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Aggression and Violent Behavior



Toward an intersectional understanding of violence and resilience: An exploratory study of young Southeast Asian men in Alameda and Contra Costa County, California[☆]

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ABSTRACT

There is a nascent, but growing, literature on Southeast Asian youth violence that focuses on the role of acculturation, portraying violence as a problem of maladaptation. However, scholars overlook the ways in which violence holds meaning for the youth who experience it and how violence may be related to racial and gender identity formation. We conducted a qualitative study with young Southeast Asian men to elicit the role violence plays in their understanding of what it means for them to be Southeast Asian and male. We conducted focus groups and semi-structured individual interviews with an ethnically diverse group of 21 young Southeast Asian men 13–17 years of age from Alameda and Contra Costa Counties, California. Data were analyzed using the extended case method approach. Our findings illustrate that violence and engagement with community-based organizations are situational tools that these young Southeast Asian men use to navigate their social contexts in an attempt to be resilient in ecological contexts marked by alienation and discrimination, as well as to construct accepted and successful racial and gender identities. Furthermore, we found that their actions were guided by gendered codes of conduct, such as a “code of the street.”

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Abbreviation: AAPI, Asian American and Pacific Islander.

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Youth violence in the United States is a public health problem (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). Though research has shown disproportionate representation of ethnic minorities in the perpetration and victimization of violence, Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities have generally been invisible in this field (Arifuku, 2005; Guerra & Williams, 2006). However, a nascent and growing literature on AAPI youth violence shows an overrepresentation of Southeast Asian¹ and Pacific Islander youth in violence and crime statistics (National Council on Crime and Delinquency, 2003). For example, in Oakland, California, Laotian, Vietnamese, and Cambodian youth account for over 68% of felony arrests from 1991 to 2000 (National Council on Crime and Delinquency, 2003). Because of this disproportionate representation, research is needed in these communities to elucidate the factors that contribute to violence and its damaging consequences.

Research to date on Southeast Asian youth violence targets the role of acculturation, employing segmented assimilation theory as a guiding framework. In short, scholars using this approach argue that violence and delinquency are maladaptive behaviors of Southeast Asian youth who acculturate into an “underclass” segment of society that is characterized by social alienation and concentrated, chronic poverty. Violence is therefore described as an outcome of insufficient socialization and a product of disadvantaged ecological niches. However, this theoretical framework does not recognize that violence can hold meaning for the young people who experience it, and that it occurs within an individual's developmental context. Furthermore, the literature overlooks the agency of young people, and therefore would benefit from including the voices of the youth themselves.

This paper attempts to address this gap in our current understanding of Southeast Asian youth violence by turning to alternative theoretical frameworks, as well as the lived experiences of youth, via an exploratory, qualitative study. First, we ground our research in its historical and geographic context by briefly discussing Southeast Asian resettlement, as well as current demographics of the Southeast Asian community, in the United States. Next, we review the literature on acculturation and segmented assimilation as it relates to Southeast Asian youth violence. We then turn to a discussion regarding agency, resilience, and intersectionality as alternative frameworks for understanding Southeast Asian youth violence. Lastly, we describe our study and its findings, discussing the links between identity formation and violence for a group of young Southeast Asian men from Alameda and Contra Costa Counties, California. We demonstrate that violence is linked to different codes of masculinity, and also plays a particular role in the participants' gender and racial identities. By highlighting the agency with which the young men navigate their social contexts, we illustrate their resilience.

1. Historical and geographic context

Southeast Asian refugee migration to the United States is a direct result of the Vietnam War. The combination of an infrastructure

¹ We 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 have a common history and relationship with the United States. This history has played a paramount role in the current situation for Southeast Asian refugee communities in the United States.

devastated by 30 years of war and the fear of persecution at the hands of new Southeast Asian regimes created the lasting conditions that uprooted many Southeast Asians from their homelands (Chan, 1991; Strand & Jones, 1985). Southeast Asian communities and families were further destabilized by the migration and resettlement experience in the United States, which included the challenge of attempted re-incorporation into a post-industrial American economy and society. Moreover, the United States embraced a policy of dispersal, resettling refugees in cities all across the nation (Chan, 1991). Through a process of secondary migration, though, many Southeast Asian refugees found their way to shared communities, such as in California, Minnesota, Texas, and Massachusetts.

During this post-1975 period of Southeast Asian refugee resettlement, working-class communities in major cities around the country were bearing the brunt of disinvestment and deindustrialization (Wilson, 1997). In California, this era was marked by shrinking employment opportunities, particularly in low-skill sectors, decreased funding for education and social services, increased policing of youth by gang task forces and 3-strikes laws, and the criminalization of poor and immigrant communities by welfare reform and anti-immigrant legislation (Hing, 2005; Ishihara, 2007; Krisberg, 2004; Pintado-Vertner, 2004; Tang, 2000).

As a result, many Southeast Asian youth and their families in the United States live in urban areas marked by chronic, concentrated poverty. Whereas the poverty rate reported by the 2000 Census for the overall U.S. population was 12.4%, rates for certain Southeast Asian subgroups were much higher (Cambodian, 29.3%; Hmong, 37.6%; Laotian, 19.1%; Vietnamese, 16.0%) (Niedzwiecki & Duong, 2004). California is home to the largest percentage of Southeast Asians in the United States as a whole (38.9%), as well as by subgroup (Niedzwiecki & Duong, 2004). California data reflect the national trend, with an overall familial poverty rate of 9.3% in 2007, compared to higher rates for Southeast Asian families (Cambodian, 27.5%; Hmong, 27.5%; Laotian, 17.9%; Vietnamese 11.3%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). Rates of poverty are even higher among Southeast Asian families with children under 18 years of age (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). This is particularly important because the Southeast Asian community in the United States consists largely of young people. According to the 2000 Census, 14.4% of the general U.S. population is between the ages of 10 and 19, compared with 27.1% for Cambodians, 31.8% for Hmong, 22.4% for Laotian, and 15.6% for Vietnamese (Niedzwiecki & Duong, 2004).

2. Acculturation, segmented assimilation, and Southeast Asian youth violence

The broader literature on immigrant youth violence has generally focused on acculturation, generally noting a positive association between acculturation and violence and delinquency (Soriano, Rivera, Williams, Daley, & Reznik, 2004). Boutakidis, Guerra, and Soriano (2006) outline two mechanisms that may be at play in linking acculturation and violence for immigrant youth. First, the acculturation process itself can produce specific stressors that affect an individual's ability to adapt to a new society. As an example, conflict between parent and child due to dissonant acculturation experiences has been hypothesized to be a unique stressor for immigrant youth that predisposes them to maladaptive behavior. Second, violence may be a result of the cultural norms and values of either the native or host communities. For example, an oft-cited host society cultural code that

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