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**Negotiating With Agency:
Towards an Intersectional Understanding of Violence and
Resilience in Young Southeast Asian Men**

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Research regarding Southeast Asian youth violence often employs a risk and protective factors framework, portraying such behavior as a problem of maladaptation. However, violence also holds meaning for the youth who experience it. Cultural and gender theorists posit that violence is a tool young people use to construct their gender and racial identities. As adolescence is a key period of identity formation, understanding youths' constructions of their gender and racial identities may inform more appropriate violence prevention strategies. As part of a research team, I conducted focus groups and semi-structured individual interviews with a diverse group (n=21) of young Southeast Asian men ages 13-17 recruited from a community clinic for Asian youth. Interviews elicited the role violence plays in their understanding of what it means for them to be both Southeast Asian *and* young men. Data were analyzed using a grounded theory approach. My findings document that violence is ubiquitous in the lives of these young men. Furthermore, resilience and identity formation should be understood as complex processes through which relations of power are mediated and navigated, as opposed to static traits that young people possess. Thus, I suggest that violence prevention programs should use a constructionist framework, as opposed to an ecological framework, to design interventions that speak to the lived realities of the youth they target.

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I want people to love me for me, not because of what people tell them. But to give me the opportunity...to sit down with me, and just to get to know me and talk to me. If so, maybe you'll find out that I'm really not a bad guy after all, you know? I'm not a lost cause.

– Duc Ta, *Juvis*

Introduction

Southeast Asian¹ youth in the United States are popularly perceived as either the model minority or the juvenile delinquent. Such characterizations found ideological scaffolding in 1980s and 1990s mainstream media. For example, in a widely cited article from *Time Magazine*, Brand (1987) discusses the educational successes of second-generation Asian Americans, including many Southeast Asians, labeling them “the new whiz kids.” On the other hand, scholars have pointed to the ways in which the mainstream media have played on public fear of violence and crime to warn of rising waves of nomadic Southeast Asian youth gangs preying on innocent citizens (Smith and Tarallo 1995). This alarm has also been sounded from within the academy and criminal justice organizations, decrying the emergence of Southeast Asian youth gangs as a “rising epidemic” (Akiyama and Kawasaki 2001).

In direct contrast to these popular characterizations, the voices of Southeast Asian youth point to a different conclusion and a more complex life course than expressed by such a false dichotomy. A good example of this disconnect between scholarly and popular characterizations of Southeast Asian youth and their actual, lived realities can be found in the case of Duc Ta, a second-generation Vietnamese American young man whose words serve as the epigraph for this

¹ For this paper, I utilize the term “Southeast Asian” to refer to individuals who are or have ancestors from three particular countries in Southeast Asia: Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Though Southeast Asia as a region contains many more countries, and though these three particular countries have distinct histories and cultures, they also share a common history and relationship to the United States. This history has played a paramount role in the current situation for Southeast Asian refugee communities in the United States.

chapter. Duc is one of twelve youth profiled in the documentary film *Juvies*, in which filmmaker Leslie Neale explores the punitive nature of the juvenile justice system. Duc was sixteen years old when he was involved in an event in which two friends shot a gun out of his car while he was driving. Duc had no prior arrests and had spent most of his young life avoiding a life in a street gang. Despite no evidence that he had fired the gun in question, Duc was charged, along with his two friends, with first-degree attempted murder and personal use of a firearm with a gang enhancement. In the end, Duc was convicted and sentenced to 35 years to life in prison.

Duc manages to capture in a few words the tension at the very heart of this paper: namely, the disconnect between how we as a society portray and perceive young Southeast Asian men and the ways in which they see themselves and define their own identities. For Duc, he was neither the model minority nor the Southeast Asian gangster, and as such, he found himself outside of the false dichotomy that society casts. However, the rigidity of such a dichotomy aided in his mischaracterization – if Duc was not the model minority, then he must have been the juvenile delinquent. His case thus illustrates the very real material consequences of casting young Southeast Asian men into such rigid categories. This research addresses this misrepresentation of young Southeast Asian men in the hopes of coming to a more complex and critical understanding of the ways in which young Southeast Asian men see themselves and understand their social positions. To do so, I will discuss findings from focus groups and individual interviews conducted with young Southeast Asian men; in particular, I will highlight how different codes of masculinity impacted these young men's experiences with violence and community activism.

This project engages the emerging public health literature on resilience, youth development, and violence and delinquency prevention in a dialogue regarding theory, framing,

and agency. In particular, I build on emerging research from the Bay Area of California that seeks to elucidate an ecology of Southeast Asian youth violence and delinquency through the lens of immigrant adjustment theories. Southeast Asian youth violence and delinquency have gained recent attention from violence prevention activists, community groups, and researchers in the Asian and Pacific Islander (API) community. Such attention emerges out of research from disaggregated data on the API community that shows an increased visibility of certain API subgroups within criminal justice statistics (Le and Arifuku 2005). Part of the picture can be found in arrest and incarceration data. On a national level, FBI data from 1980 and 2000 show the rising arrest rates for APIs in general (Arifuku 2005). State data point to the disproportionate and rising representation of Southeast Asians and Pacific Islanders in the Division of Juvenile Justice² during the 1990s (Glesmann 2005). Lastly, local data illustrate the fact that Laotian, Vietnamese, and Cambodian youth account for over 68% of API felony arrests in Oakland, California between 1991 and 2000 (National Council on Crime and Delinquency 2003; Glesmann 2005; Arifuku 2005).

Arrest statistics, however, cannot offer more than a hazy picture of violence in the community, as violent crime is often underreported and the aforementioned statistics do not clarify whether young people were arrested for violent or nonviolent crimes. Thus, victimization and self-report data are important in providing another angle in understanding the prevalence of violence in the lives of API youth. In one community survey, 27% of surveyed API youth report having been on the receiving end of violence from another API youth at some point in their life (The Services and Advocacy For Asian Youth Consortium 2004). Though each subset of data only provides a glimpse into the bigger picture, taken together, victimization, self-report, and

² Formerly known as the California Youth Authority, the Division of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) is a state-run agency in which youth are incarcerated, usually due, but not limited, to violent offenses.

official arrest statistics help us understand more fully the extent with which Southeast Asian youth are disproportionately involved in violence and delinquency, as well as the criminal justice system.

Theorizing Culture and Violence

Public health research on Southeast Asian youth violence has focused on the role of culture as a mediating factor, testing to see whether culture plays a risk or protective role. In general, culture has been seen as an important factor in explaining disparate rates of violent victimization and perpetration in communities of color when compared to whites (Soriano et al. 2004). In particular, different aspects of culture have been studied as possible links to the perpetration of violence, such as assimilation and acculturation. Classic assimilation theory was first expressed in the works of Robert Park and Ernest Burgess, defined as a “straight line” integration of ethnic minorities into mainstream society (Martinez and Valenzuela 2006). On the other hand, Moyerman and Forman (as cited in Soriano et al. 2004) define acculturation as the process through which a person from one culture, such as an immigrant to the United States, modifies his or her values and behaviors due to contact with another, usually dominant, culture. Research on culture and youth violence has generally found that a deeper penetration into the host society, or “American” culture, is associated with higher levels of violence, gang membership, and substance abuse (Soriano et al. 2004).

