My Journey to Social Work

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The following narrative describes the life of an immigrant growing up in the United States. The author discusses the concepts of grief, loss, acculturation/assimilation dynamics, cultural adjustment, family dynamics, and career choices by citing personal examples.

Introduction

The Vietnam War officially ended on April 30, 1975. I was a six-year-old boy living in a small countryside village in South Vietnam. Under the Communist regime, our land was being divided up and given to strangers. I remember the regression of our everyday living standards, from the loss of freedom to the lack of even the most basic survival needs, specifically food or rice. My life took a dramatic turn in 1980 when our family of five left our homeland in the middle of the night, escaping by boat and risking our lives at sea. After floating on the endless ocean for four days and five nights, facing and surviving three attacks by Thai fishermen or pirates, and enduring seven months at various refugee camps, we arrived, finally, in the United States. It is this new chapter of my life that I have deemed most applicable for *Reflections.*

My purpose in writing this article is to educate and contribute to the knowledge base by relating one immigrant person's experience in the U.S., an experience that is not unique. In fact, it is common for many other refugees and immigrants, regardless of their country of origin. Meanwhile, it is important to note that there are many other immigrants or refugee families whose life experiences in the U.S. may be totally and drastically different from mine. Though I confess some level of discomfort with the self-disclosure necessary for a narrative of this nature, my true hope is that the readers will come away with some of the underlying issues that immigrants may encounter as they set foot in the U.S. These issues may involve grief and loss of their loved ones, being subjected to discrimination, racism, and stereotypes, facing the inevitable acculturation/assimilation process, operating in different value systems, juggling between family expectations and societal expectations and their impact on parent-child relationships, and deciding career choices. It is my hope that these reflections will illuminate, educate and provide insights to the readers about the clients, students, friends, neighbors, or immigrant strangers whom they have encountered or will encounter in their daily lives and may have shared a similar journey.

Arriving in the U.S.A.

My parents and siblings arrived in Houston, Texas, on December 31, 1980. Coming from South Vietnam, I had never experienced winter-like weather. Growing up in a small countryside village, I had also never experienced the "bright lights, big city" environment. My hometown did not have electricity, indoor plumbing, paved roads, or any other amenities a big city has to offer. As we descended into Houston, I remember so many "firsts." From the plane, I saw tall buildings surrounded by a huge abyss of radiating lights. I remember landing at the enormous international airport, stumbling on

an escalator, riding in a car from the airport to my uncle's house, and seeing a huge television screen with English-speaking shows. I don't recall feeling overwhelmed but probably more amazed and enthralled.

Life at School

I was eleven-years-old and began life in the U.S. as a non-English-speaking sixth grader. My parents, both of whom were professors in Vietnam, began their lives as gas station attendants. Our family was subsidized by welfare and foods stamps. My siblings and I learned English by "immersion." Reflecting on my experience, I wonder how my parents were able to work and navigate the American life with limited knowledge of English, not to mention the challenges of learning a language that was twisted with additional Texan slang and twang. For example, it took me a long time to figure out the meaning of "y'all" or "ain't" since the Vietnamese-English dictionary I carried with me contained no such words. I also clearly recall my American classmates giving me a puzzling but inquisitive look during the rare occasions when I finally gathered the courage to speak or ask questions. Reluctant to speak in the first place, due to my already weak command of English, I was even further discouraged by my peers' teasing of my heavily accented English. It was less comforting to know that I was not alone as I witnessed my sister going through the same experience with her peers while my parents faced similar situations with their frustrated customers at the gas station. It was not unusual for me, my sister, and my parents to receive racial slurs from our peers or their frustrated customers.

Middle school years then and now are still characterized by the formation of peer groups or cliques, merciless teasing or ostracizing, bullying, and peer pressure. Wardrobe, especially name branded, was one of the tools that served as a filter for the "in" and "out" crowd. Because my parents could not afford clothes sold at department stores, our wardrobe was composed of items from Goodwill. Again my "fashion faux pas" did not help my attempts of integration. In terms of bullying, I never understood why it was often assumed by some of my peers that I knew karate and, of course, there was never a shortage of incidents in which I was challenged.

After two years of being in English as Second Language classes, I was finally "deemed" proficient to begin taking regular English and reading classes. I recall feeling, upon receiving the news, as if my "handicap" had been lifted and that I was now a member of the dominant crowd or part of the "norm."

