. My collective sense of identity with my countrymen was refined into an interdependent self in which self is the product of family and is defined by strength of one's relationship with the environment. Outside the apartment, however, Vietnam seemed so far away ...

Outside my sisters' apartment, I pretended that I had lost my memory in order to save myself from nostalgia and the grief of family separation. In school, I forced myself to believe that I was no longer the Vietnamese teenager who left a war-torn country and found shelter in a refugee camp. I changed my name; listened to Cold Play, U2, and Green Day; watched English speakers and spoke their language. In the world outside were Winchell's Donuts, Pizza Hut, and Ralph's Supermarket—America with its optimism and its absence of hard labor. In school, immersed in an individualistic society, I learned how to challenge authority, to be assertive, and to be independent. I attempted to invent a new American self that could walk outside the footsteps of my sisters and brothers.

Such dichotomy has created conflicts of identity for many Vietnamese Americans. While some have resisted adapting to the rules

and norms of the mainstream and deny their own Americanization, others, like me, attempted to fit into the new context, embraced the new environment, and thrived. A shifting awareness of self led me to identify the notion of "dual selves" (Singelis, 1994), which I defined as the ability to maintain simultaneously the interdependent self of my ethnic culture and the independent self of American society. This conscious act of switching "selves" to fit the context engendered a challenge that had to be faced.

I often berated myself about the discomfort I felt in social interactions with Vietnamese friends, American friends, and my American partner. Every day, I walked within two different worlds, carrying a polarized view of self. At home, with an emphasis on interdependency, I was taught to place others' needs, desires, and goals above my own. I was taught that my existence was the product of the family. I was taught to listen, not to speak up. At work, in school, and around my American friends, I sought to assimilate and strove for autonomy like that of my American peers.

But this switching often did not occur smoothly. At home, my life and schedule circled around my sisters' families. They often spoke for me. Most of their requests were in the form of a statement, rather than a question, with the assumption that I would be OK with them. "I know that you like this." "Oh! We are going to the Grand Canyon on Memorial Day. You are driving." "We go to the temple. It is good for you." "You must buy this for Mom. It means a lot to her."

I often submitted to their requests, feeling that it was my duty to make them happy and to minimize family friction at all cost. Most of the time, however, I felt weak and was unclear about my sense of self. Often I asked myself, "What do I want? What do I desire to do?" On such days, these questions were left unanswered. Not complying with their expectations, or challenging the traditional

blueprint of the family, made me fearful of being labeled uncaring or disrespectful and of being alienated from my family.

While socializing with American friends and assimilated Asian friends, on the other hand, I often felt criticized for not being stronger and more independent. On one occasion, I was in a relational conflict and solicited advice from a friend in Washington, D.C. He said: "You have to speak to him directly about how you feel. You are the only one who can make a decision. You are so dependent on me." I was confused, depressed, and stuck. He then added more fuel: "I think you have low self-esteem, Brian. We have to do something about your self-confidence." My assimilated friend interpreted my Asian ways of thinking about self as "submissive, ambivalent, and fragile." Inadvertently, he devalued the identity in which I was raised and which I had cultivated all my life. This inconsistency of identity was at times overwhelming. I often felt inadequate, lacking my own personality or character, and pressured to choose one way of being over the other.

Engaged in various cultural systems with conflicting roles, I often pondered: "Does self-consistency matter? Does it have to be either interdependent or independent? Can't these two coexist?" In the mainstream society, I was imbued with the notion that while inconsistency brought distress and confusion, consistency conveyed a great sense of control, which normally equates to a positive sense of coping.

Yet, as I developed as a social worker, I asked myself to examine my feelings in different contexts. Being "interdependent" was reframed as an interpersonal strength due to its flexibility, its capacity to change. Attempting to fit my "self" into various contexts had increased my ability to defuse hostility and anger. These days, I approach conflict from a different angle from what I knew as a refugee from Vietnam. I see my "self"

with its many dimensions simultaneously. I have trained myself to avoid stress generated by interpersonal conflict as I attempt to place myself in the shoes of the involved parties. The reward has been a strengthened sense of empathy with others. As part of this way of being, I never thought of putting aside my own interests in favor of others'; in fact, being interdependent helped me to widen my circle of friends and social support.

So it proved. When my friends or sisters raised their voices in frustration about this or that, I knew that by challenging them I would be creating a "self" away from those I cherish. I did not want to get away from "we," the collective, the bond that is the foundation of my life. In an attempt to balance their emotion with my need to belong, I would calm them down by saying, "You are right. I am sorry that I upset you! What do you think I can do to help the situation?" Because I allowed them to save face, they eventually recognized their irrationality and apologized for being in such a rage. But asserting myself or my needs could also be accomplished at a later stage of conflict resolution. I figured out that if I did not see the view of the other side, I would never be able to address my own needs (my independent "self").

In my research on "switching selves" with Vietnamese-American adolescents, I have found evidence of the coexistence of the interdependent and independence self as the product of a multicultural society. Adolescents with this ability appear to have positive coping strategies and a good sense of well-being (Lam, 2006). It is possibly that, as with my own experiences, these adolescents were able to manage their emotional needs through a strong connectedness with family members, peers, and community. The lessons learned from my personal struggle to achieve a coherent identity thrust me into social work, which afforded the opportunity to teach and do research on coping strategies among those

faced with identity concerns linked to cultural norms and values.

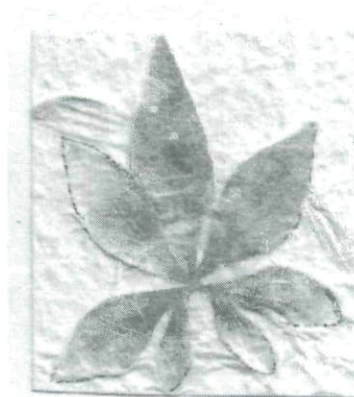
Through my personal experience and research regarding “self concept,” I have found that concepts of self govern how individuals behave, communicate, and receive feedback from others. Understanding self-development may uncover various sources of support (Lam, 2005; Lam, in press) and strategies for decision-making and communication strategies. The following list provides some guidelines for understanding individuals with “multiple or shifting selves”:

1. Social workers should not lock themselves into traditional Western orientations in which self-consistency is emphasized.
2. In assessing clients’ view of self, social workers may assess values and behaviors that provide the basis for understanding their identity.
3. Social workers may want to assess and explore “multiple selves” or shifting selves that are illuminated in contexts such as family and other close relationships. This type of assessment may uncover strengths. Studies have found that the multidimensional aspect of self may guard individuals from negative events. See Suh (2002) for a review of these concepts. Subsequently, multiple selves may help to reduce a sense of vulnerability in the face of distress.
4. Social workers must be careful in interpreting the interdependent self, which should not be considered as dependent and pathological.
5. Social workers should explore and understand the patterns of communication of their clients. For instance, Asian Americans are disinclined to create interpersonal disharmony, so they tend to engage in indirect

strategies and non-confrontational attitudes oriented to the group (Sue & Sue, 2003).

6. Treatment goals should not heavily emphasize values such as self-direction, self-awareness, and autonomy as criteria for emotional well-being (Sue & Sue, 2003).

As I reflect on my journey to America, social work training has helped me to recognize the resilient nature of a “self” that is constructed and adapted to its ever-changing social contexts. The changing dynamic of “self” underscores the core principle of reciprocity embodied in social work’s *Person in the Environment* perspective. The revelation of my personal experiences has helped me to make sense of my ambivalence and broaden my sense of self.



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