Research regarding the Southeast Asian refugee experience in the United States is also influenced by the way culture is theorized and used to explain deviance or problem behaviors. Early on, under an assimilationist framework, cultural and lifestyle differences were seen as a barrier and used to explain a wide array of medical problems and problem behaviors, such as

mental health problems, infectious diseases, low utilization of health care services, medical non-compliance, child abuse and neglect, gang violence, and delinquency (Cowart and Cowart 1994; D'Avanzo 1992; Davis 2000; Mattson 1995; Mattson and Lew 1992; Muecke 1983; Nuttall and Flores 1997). However, because assimilationist views of immigrant adaptation posit that these markers of maladaptation would disappear with time through a natural process, such a theory was not able to explain the persistence of problems such as poverty, poor school performance, and violence in the second generation (Zhou 1997). Furthermore, assimilation theory cannot explain research findings that Americanization is positively associated with violence and delinquency (Le and Stockdale 2005; Ngo and Le 2007).

More recently, segmented assimilation theory has emerged to offer an explanation of these seemingly contradictory findings. Segmented assimilation theory is a framework used to describe the different processes and pathways second-generation immigrants go through as they incorporate into the host society (Portes and Rumbaut 2001). This framework describes three possible pathways, depending on the social context, or which different “segment” of society, the immigrant community is most likely to acculturate into. The first pathway borrows from classical assimilationist theory and is described as the “time-honored portrayal of growing acculturation and parallel-integration into the white middle-class” (Zhou 1997, 975). The second pathway is an opposite, “downward,” assimilation into an American “underclass” characterized by persistent urban poverty in the context of deindustrialization, globalization, and a growing national class dichotomy. Finally, the third pathway is a preservation of original ethnic networks and cultural values, in which the immigrant community bands together for the sake of increasing their economic capital and protecting against harmful assimilation into the underclass.

Segmented assimilation theory suggests that Southeast Asian youth violence and delinquency occur as a result of problematic environmental factors. Specifically, the breakdown of the family and social networks due to the historical circumstances of the Vietnam War, combined with the insertion of these vulnerable families into criminogenic environments in the United States, is believed to have led to downward assimilation into the American underclass that is characterized by high levels of violence, substance use, adolescent pregnancy, and high school dropout rates. Good examples of segmented assimilation theory, particularly the idea that the refugee experience is a unique factor that leads to deviance, can be found in scholarly writing on Southeast Asian street gangs. In one example, Rumbaut and Ima (1987) argue that the formation of Southeast Asian street gangs in San Diego, California is a result of the breakdown of family networks that otherwise would be intact if not for the plight of the refugee. In a more recent example, Vigil et al, in discussing the rise of Vietnamese youth gangs in Orange County, California, starts out by stating, “because of their refugee status, many Vietnamese American youth suffer from *unique adjustment problems* and experience conflict and alienation both at home and in school” (2004, 207, emphasis added). Drawing from previous work, they show how family disorganization and changes in gender roles in the aftermath of the Vietnam War and subsequent resettlement in the United States lead the children of Southeast Asian refugees towards the camaraderie found in street gangs.

Empirical research has also been used to support the notion that Southeast Asian youth are vulnerable to violence and delinquency due to their proximity to the American underclass. Perhaps the most well-known application of this theory to a Southeast Asian community comes from Bankston and Zhou’s (1997) article on Vietnamese youth in New Orleans. In their estimation, peer group influences are the most important factor dictating whether assimilation

into the underclass occurs, whether it be contact with native-born minority groups or co-ethnic peers that have been Americanized. Thus, their research posits that, within a context of urban poverty, association with Americanized co-ethnics and members of other racial groups predicts maladjustment for Southeast Asian immigrant youth. Similar conclusions were drawn from other research pointing to the importance of peer groups and peer delinquency in predicting delinquency within Southeast Asian youth (Kent and Felkenes 1998; Le, Monfared, and Stockdale 2005). Further, Ngo and Le (2007) find that acculturation is associated with risk for serious violence. They hypothesize that this is due to acculturation leading youth to a more individualistic outlook on life and to intergenerational conflict with parents who are acculturating more slowly, or differently, than their children.

Despite empirical backing, segmented assimilation theory has limitations, and it has been critiqued for many different reasons. First, just as classical assimilation theory was unable to explain certain anomalies in research findings, so too is segmented assimilation challenged by research that cannot corroborate the theory's assertion that acculturation into urban poverty is associated with higher rates of violence and delinquency. For example, in a sample of 29 Cambodian parent-adolescent dyads, Lim, Levinson, and Go (1999) found that *less* acculturation was associated with higher levels of delinquency for the adolescents. Furthermore, Go and Le (2005) demonstrate that a higher level of delinquent behavior in Cambodian youth is positively associated with ethnic identity, a finding that is contradictory to the claim of segmented assimilation theory that holding on to identities and values of the original culture is protective against violence and delinquency.

Second, scholars have taken umbrage with the notion that the Southeast Asian refugee experience, when compared to that of other Asian immigrant groups, is a unique contributor to

the vulnerability of the refugee second generation. Scholar and activist Eric Tang (2000) calls this apolitical treatment of Southeast Asians within the segmented assimilation framework “Southeast Asian exceptionalism.” In other words, Tang argues that in the minds of segmented assimilationists, Southeast Asians have come to represent an exception to the Asian immigrant success story due to their “unique experience” of war, trauma, and refugee flight. Southeast Asian exceptionalism posits that if only these strong, traditional cultural networks in the Southeast Asian community were not destroyed, then they would be available to help the refugee second generation withstand the downward pull of the American underclass, protecting against the problems prevalent in this sector of society. The lack of an ethnic and cultural network is seen as the reason for this exceptional “Asian inner-city poverty that is strikingly similar to Black urban poverty” (Tang 2002, 241). Insofar as segmented assimilation theory views Southeast Asian poverty, crime, and deviance as “exceptional” to an Asian immigrant model of success, such research drawing from this framework ignores the state’s involvement in maintaining these conditions of vulnerability. As such, state violence enacted against Southeast Asian communities in the form of welfare reform, increased criminalization and police brutality, and deportation is obscured (Tang 2002).

Third, by insisting that Southeast Asians acculturate “downwardly” into the urban underclass, such theoretical frames naturalize poverty and deviance as pathologies of the inhabitants of the communities in which Southeast Asians have resettled, mostly among black and Puerto Rican individuals (Tang 2002). Rather than using the similarities between Southeast Asian communities and the communities that predated their resettlement as evidence of the adoption of underclass pathologies by Southeast Asians, critics of segmented assimilation note

that these similarities point to the ways in which structural environments for all youth of color in poor, urban environments are similarly constraining. As Jaynes states:

The second generation's socioeconomic attainments frequently mirror similarly situated native-born attainments because *both groups face the same opportunity-limiting schools, employment chances, and the discriminatory patterns of intergroup relations and have similar access to criminal careers* (2004, 113, emphasis added).

Fourth, criticism of segmented assimilation also centers on the rigidity of its pathways, noting that there are limitations to how the theory conceptualizes the lives of immigrant youth who are caught in harsh environments. For example, Kasinitz (2004) charges that segmented assimilation theory “underestimate[s] the fluidity in the ways people acquire and use” their racial identities. As a result of this rigidity, segmented assimilation theory fails to fully characterize the different pathways many second-generation immigrants take in life. Going back to the characterization of Southeast Asian youth gangs, Lay describes the life trajectories of Southeast Asian youth in Providence, Rhode Island:

It would be a mistake to conclude that gang membership is inevitable for Cambodian American youth, even taking into account their particular background and migration experience...*There are alternative means* of acquiring companionship, protection, excitement, romance, money, identity, and acceptance – means that do not involve harm to others or invite the possibility of harm, imprisonment, and death to oneself (2004, 231, emphasis added).