Grieving My Losses

Though I did not realize at the time, I was probably suffering from the loss or separation from my grandmother. I just knew that I missed her greatly! In the eastern culture, the eldest son of the eldest son, or first grandson, is usually the most valued in the family. I was the first grandson and treated as such. My grandmother and I had an unusually strong and close bond as she helped raise me while my parents taught in other cities. Our lives revolved around each other. About one week before our escape, which apparently had been planned for months unbeknownst to me, my grandmother asked if I would ever leave her. My answer was clear and certain: "I would never leave you, Grandma, and even if I did you'd have to come with me." She offered no reply and I went on without knowing of the events to come. Approximately one week later, being awakened suddenly in the darkness of the night, my family jumped onto our boat with me begging Grandma to come with us. I did not see my dear grandmother again until 1996. Through the years overseas, I wrote numerous letters to her, but mostly I remember waking up often with my pillow wet by tears from the dreams I had of our reunion. The tears remained hidden since it is taught in our culture, and often in other cultures, that crying indicates weakness and men or boys are not supposed to cry. There was no other outlet to deal with my losses, as "feelings" were not often the focal point of discussion in my family. Instead, my parents focused on gaining economic stability while the children concentrated on performing well in school. Meanwhile, I kept my tears and feelings bottled up and simply

hoped time would gradually heal the wounds of losses.

All in the Family

After seven years in the U.S., my parents' continuous hard work allowed them to save enough money to purchase a house in a nice neighborhood. Further, they went on to purchase a laundromat with some apartments to rent. My English improved and school had gotten much easier—or more understandable, to be precise. My friends were now both American and Vietnamese. On the economic and education fronts, as a family we achieved the original goals that led us to our escape. We were living our American dream!

Life at home was a different matter. At this juncture it is important to paint a backdrop of cultural values and the differences in parenting styles between the east and the west in order to help contextualize the family dynamics and home environment. Research has shown that children tend to adapt to and adopt new cultures and to learn languages at a quicker pace than adults (Ghaffarian, 1998). I recall times when my parents became infuriated with me and my siblings when we began talking to each other in English instead of Vietnamese. Further, other research has shown that Vietnamese parents, specifically, though they may thrive economically, tend not to adapt to, or even to resist, the western culture regardless of time spent in the U.S. (Nguyen & Williams, 1988). In fact, they very much retain the traditional eastern values and culture and expect their children to do the same. For example, it is extremely rare that my parents would venture out to eat at an American restaurant or watch American films or television shows. Twenty-seven years after our arrival in the U.S., Vietnamese food, television and radio shows, magazines, and music continue to feed their daily servings of Vietnamese culture. In the eastern culture, parents tend to employ an authoritarian or dictatorial parenting style (Kelly & Tseng, 1992; Lee & Zhan, 1997). As such, children are expected to display absolute obedience without question. Positive encouragement is often not utilized due to fear that too many compliments will nurture complacency. More often, negative reinforcement is used as a tool for motivation (Chung, 1997; Lee, 1997). My father often questioned my dedication when I would bring home a 90 average on my report card. At the time, it appeared as if nothing was ever good enough. But now, looking back, it was the only way my father knew of pushing me to do better. It was his way of encouragement. Further, some Vietnamese parents may also view western culture as risqué and inappropriate in contexts such as sex, drugs, and alcohol (Nguyen, 2005). Status or "face" of the family is also very important (Boman & Edwards, 1984). The children's failure or success is seen as a direct reflection of the parents. Therefore, academic and economic pressure to thrive usually plays an important role in family expectations. The combination of the parents' fear of children inflicting shame on the family and an emphasis to succeed may result in the parents asserting tighter control on their children (Nguyen, 2005).

For the children, especially for those who may be going through identity development, living in a heterogeneous U.S. society and having to juggle between conforming to the expectations of the eastern values in their family life while attempting to "fit in" with the external western society can present a challenge (Nguyen, 2005). At school, where most of their time is spent, these children are exposed to American peers and teachers who espouse western values. At home, the children are also inundated with mass media such as television, magazines, music, and games. All the while, their parents may be insisting that they conform to the eastern values and maintain cultural "roots." This drastic difference in cultural values without mediating norms inevitably leads to a strain in the parent-child relationship where communication issues may emerge (Nguyen, 2005). Consistent with cultural values and parenting, it is possible that the children may question parental authority or the insisted ways of life while facing a backlash of consequences for being disrespectful to the parents. In fact, it was a never ending tug-of-war between me and my parents in that I was transforming and adopting the behaviors of my American peers;

meanwhile, my parents adamantly insisted that I retain my Vietnamese roots.