In other words, segmented assimilation theory does not account for the ways in which Southeast Asian youth living in poverty find alternative means of expressing themselves that are not tied to violence and crime, on the one hand, nor tied to educational achievement and the maintenance of traditional cultural values, on the other hand. Alsaybar (1999) similarly complicates the notion that Americanization leads to violence and delinquency, and that maintenance of traditional cultures leads to high achievement. Following fieldwork with Filipino street gangs and party crews in Los Angeles, Alsaybar describes the fluidity with which young people from the same

environments are able to construct themselves as both gang members and budding entrepreneurs in the L.A. club scene at the same time. What these studies illustrate is that, insofar as segmented assimilation rigidly equates acculturation into urban poverty with “underclass” pathologies, it obscures the alternative and overlapping ways that immigrant youth express themselves.

To be sure, some scholars have moved away from the false dichotomy promoted by segmented assimilationists to show how, for example, Hmong youth navigate their school environments in unpredictable ways (Lee 2001). Lee uses ethnographic data from a Wisconsin high school to counter the simplistic categorization of Southeast Asian youth as either model minorities or juvenile delinquents. In her words, “descriptions of Hmong students as either traditional or Americanized fail to fully appreciate the extent to which those who are described as traditional have acculturated and those who are described as Americanized have maintained a distinct identity as Hmong Americans” (2001, 16). Furthermore, the youth in her study were neither solely “good kids” nor “bad kids;” there were those in both “traditional” and “Americanized” groups that excelled in school and those that were chronic truants. With regard to Southeast Asians, Jeung describes the multiple layers they move through in constructing their identities within different social settings, all the while “creating new spaces for identity formation” (2002, 73). For example, their adoption of a strong ethnic identity in their neighborhoods to compete for resources and power as well as claim a panethnic Asian American identity in the face of anti-Asian racism illustrates the situational nature of identity. Such a fluidity of identity formation also speaks against the idea that identities are bound by culture or class, as theories of acculturation and segmented assimilation would argue.

As these studies show, a critique of the dominant approach to research on Southeast Asian youth violence and delinquency does not require that scholars abandon the notion of

culture altogether. Quite the contrary, these studies are examples of a fuller engagement with culture using a youth cultures perspective. Indeed, API researchers have begun to employ a youth cultures framework to understand practices that do not fit neatly into the boxes of the model minority and juvenile delinquent. Zhou and Lee define youth culture as “the distinct ways and patterns of life in which socially identifiable youth groups come to process the raw material of their life experiences and give expressive forms, or ‘maps of meaning,’ to their social and material existence” (2004, 5-6). This framework has endowed researchers with the theoretical tools to explain the ways in which young people respond to racial and class subordination in ways that create new, hybrid identities, values, networks, and spaces. In this way, a youth culture perspective is also a constructionist perspective, looking at how identities are constructed as a result of interactions among individual agency, local contexts, and micro and macro social forces.

Using a youth culture framework, then, these studies collectively illuminate the ways in which the lives of youth are much more complex than predicted by segmented assimilation (Alsaybar 1999; Jeung 2002; Lee 2001). As such, research on violence and delinquency needs an alternative lens to complicate the simplistic notions that are currently predominant in the literature, and to fully capture the experiences, identities, and expressions of Southeast Asian youth.

Towards an Intersectional Approach to Violence

Extending from the previous critique of segmented assimilation and adoption of a youth culture perspective, I argue that to talk about violence and delinquency is also to talk about gender. Gender has been shown to be a central component in the lives of API youth. For

example, recent attention has been paid to the emergence of API male youth in import car culture as another way of creating a pan-ethnic identity, as well reclaiming masculinity (Namkung 2004). Gender has also been shown to have a powerful impact in school settings for Vietnamese American young women and men. Using qualitative interview data with Vietnamese immigrant high school students in Washington, Stritikus and Nguyen suggest that these youth employ a *strategic transformation*, a “process in which students intentionally define gender or cultural identities as ways to leverage social status and power within specific situations” (2007, 889).

In direct contrast to the prevailing approaches found in the public health and medical literature, I suggest that we must also understand the *interpretive* nature of violence in order to completely understand its role in the lives of young Southeast Asian men, and to thus prevent its occurrence. Criminologists and gender theorists have been at the forefront of this work, asserting the importance of masculinities to the contribution of violence. In these theories of violence causation, violent acts are understood to be a tool for the construction of a masculinity, symbolized as the power over others (Messerschmidt 2004).

This field of inquiry borrows its foundation from feminist gender theorists and their conception of gender as a social construct. In these formulations, gender is a “routine, methodical, and recurring accomplishment” that is a product of interpersonal interactions (West and Zimmerman 1987). In this social constructionist view, gender is a process that one does, as opposed to a set of roles or traits that one possesses. Thus gender is a construct that is never static and is always being contested on many different levels. Viewing the accomplishment or production of gender in this way suggests that human practices and behaviors are gendered in specific contexts and within certain structural environments. Indeed, this cyclical relationship

between practice and institutionalization is what Messerschmidt refers to when labeling gender as “structured action:”

Social structures are neither external to social actors nor simply and solely constraining; on the contrary, structure is realized only through social action, and social action requires structure as its condition. Thus, as people do gender, they reproduce and sometimes change social structures. Not only, then, are there many ways of doing gender – we must speak of masculinities and femininities – gender must be viewed as structured action, or what people do under specific social-structural constraints (2005, 197).

Such a social constructionist theory of gender, then, highlights an essential aspect of understanding human behavior – agency – while also taking into account the importance of structure and discourse. Extending this understanding of masculinities and applying it to the study of criminal or violent behavior, Messerschmidt (2004) claims that violence is one way in which men are able to construct their masculinity; simply put, to do violence is to do masculinity. Similar applications have been made in health-related behaviors research, illuminating the relationship between masculinity and practices such as accessing health services, sexual decision-making, pain and symptom denial, substance use, lifestyle habits such as exercise and diet, and treatment decisions, particularly regarding prostate or testicular cancer (Courtenay 2000; Marcell, Plowden, and Bowman 2005; Sabo 2005).

The social structures and circumstances that surround men are also shaped by differences in relations of power among men, differences that unfold along lines of race, class, and sexuality. Multidimensionality theory posits that, as human beings, we all are composed of many different dimensions, though only some of these have material significance “in that society structures systems of privilege and disadvantage on the basis of them” (Mutua 2006, 23). Furthermore, these different systems of domination are inseparable and mutually reinforcing. Using such a

multidimensional approach, then, we can begin to understand how the lives of men of color, for example, are both racialized and gendered.

Scholars of Asian American masculinities have long focused on the ways in which racism and patriarchy combine as an emasculatory force in the lives of Asian American men. The historical representation of Asian American men is tied to a historical legacy in an “ideology of White aesthetics” (Kang 1997, 286). The particular mechanisms through which the aesthetics of Asian American masculinities are devalued are not the focus of this discussion. However, because of this ideology of White aesthetics, Asian American men struggle to define themselves as both Asian American and men.

Masculinity scholars have dealt with these unequal power relations among men in two ways. One mode of thought asserts that race and class relations, through economic exclusion, disrupts traditional mechanisms through which men of color can construct their manhood, such as providing for their family and educational advancement. Without other means to construct masculinity, such as educational and economic advancement, men of color are left with very few choices, including violence, crime, and sports (DeKeseredy and Schwartz 2005). The second mode of thought borrows from DuBois’ concept of double consciousness, arguing that men of color, bound between a dominant and subordinate culture, have “conversations” between the two in order to “project an image of self to the world” that is at once a result of the external and internal gaze (Lazur and Majors 1995). The resulting strain of having to exist both inside and outside of these two worlds produces the ingredients – frustration, anger, visceral emotions – for violence.

The theories of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) and multidimensionality (Mutua 2006) provide us insight into how a man of color’s actions may

reflect both his gender and racial identity, as well as his position within structural constraints. The argument is that all men, through their practices, work together in constructing various types of masculinities, out of which emerges a hegemonic masculinity that is, in turn, maintained by the practices of men. Hegemonic masculinity is thus constructed through differential power relations not only between men and women, but also among men. That straight, middle class, white men embody such a hegemonic masculinity in American society, however, has less to do with their characteristics, and more to do with the power they hold in society to define. Thus, “it is more precise to think of hegemonic masculinities as a position in the social order – one that is seen as worthy, complete, and superior – rather than a fixed set of essential characteristics” (Chen 2004, 50). Insofar as I have argued that racism entraps men of color in a position of racial subordination as well as gender subordination in relation to white men, I also argue that violence, then, can be conceptualized as a way men of color can attempt to lay claim to a hegemonic masculinity that is denied them. In this way, to do violence is to do gender and race.

Research Context

In considering a modified lens for understanding Southeast Asian youth violence, I will start with the social and historical context of Southeast Asian youth. This contextual grounding includes the history of Southeast Asian refugee migration to the United States as well as the shifting economic and political environments in the United States in the latter half of the twentieth century.

In 1975, the United States military pulled out of the Vietnam War. Soon thereafter, a large influx of Southeast Asian refugees was admitted to the United States. Scholars estimate this first wave to have included about 130,000 refugees (Strand and Jones 1985). Many of these

first wave refugees were soldiers who fought alongside the U.S. military against the communist regimes in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos and who fled their homelands for fear of persecution after the U.S. military withdrawal. However, many scholars also point to the responsibility of the United States and their direct role in creating the harsh conditions that forced many Southeast Asians from their homelands (Lee 2006; Hing 2005). As Chan states, refugees from Southeast Asia post-1975 were heavily influenced by “the legacy of 30 years of warfare, which...demolished cities, destroyed farmland, denuded forests, poisoned water sources, and left countless unexploded mines” (1991, 157). This combination of an infrastructure destroyed by years of war and the fear of persecution at the hands of Southeast Asian regimes created the lasting conditions that uprooted many Southeast Asians from their homelands, including the later waves of refugees that came to the United States. The profile of the second wave refugees differed from the first, as there were considerably larger numbers of Cambodians and Laotians, and they were generally more rural, less educated, and poorer than their first wave counterparts (Chan 1991).

Under the supervision of the Interagency Task Force (IATF), Southeast Asian refugee resettlement in the United States was initially fragmented and disorganized. The IATF regulated several volunteer agencies that were in place to help find sponsors for the refugees. State governments also were supposed to receive federal reimbursement to provide medical and social services for refugees that were resettled in their states. However, time constraints placed on the volunteer agencies by the IATF as well as lapses in funding from the federal government proved to be barriers to this process (Chan 1991). As a response to the influx of second wave Southeast Asian refugees, Congress passed the 1980 Refugee Act, which sought to improve the resettlement process.

The history of Southeast Asian refugee resettlement in the United States also coincides with a changing national economic and political climate. During the post-1975 period in which large numbers of Southeast Asian refugees were resettling in the United States, working-class communities around the country were bearing the brunt of disinvestment and deindustrialization in the nation's major cities. In California, as blue-collar jobs were being relocated in droves, cities such as Oakland were left with high rates of unemployment, growing poverty, and struggling public schools. To make matters worse, in 1978, Proposition 13 was passed by California voters, decreasing the state property tax by 30% and subsequently reducing funding for education (Pintado-Vertner 2004).

California in the 1990s also saw a conservative political agenda pushed through the ballot system, again mirroring national trends in the Wars on Crime and Drugs. Drawing on public fear of a supposed population of vicious youth "superpredators," this period in the late twentieth century saw the passage of policies such as "three strikes" and Proposition 21 in California, aimed, respectively, at lengthening prison sentences and increasing the ease with which prosecutors could try youth in adult court. Communities and schools joined in with "zero-tolerance" policies and "tough love" attitudes, criminalizing young people for otherwise "normal" behavior (Ishihara 2007; Krisberg 2004). The War on Crime has also served as justification for the creation of gang databases, or "mug books," in local police departments, as well as the rise of "gang expert" testimony in court cases against youth offenders, both of which have combined to "heavily track and confine young people's movements and identities" (Ishihara 2007, 5).

In the same period, anti-immigrant sentiment and the reactionary backlash against growing diversity resulted in the passages of Propositions 187, 209, and 227 in California.

Proposition 187, ultimately rendered unconstitutional in the courts, sought to deny undocumented immigrants from access to government services. Proposition 209 banned affirmative action in University of California admission policies, and Proposition 227 banned bilingual education in California public schools. Furthermore, national legislation in the forms of the Illegal Immigrant and Refugee Individual Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) had additional detrimental effects on poor Southeast Asian communities, pushing welfare recipients into low-wage work and creating the legal means for the deportation of refugees (Tang 2000; Hing 2005).

The aforementioned policies and changing social and political climate have had a disproportionate effect on young people of color in urban cities. As Krisberg states, “To the extent that obscene levels of spending on the War on Crime have led to reduced funding for education, health care, after school programs, and job training, low income youngsters have paid an indirect and egregious tax to finance the attack on them by cynical politicians” (2004, 2). Furthermore, the extension, or spillover, of punitive and disciplinary technologies into the community and educational institutions has been identified by scholars as “governing through crime” or “the youth control complex” (Rios 2006; Simon 2007). As such, the social and political climate in which the young Southeast Asian men interviewed in this project live is one of increased criminalization and carceralization.

Methods

Research Team

The research team consisted of myself, a second-generation Chinese American man who was the lead investigator, and two co-investigators, a second-generation Korean American

woman and a second-generation Cambodian American man. All members of the research team are either current or former employees of the health clinic where recruitment was centered.

Recruitment and Sampling

Eligible participants included young Southeast Asian men ages 13-19 who were residents of Alameda or Contra Costa Counties. These young men were recruited through a local community clinic that serves the Asian youth community in Alameda County and through community contacts. Because of the many different ethnic groups subsumed under the category “Southeast Asian,” a diverse sample was sought using purposive sampling methods. Furthermore, in order to get a broad view of the community, purposive sampling was used to recruit two different groups of young men, otherwise referred to as the “good” kids and the “bad” kids. As we came to find out, however, such a dichotomous representation was unfounded.

Participant Demographics

Fourteen of the 21 youth interviewed in this study resided in Oakland, and the other seven young men were from different cities in Contra Costa County (Richmond, El Sobrante, and Pinole). The age range of participants was 13-17 years old. Nineteen were currently in high school; one participant was still in middle school (8th grade); another had just recently graduated from high school.