The already strained parent-child relationship is further exacerbated because Asian families tend to be insular. Asian parents and families do not go outside of their immediate network to seek help, for privacy is very important. Exposure to "outsiders" may cause embarrassment since the parents may be perceived as lacking parenting skills and the ability to "control" their children. Again, it is extremely important for Asians to maintain the image of success in their economic as well as their family life (Nguyen, 2005). Meanwhile, the "pot of internal family conflicts" continues to "stew" as the parents and children cannot communicate due to language and value barriers. In other words, over time, children may lose their native language as they become more immersed in the American life, causing communication difficulties with their parents. In addition, they also adopt more of the western values while letting go of some of the eastern values espoused at home by their parents. Though we never sought outside help as the relationship between my parents and I continued to deteriorate, I wonder if my parents would have been able to put the "shame" factor aside in order to achieve a more harmonious family had help become available.

In conclusion, the combination of incongruence in cultural values between parents and children, the use of authoritarian parenting styles, closed family boundaries, language and communication difficulties, and lack of available resources may cause a stalemate between parents and children that can lead to conflicts and mental health and behavioral problems in the family (Nguyen, 2005). These elements existed in my family. In short, times were difficult for me as I attempted to assimilate while my parents were insisting that I should not assimilate at all, due to their view of the "polluted" values in American society. My Vietnamese by then was fading and my value system had been greatly influenced and altered by the dominant culture. Consequently, neither I nor my parents were able to compromise and without any help, attempts at reconciliation often failed and our parent-child relationship remained strained.

Twenty-five years later, I am now working as a therapist. Asian clients whose children were born either in the U.S. or in Vietnam come to me to seek help, bringing with them similar issues and problems. This serves as a reminder that: 1.) As the Asian immigrant population increases, decreasing the cultural gap, improving communication methods, and developing a healthy parent-child relationship will be paramount in forming a "functional" family; and 2.) the need for culturally sensitive helping techniques and an increase in the sheer number of culturally knowledgeable or native practitioners are paramount to serving this increasing population.

Into Adulthood

Despite the cultural and communication conflicts at home, my parents continued their hard-working ways while I was performing average in high school. Interestingly, as my English improved over the years, my grades in classes such as sociology, history, reading, english, government, etc., were much better than the grades received in chemistry, algebra, physics, biology, and other hard science classes. I remember hearing snide remarks from my Asian friends, and, on occasion, comments from my teachers about the 'backward' stereotype. "Since you're Asian, why are you not excelling in Math and Science?" To this day, I honestly do not recall my reaction to such comments.

Entering college about three hours from home, like most of my Asian friends and also due to my parents' expectation of majoring either in engineering or medicine, I decided to major in Biology with the end goal of entering dental school. Looking back, my not so stellar grades in the hard science classes from high school should have served as an indicator that anything that had to do with engineering or medicine was not in my future. On the other hand, anything less would be an embarrassment to my friends and a disappointment to my parents. It did not take long into my college career for me to realize that my grades were not going to admit me into any field that dealt with medicine or

engineering. However, I continued with hope and my parents' hard-earned money and with renewed rigor, aiming to improve at the beginning of every semester, only to end up barely passing my science classes. Changing my major was not an option because it would cost more money and I certainly did not want to disappoint my parents. Finally, I faced the difficult task of informing them that I would graduate only with a Biology degree and the uncertainty of my future career choice. Though my parents never did comment much on that particular conversation, I have no doubt it disappointed them and I felt extremely guilty for not living up to all of the sacrifices they had made since arriving in the U.S.

Discovering Social Work

After five years of college, countless dollars later and with a Biology degree in hand, I remained in my college town and began my adulthood as a check-in clerk at a health department. My job was to print numbered labels and paste them onto incoming specimens in order to send them on to other testing labs. Though the job was important and played a necessary role in the cog of the health department's everyday business, it did not require a person with a B.A. degree to complete such simple tasks, and the salary reflected such. As a result, I continued to need subsidy from my parents. I was far from living out my parents' dream of my being a dentist or doctor or successful engineer. More importantly, I was far from figuring out my own path in life.