The ethnic composition of the cohort was: six Cambodian young men, nine Laotian young men, of which seven were Khmu and one was Mien, five Vietnamese young men, and one Biracial young man of Vietnamese and White descent. Sixteen members of the cohort are second-generation in the United States, and five are of the 1.5-generation, as they were born in Southeast Asia but entered the United States as refugees when they were infants.

Data Collection

This project utilized an open-ended, semi-structured approach to guide both individual and focus group interviews. The combination of both group and individual interview techniques allows researchers to obtain a broad understanding of social phenomena such as violence and identity formation. For example, focus group interviews are a “rich and productive way of gaining access to well rehearsed ‘public knowledge’,” whereas individual interviews allow a more in-depth exploration of the ways in which social hierarchies and cultural institutions affect identity formation and behavior (Michell 1999, 36). Furthermore, focus groups enable researchers to observe the interactions of participants in discussing sensitive issues, such as masculinity and violence. Such interactions are invaluable in illuminating the ways in which group solidarity is built, and they also show the steps through which groups progress in framing issues in collectively-approved ways (Blee and Taylor 2002).

The semi-structured interview guides used in this project contained mostly open-ended questions, though the focus groups and individual interviews were largely driven by the youth participants’ interests and ideas. Subject areas in the interview guide were created from previous research literature on violence and included: 1) experiences with violence, 2) gender identity/masculinity, 3) racial/ethnic identity, and 4) experiences with racism. These categories were designed to gain a full sense of the youth participants’ experiences with violence, as well as the ways in which these youth understood themselves as racialized and gendered beings.

Analysis

Qualitative analysis was done using the theory-driven approach of the extended case method. The extended case method is a reflexive theory of social science research that seeks to “extract the general from the unique, to move from the ‘micro’ to the ‘macro,’ and to connect the

present to the past in anticipation of the future, all by building on preexisting theory” (Burawoy 1998, 5). In other words, this approach views everyday life as an extension of larger sociocultural processes, and furthermore situates the everyday within a particular historical context. Taking macro theories as a starting point, the extended case method seeks to improve upon these theories by embedding them within dialogues – between researcher and participant, local and global forces – and searching for “anomalies” that such theories fail to explain. In this sense, the extended case method seeks to “extend” a particular case “by theorizing it as a very specific instance of social and cultural structures or institutional forces at work,” and then to refine theory through the explanation of anomalous cases (Lichterman 2002, 122). Furthermore, as culture is the lens through which people understand or recognize their position within a structure, or group of structures, the extended case method is an appropriate approach to studying how people’s actions are shaped by sociocultural forces, and further how people use culture to make meaning out of their everyday actions as related to their position within a particular social context and historical moment (Eliasoph and Lichterman 1999).

Data analysis progressed through a systematic and iterative course, using “memos” and codes from field notes or interview transcripts to develop hypotheses about the importance of these codes and the stories they tell. Such a back and forth between analyzing and collecting data informed subsequent interviews, allowing us to hone in on meaningful findings. Our previously targeted theories were used as the basis for our analytical codes and memos (Lichterman 2002, 123). The process of analysis, then, was used to find anomalies within the data that are inconsistent with the corresponding theoretical lens.

Research Findings

The findings from this article describe the ways in which the actions of young Southeast Asian men are guided by race and gender. First, I will relay the participants' experiences with "the hood," illustrating how violence is normalized as an everyday part of their lives. Second, I will describe how, depending on their respective settings, young men's actions are related to different codes of masculinity, and further how violence is a tool with which young Southeast Asian men construct their masculinity. Third, I will discuss the reactions the young Southeast Asian male participants have to their racialization by peers and other institutions, such as the school and agents of law enforcement. Fourth, I will briefly highlight Southeast Asian youth organizing as an emergent cultural pathway that is not reflected in segmented assimilation theory, but that is heavily linked with these young people's constructions of their racial and gender identities.

Violence: An Everyday Thing

The young men in this study differentiate the world that they inhabit – "the hood" – from the rest of the East Bay – "the hills" and "the suburbs." For them, the hood comes to represent everything that the hills are not: impoverished, dilapidated, overrun with drugs and violence. As one participant put it:

*Rusky*³: The people in low class – it's really different from the higher class people, because – 'cause if you see the low class people, it's really poor. It's like – a lot of broken houses. There's people with no jobs. The high-class people, they got jobs. Low-class people, they be broke, they be in the streets.

In a way, the hood also comes to be embodied by these young men in their characterizations by society at large. As John explained: "Just the environment we live in, that's the way we grew up

³ All names used in this paper are pseudonyms

so people gonna label us as ghetto – not successful and all that stuff.” Furthermore, the young men all describe their sense of isolation in this social context, describing how “growin’ up, you don’t know no one [to] help you” or “deep inside...I know ain’t nobody always gonna be there for me.”

Perhaps the most striking aspect of this social context that arose out of the interview transcripts was the normalization of violence, an idea that was universally accepted by the study participants. When asked to simply describe their experiences growing up in Oakland, all of the young men described violence as a ubiquitous concern. As Rusky stated: “My experiences growin’ up in Oakland? I see a lot of violence. I see a lot of drug use and alcohol use. This is basically an everyday thing. I see it there all the time, everywhere I go. It’s kinda normal for me to see that now.”

Gendered Pathways

In talking about pathways of achieving masculinity, the young men differentiate between a code of the streets and a code of the family (Anderson 1999). The code of the streets is heavily influenced by notions of power, respect, and masculinity. In effect, such a code differentiates those who are men from those who aren’t, determining who commands respect and power, while branding others as weak, soft, and targets for harassment. As KP, a 17-year-old Khmu youth, explained in a focus group:

On the streets, you gotta be like...you can’t be no sucka or nothin’. You gotta be like...you can’t be soft. You gotta be like tough. Can’t let nobody push you down. In the streets, like everybody tryin’ to be a man, like ‘man I ain’t no kid, I’m a man!’ They tryin’ to prove it.

The conversation continued:

Interviewer: OK, so what are ways you can, you know, prove that you’re not a sucker?

KP: Somebody got a problem with you, yeah you gotta prove it.

Billy: You gotta prove it. Like you gotta rob somebody or somethin'...do somethin'.

Within a code of the streets, manhood is understood as a zero-sum construct. As such, a person's ability to prove their manhood comes at the expense of another person's manhood. In other words, proving your manhood involves an extension of power, whether physical or not, over another.

Jason, a 17-year-old Cambodian youth, used a similar logic in explaining his previous experiences with violence. Jason, loyal to a fault, described himself as a person who is always looking out for his friends and family: "I was always tryin' to be a nice person, you know what I'm sayin', helped all people, always looked out, gave people money when they needed it, always a nice person – that's how my dad raised me." However, after lending several hundred dollars to an acquaintance and never being paid back despite "asking politely" many times, Jason describes feeling taken advantage of and needing to send a message. Eventually, Jason assaulted the other young man in question – once to try to get his money back and a second time for good measure. When asked why he went about it in this manner, he replied:

To show people that I don't like to play around, [that] I got a short temper. That's if he push my button. You know what I'm sayin'? 'Cause in the hood, you have to have a short temper because can't nobody just come and sweet-talk you and stuff, you know what I'm sayin'?

Through these testimonies, then, we can begin to see how violence is 1) guided by codes of masculinity and 2) a means of exerting, or performing, a particular masculinity in a particular setting. Out of the very act of violence – whether it is robbery or assault in these cases – emerges a picture of the young man as tough, powerful, and commanding respect.

The other side of the game is also clearly articulated, perhaps pointing to the importance of adhering to such a code in the first place. Within this code, those young men who are not able

to successfully fight are labeled as “soft,” “weak,” or “punks” and subsequently targeted for harassment:

Interviewer: What happens to someone that’s weak or soft, and he’s like walkin’ out on the street? Like, how do people react?

Jordan: They know.

Interviewer: They know?

Jordan: They know [and] mess with them. It’s like a target for them...It’s like on TV. You got a bully pickin’ on a kid and the kid don’t do nothin’ about it. The bully gonna continue pickin’ on him until the kid do something about it.

In this context then, self-defense also emerges as an essential component of masculinity, even for those young men who consider themselves to be anti-violent. Take for example Bubba, a 16-year-old Vietnamese youth. Stemming from previous personal and family experiences with violence, Bubba adopted a very negative perception of violence and is a self-professed pacifist. He is mild-mannered and spends the majority of his time either with schoolwork or at the local community center, hanging out with friends and playing basketball. Bubba is tall for his age and somewhat heavysset, still retaining much of the baby fat from his earlier years. Because of this, and due to his overall shy demeanor, Bubba is often teased and bullied at school: “People pick on me...they want to start fights but I say no...I say ‘Oh no, I don’t wanna fight,’ and then they think I’m a sissy.” Bubba noted that he has been in a couple of scuffles at school over the years. By his own standards, they have been fairly minor. However, they have resulted in suspension, and ultimately, his father pulled him out of school and placed him in home-schooling. In describing these events to me, Bubba was adamant about his dislike of fighting. However, he added one caveat: “I don’t like fighting, but I want to try to be able to...if someone stands up to me...try to fight back.” With regard to his experiences with the school fights, Bubba explained: “My dad told me, ‘If he hits you, you have the right to defend yourself,’ and I did.”

Bubba's discussion of his experiences suggests that a code of the streets can extend into the school setting, albeit in a less severe form. Because Bubba, due to his body habitus, personality, and anti-violent values, found himself in a social position of weakness, namely that of the "sissy," he was a target for harassment. Reinforced by messages from his father, Bubba expressed the need to physically defend himself against the verbal and physical onslaughts of his peers.

In contrast to a masculinity governed by a code of the streets, the young men in this project also point to alternative means of being a man. For example, they point to the "breadwinner" role, which is much more aligned with a middle-class conception of masculinity and responsibility, guided by a code of the family. In a focus group, Jordan stated, "Bein' a man's, like, bein' there for your family, comin' home with a paycheck, [and] feedin' your family and stuff. Just like...bein' a man in general...mostly takin' care of your family." Such a characterization was echoed by several other youth in this study. However, most of the young men interviewed identify this role as one that young people grow into, as they accrue more responsibilities as adults, as well as more economic means. For example, they describe a progression into this type of manhood that is associated with finishing school, obtaining full-time employment, and moving out of their parents' house. For the young men, such a definition of manhood was highly tied to their age, and as such, they did not see themselves as men in this way. Rather, in this arena, they still labeled themselves as teenagers, young people, or youths. When asked what marked the transition from youth to an adult manhood, Rusky put it simply: "They're older, and we're younger. They got more power."

Here, like in the previous discussion about a street-governed masculinity, we see that a masculinity guided by a code of the family is also linked to power, although in a different way.

In the former, power and respect are exhibited and gained through intimidation, harassment, and physical force. In the latter, respect is gained through other channels, such as doing well in school and finding successful employment. KP laid out these two pathways:

[There are] two ways to get respect...Like, you do bad things and, and you be like...you get locked up or something and you come out. Your homeboy's gon' show you respect, be like, 'Oh you did time...you get that respect.' But then, to a good way...It's like you do good, you gon' be a role model to the other little kids, and then you be like oh...the mom'll be like 'Oh why don't you be like him,' and this and that. 'Cause he got...he be like successful...Yeah.

Furthermore, the young men noted that these pathways aren't mutually exclusive. For example, Jason explained:

Jason: There's always the devil and the little heaven thing – angel. They're like, 'there go the drugs and gun stuff,' and then you go to school and have success with that. Which one do you wanna be? *You can choose to do both.* But if you lose – if you slip and fall, it's all get back up and try again. That's what I always say.

Interviewer: Do you think – who has more weight, the devil or the angel?

Jason: I say both. The devil pulls you down so quick. The heaven thing, right back up.

Because these pathways aren't mutually exclusive, however, they overlap in ways that are seemingly contradictory. For example, in these young men's discussions regarding the two codes governing their gender identities and actions, robbery surfaced as a tool that occupied positions within both codes. Understanding that their economic and social opportunities were limited, and at the same time recognizing that they were still held to the standards of masculinity put forth in the different environments that they moved in and out of, these young men came to recognize robbery as a means of survival, both in the sense of "proving manhood" and "taking care of a family." As Jordan explained: "People, they rob to feed their family. Yeah, it's like if you got nothin'...you broke...you got a family you gotta raise...you gotta do what you gotta do."

Racialized Youth

In addition to seeing their social positions and identities influenced by class and gender, the young men in this study also discussed at length the ways in which their racial and ethnic identities are shaped by both external and internal racializing forces. Using Omi and Winant's theory of racial formation, the ways in which these young men negotiate these racializing forces can be understood as micro-level, everyday racial projects. Omi and Winant define a racial project as a simultaneous "interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines" (1994, 56).

The young men described anti-Asian racism in their schools and neighborhoods as a common problem. When on the topic of racism, the first example that inevitably came up is their mischaracterization as Chinese or simply Asian, as well as the racial taunts that ensued. In contrast to the matter-of-fact manner which most of the young men used in discussing the other aspects of their worlds, such as the codes of masculinity elaborated above, the topic of interpersonal racism was consistently met with a remarkably visceral response. For example, Rusky, an even-keeled and notably calm young man, became animated and immediately arose from his comfortable, slouched seating position to declare:

Ooh, let me just say this one thing! I hate it when people come up to me and ask me, 'Are you Chinese or Asian?' I hate that. It's because there is more other races than Chinese. So I'm like...man! [I'm] Mien. They don't even know what Mien is. I have to explain it. I have to give them the history...so I don't want to say I'm Mien. But I would still say it.

This theme was repeated throughout the different interviews we conducted with the young men as they pointed to their peers' ignorance, sometimes seemingly deliberate, of the ethnic diversity of the API umbrella category. In another example, KP joked about the way he tells people what

his ethnic background is: “I’m Khmu. They be like, ‘What is that?’ And I’ll be like, ‘Don’t trip, you better find out.’”

The young men also described other forms of interpersonal racism that they experience. For example, it is common for the youth to be subject to racial taunts of name-calling and language-mocking, such as “Chinky Eyes” or some incoherent derivative of “Ching-Chong” phrasing. Name-calling is often accompanied by violence, as illustrated by the following focus group exchange:

Jackson: People at school, they’d be like, ‘Oh, he’s Asian. He’s smart, he’s rich – let’s go jack him.’

Mark: ‘He wears glasses. He’s a nerd. [Let’s] punk him.’ You got a messy hairstyle, they’re gonna take you as a FOB [Fresh Off the Boat] and then they’re gonna want to jump you, because they assume you can’t fight.

As they explained, being stereotyped as the rich, nerdy, or weak Asian male archetype often leads to these youth being targeted for harassment, assault, and robbery in both their school and neighborhood environments.