It did not take long for my father to summon me home once my siblings were in college. He could no longer afford to put two other children in college while still raising his eldest college-graduate son. Once home, I needed a salary and applied for a position at Children's Protective Services (CPS). I had never heard of the field of social work, for it did not exist in my home country. Our private Asian culture had taught us not to meddle in one's family business. Regardless of values, my only intention was to obtain a job in order to buy time to plot my future.

I have always had excellent personal skills and enjoy helping others. However, I had never had an opportunity to use my natural abilities. Two months into my work at CPS, I had an epiphany and found my calling. I loved the job and all that required came as second nature - a drastic difference from my days of fiddling in the biology lab. I enjoyed meeting and working with people, excelled at conducting child-abuse investigations, performed in-depth and accurate risk assessments, and wrote comprehensive but achievable service plans. In addition, I felt valuable and needed since I was one of only a very, very few Vietnamese-speaking caseworkers in a very diverse county of three million people. I became known at the agency for taking on Vietnamese-speaking cases. Oftentimes, my cases rang a familiar tone of parent-child conflicts involving cultural and language gaps between Asian parents and their children. My ability to relate and empathize was also paralleled with heightened frustration in that I did not have the necessary credentials or counseling skills to help the individual family members navigate through their conflicts. Those frustrating feelings also helped me find my life purpose with renewed energy. I was no longer lost or grumpy!

My parents noticed a new bounce in my steps, and though they'd have preferred a different and more traditional occupation, they encouraged me to explore my new passion. In order to raise my GPA to enter the MSW program, I enrolled in a local university and began taking psychology and sociology classes. For the first time in my academic career, I excelled and actually enjoyed the classes I was taking. I also met my mentors, Drs. Monit Cheung and Patrick Leung, Professors of Social Work, who nurtured and encouraged me to keep pushing forward and pursue my passion. Soon after, I was accepted into the MSW program, and for the first time a feeling of comfort and belonging came over me.

Upon my MSW graduation, as class president, I sat on stage and then gave a graduation speech. My parents were seated in the front row beaming with pride, regardless of the profession. I continued to work and excelled my field while completing the Ph.D. in Social Work. Five years later, I followed my parents' path of becoming a professor.

Coda

Success is a relative term. Some would identify success in terms of material possession, personal and/or professional achievements, job satisfaction, or just emotional levels of contentment and happiness. For my parents, consistent with our culture, the children's success is really their success and the same goes for failure. We, as children, are a direct reflection of our parents. In many ways, I often wonder if I and many of my peers overachieve so we can make our parents proud, or whether we really do so for ourselves. Regardless, the outcomes have been positive and are desirable by most people. With their protectiveness and strong emphasis on education, despite our differences, two of the children have their Ph.D. and the other has a successful career in the banking industry. All of us stayed out of the trouble that my parents so feared (i.e., teenage parenting, drugs, alcohol, college drop-out, gangs, etc.) My parents have evolved over the years and have come to better understand our ways of doing and living. And, as children, we have also come to understand life from their perspective. We, by no means, have assimilated to the degree that our eastern values are displaced or replaced. Rather, we live an acculturated life where both value systems are incorporated. As my parents witnessed my struggle, I think they, too, eventually saw a reflection of their own struggle in this strange and foreign land. They have also witnessed my ascent to my own contentment and happiness. In the end, they are no different from any other parents, regardless of race or circumstances. They, like all parents, ultimately want their children to achieve and be happy. My father once said (and I paraphrase):

"In the beginning, it was a hard economic, psychological, geographical, occupational, and political adjustment. It was difficult to grasp and understand such a foreign and different world where not only the value system was different but the entire way of life was almost the opposite. We did not know what to anticipate or to expect. As soon as we stepped off the plane we switched into survival mode and had no time to adjust. There was no support as we searched for bearings. Now that there is some time for reflection, the fifty percent chance of surviving the dangerous boat journey and all of the hardship faced outside and inside the family was worth the risk. Above all and of utmost importance, the children have achieved."

After sixteen years apart, I got to see my grandmother again in 1996 and two more times subsequently. I was no longer the little boy, now a grown man, but still her first grandson. She had developed Alzheimer's disease and had a hard time recognizing and remembering me each time I saw her. I saw her again for the last time in 2003. Some losses are just plain "ole" permanent and there "ain't" no replacing!

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