The young men’s reactions to such anti-Asian racism were equally as visceral and consistent as their experiences. Rusky stated simply, “It just makes me mad, like I wanna fight that person who makes fun of me.” Similarly, Van explained how fighting or other aggressive alternatives are his initial response:

When people make racist comments about you and you’re just made like that, you know you’re gonna fight...you know something’s gonna happen. I just...either, I try not to let it out, but if you would mess with me I’d probably accidentally let it out. I’ll just play basketball all day or something, or just practice something really, really aggressive, like probably jump rope a lot, like all day. Just make myself sweat so much that I get really tired and just fall asleep.

An externally imposed racial identity that marks these young men as weak intersects with a gendered understanding of power as a trait of masculinity. Insofar as these young men are defining anti-Asian racism as the mismatch between their internal understandings of their racial

identity and an externally-produced definition, we can come to understand their visceral, sometimes violent, responses to racism at the intersection of race and gender.

John, a 17-year-old Cambodian youth living in East Oakland, relayed a story about the changing demographics of his neighborhood and subsequent encounters with racism that illustrates this point. John recalled that the majority of his neighborhood during childhood was comprised of other Southeast Asian families. Over the years, however, most of these families moved to other cities in the Bay Area for a variety of reasons, and subsequently the racial demographics of the neighborhood changed to being predominantly black. Now that his family is the only Asian family in the building, John describes the way in which their neighbors denigrate and threaten them. In this recounting, the “code of the streets” emerges again in the form of a turf battle. The young black men who, according to John, have moved into the neighborhood and are “tryin’ to run the block, claiming the block,” enact a performance of masculinity. However, the additional piece of the story is that John and his family, being Asian and also numerically isolated, have come to embody the weakness that these other young men in the neighborhood target.

The intersection of race and gender is important in understanding these young Southeast Asian men’s emotional responses to anti-Asian racism. However, though these young men speak plainly about the possibility of violence and aggression in the face of such treatment by their peers in the school and neighborhood settings, a third pathway that these young men were engaged in emerged from the interview transcripts and analysis that was not linked with violence, educational advancement, or gainful employment, but that was also associated with these young men’s identities and social positions.

Southeast Asian Youth Organizing

Unbeknownst to the research team at the beginning of the study, and regardless of their level of academic achievement or their involvement with violence and delinquency, most of the young men who were interviewed in this study were in one form or another also involved in youth organizing towards social justice. Due to the sizeable population of API youth in the Bay Area, there are a large number of community-based organizations that provide services for and are engaged in advocacy and organizing work with young API communities. As such, young Southeast Asian men engage with these organizations in an attempt to change the institutions in which they are being racialized and targeted. They do so in the form of organizing against Cambodian deportation, police misconduct, and racial profiling, as well as organizing regional violence prevention summits and getting together with other Southeast Asian youth to learn about their collective histories. For example, Jason describes the work he's done with a youth organizing group in Oakland:

Jason: We was doin' this show at Chinatown...about deportation. Yeah, it was fun. We wouldn't get paid that much but, it's not always about getting paid. It's about learnin' something, getting' something out of it and gainin' something. That's how I look at it.

Interviewer: So what did you gain from [this youth organization], would you say?

Jason: I gained from [them] how to stand up for your rights.

In engaging in this organizing work, the young men are able to construct a racial identity that is associated with pride and the buildup of community power. They take a great deal of pride in their work with, and for, the community as they strive to become role models for younger generations, as well as make substantive, material changes in their communities that can also impact the lives of their families and community.

Another example of youth organizing came from a focus group with young men who were all members of a violence prevention organization. The young men all worked together to

outreach to their peers and other organizations, putting on a yearly anti-violence summit that included educational workshops and entertainment. Part of the programming, however, also included lessons about Southeast Asian history that the young men describe as invaluable in helping them connect to their families, communities, and roots. As KP explained:

Programs like this, they help you out with the history and stuff, like get you thinking. ‘Cuz before this when I used to be outside, like out in the streets and stuff, I be complainin’ all the time, be like damn we livin’ like this. It’s hella hard and shit, be like where we live somebody got shot and stuff like that, but I ain’t really realize that my parents were goin’ through harder stuff than what I was goin’ through.

Though not all of the history is new to the young men, they explained that some of it is, as they are not taught Southeast Asian history in schools and many times their parents would rather not speak about the past. They also linked these lessons to their commitment to the community, sharing how learning about their roots instills in them a sense responsibility to changing the conditions in which they currently live. As such, it was clear from the interviews that youth organizing and youth programs had emerged as an important locus for racial and gender identity formation for these young men.

Discussion

The goal of a social science approach to violence, Abbink posits, is to inform an academic and public discussion:

It can do this by sensitively describing and demonstrating [violence’s] historical forms and its discursive forms, revealing its cultural aspects and its social reproduction among humans, and in doing so contextually explain its variability and contingency. Any essentialized views of violence as inevitable and immutable in human nature – or, allegedly, in some societies or so-called ‘cultures of violence’ – can thus be rejected as explanatory non-starters (2000, xvi).

In this spirit, this paper calls into question research that portrays Southeast Asian youth violence as primarily a result of conditions of vulnerability that were created by the Vietnam War and refugee resettlement in concentrated areas of urban poverty. In contrast, in light of the different contexts and social settings that young Southeast Asian men navigate on a daily basis, the main findings of this research suggest that their actions are also influenced by their construction of racial and gender identities. These identities are forged through interactions with peers and social structures, such as schools and social service agencies, as well as guided by codes of gender that are defined by social setting. As the findings demonstrate, then, violence is one tool that young Southeast Asian men strategically and situationally employ in the expression of their multiple identities.

The findings of this research corroborate one aspect of segmented assimilation theory, namely the notion that proximity to urban poverty is associated with violence. The young men in this study describe the ways in which violence and poverty are ubiquitous in their lives, and many of them also describe instances in which they have perpetrated violence against another. However, rather than seeing violence as a marker of vulnerability and maladaptation via adoption of a culture of the underclass, this research complicates segmented assimilation theory by arguing that violence is an adaptive response to structural constraints and limited opportunities. Such an adaptive response, as explained by the young men in this study, is governed by different codes of masculinity.

Both qualitative (Anderson 1999) and quantitative (Brezina et al. 2004) studies have shown that poor, urban, young men enact a code of the street in the face of status insecurity and the threat of being “disrespected.” The code emerges out of a social context in which a young man’s opportunities to attain respect and achieve success are limited by economic and social

barriers. Citing Anderson, Brezina et al explain: “At its core...the code is described as a cultural adaptation to the hopelessness and alienation generated by blocked opportunities” (2004, 311). Such a code is also enacted by the young Southeast Asian men in this study as they navigate and survive the urban ghetto. Similar to the young people in Anderson’s study, social structure also plays an important role in constraining the opportunities of young Southeast Asian men in the United States. Although the majority of young men in this study see education as a possible pathway for them in attaining status and respect, they also are aware of the reality that very few of them will make it to higher education and beyond. Indeed, research has identified the formidable barriers that young Southeast Asian men face in their educational settings, such as racism, stereotyping of low achievement, and a lack of access to support and educational resources (Um 2003; Stritikus and Nguyen 2007). With this traditional immigrant pathway blocked, the young men discuss violence as an alternative means to achieving power and success that is in line with the code of the streets.

In highlighting Southeast Asian young men’s adoption of a code of the streets, this research links Southeast Asian youth violence to studies on African-American subcultures of violence, such as work by Majors and Billson (1993) and Anderson (1999). In doing so, I address conceptual gaps that are present in previous studies that overprivilege the influence of structure on Southeast Asian youth violence. First, this research illustrates the agency with which young men in urban poverty negotiate their worlds and social constraints. In this way, we can see how the actions of the young Southeast Asian men in this study are guided by agency but also constrained by social structure in a way that is described by Messerschmidt’s (2005) concept of structured action. Second, this study also problematizes the idea that Southeast Asian poverty is exceptional and the implication that Southeast Asian poverty is unlike native minority poverty,

such as that of African-American communities. In linking this research to that of Majors and Anderson, this study pushes us to think of how structural and contextual forces within African American and Southeast Asian communities similarly affect these communities (Jaynes 2004).

With regard to agency, violence is but one adaptive response of Southeast Asian youth to urban poverty, and the code of the street is but one governing code that these young Southeast Asian men abide by. They also describe a code of the family in which men are responsible for financial and social support of their families. In certain circumstances, this code of the family overlaps with a code of the streets. This overlap is clearly illustrated in the young men's discussions of robbery as a way to simultaneously fulfill both codes, serving as a means to gain respect as well as secure money for family obligations. However, this study also highlights the ways in which these young men seek out and build their own support networks, as illustrated by their involvement with other youth in organizing and leadership programs housed in community-based non-profit agencies. These youth leadership and organizing programs emerged as key loci for racial and gender identity formation that served as alternatives to those involving violence and delinquency. These programs served an important social function for the young men, connecting them to their history, their peers, and older youth who had previously gone through these same programs. Community-based organizations thus may play an important role in helping youth avoid violence, and this should be a focus of future research and programming.

These findings, that the young Southeast Asian men in this study follow different codes and engender different adaptive responses to conditions of deprivation, suggest that the young men, in a sense, are able to "code-switch" as they navigate different social settings (Anderson 1999). Moreover, it is important to note that the same young men in these programs were also, at times, violent. As such, this points to the fluidity of their lives that is not captured by segmented

assimilation theory. Thus, the pathways of adaptation described earlier should not be understood as mutually exclusive or totally inclusive. This study thus complicates segmented assimilation theory by illustrating the fluidity and contradictions inherent in young people's actions and identities.

Finally, this study highlights the value of intersectionality as an additional lens for understanding Southeast Asian youth violence and identities, illustrating the ways in which race and gender coincide to influence behavior. The visceral reactions that the young men in this study display in response to their racialization as weak can be better understood within a code of the street, in which strength is perceived as a trait of masculinity and weakness is taken advantage of in this zero-sum game. In this way, this visceral, sometimes violent, response to racism can be understood as a way to defy their racialization as weak and to reassert or reclaim both their racial and gender identity.

Implications

The findings from this paper have both theoretical and practical implications. First, this research builds on other studies within a youth culture framework that complicate the simple notions of the model minority and the juvenile delinquent that are put forth by the current immigration adaptation literature. Just as previous research has shown the inaccuracy of labeling a young person as either a "good kid" or a "bad kid," the findings from this project illustrate that young men who are engaged in crime or violence in the street or school are also the same young men who are committed to social change through their work with different youth programs. By noting that their actions are bound by their perceptions of gender and race, this study suggests

that future research on immigrant adaptation and violence should include an intersectional analysis to more fully capture the complexity of the life course of immigrant youth.

The second implication involves how we define resilience. An ecological framework defines resilience from an outsider's point of view, rather than defining resilience with the perceptions and experiences of youth (Ungar 2004). In other words, what is considered resilient versus what is considered delinquent is predetermined without input from young people themselves. Those youth who do well in school and ascend through middle-class pathways and take on middle-class values in the face of adversity are considered resilient. All other youth, regardless of their actual criminality or delinquent behavior, are pushed into the box of "at-risk" or delinquent. However, our findings suggest that such a definition of resilience is too narrow and obscures the ways in which young Southeast Asian men are finding success in their own ways. Our findings thus suggest an alternative reading of resilience such as that offered by Michael Ungar. Rather than defining resilience as "health despite adversity," as is the traditional definition under an ecological model, Ungar argues that a "constructionist interpretation" is more apt. He defines resilience as "the outcome from negotiations between individuals and their environments for the resources to define themselves as healthy amidst conditions collectively viewed as adverse" (2004, 342). Applying this definition to the young men in this study, then, we can begin to see how their negotiations with their respective environments and peers, as means of survival and identity formation, are forms of resilience. In this way, violence can thus be seen as a situational tool with deep personal and social meaning, not simply a sign of vulnerability.

Finally, this work has implications for the way we approach violence prevention and youth development. Given the limitations of an ecological approach that utilizes segmented

assimilation theory, the solutions that it will engender – such as cultural and language competence within the juvenile justice system, mentoring, and behavioral modification – though important and well-intentioned, will ultimately be insufficient in changing the conditions that need also be implicated in the production of Southeast Asian delinquency and violence. For example, these approaches do not address the structural constraints, such as barriers to education and increased criminalization, nor do they tackle the codes of masculinity that are bound up with patriarchy that together shape a young person's experience with violence. As Tang (2002) notes: “Most inner-city youth programs are aimed at keeping youths off the streets, out of jails, and in school. While these programs of prevention are certainly important, they often begin with a rather low expectation of what young people living in poverty can actually accomplish” (2002, 240). Our findings suggest that programs developed to promote leadership and prevent violence should take into account Southeast Asian young men's' conceptions of race and gender, as well as the unique ways in which they define their own resilience and health, and also their roles in their community.

Next Steps and Conclusions

The scope of our research limits the inroads we can make in understanding Southeast Asian youth violence. As such, future research should address these gaps. First, empirical studies are needed to establish whether there is an association between code-of-the-street-related beliefs and violence among young Southeast Asian men in urban areas. Such beliefs include the idea that violence is justified in response to real or perceived insults against a person's status (Brezina et al. 2004). Such studies have been done with other youth groups, such as African

Americans, but there have been no quantitative studies looking at these code-related beliefs in Southeast Asian youth.

Second, future research should also address the influence of a history of violence and trauma, namely the Vietnam War and its aftermath, on the second generation of Southeast Asians in the United States. Segmented assimilation theory explains the role of the Vietnam War as that of a disruption of family and community networks. However, it is unclear whether there are other mechanisms via which this legacy of trauma is transmitted, and how, if at all, it is transmitted between generations. As most of the Southeast Asian youth in the United States are now of the 1.5 or second generation, this is an important link to flesh out in order to completely understand Southeast Asian youth violence. An important emerging theoretical framework that might be useful to engage is the model of historical trauma outlined in Sotero (2006).

In conclusion, I agree with Kasinitz about the excitement of charting the boundaries of emerging, second-generation youth cultures:

As we think about race and the new second generation, it behooves us to pay close attention to the popular culture these young people are creating. In the end that culture may prove far more fluid and dynamic than the advocates of renewed assimilation recognize, and less corrosive than the predictors of segmentation and second-generation decline now fear (2004, 293).

I hope that, with this study, we have begun to explore this fluidity and dynamism seen in Southeast Asian young men's negotiations of their social worlds. By engaging with Southeast Asian youth on their own terms, we will be able to chart a new approach to youth leadership development and violence prevention that captures the complex interplay between individual agency and social structure.

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