

ETHNIC IDENTITY: THE CAMBODIAN EXPERIENCE

by

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ABSTRACT

ETHNIC IDENTITY: THE CAMBODIAN EXPERIENCE

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This thesis research contributes to the literature on Cambodian Americans, and in particular the second generation, which has attracted limited scholarly attention. It examines how these individuals make sense of their Cambodian ethnic identity in North Texas. Individual interviews were conducted with twelve second generation Cambodian-Americans in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. This study focused on the ethnic identity of second generation Cambodian-Americans by examining cultural practices, knowledge of one's family history, language and peers that may serve as significant factors. These factors were determined by looking into past research and finding common themes. A typology was created using data collected on these factors to measure the level of significance each factor had on ethnic identity. It was found that peers did not determine if my participants' sense of identity heighten or lessen, while the other three factors did. The most influential factor in determining how these individuals feel about their "Cambodian-ness" was their knowledge about Cambodian history and their family background. Results from this study indicate that individuals who were aware of their cultural background, especially their individual family's experience in the war, had a heightened sense of ethnic identity. Furthermore, these findings suggest that parents who forced their child to speak Khmer had their sense of ethnic identity lessened, while those who had more freedom to speak both

Khmer and English had their sense of ethnic identity heightened. Findings show that there were several factors that greatly influence the way these individuals view their own ethnic identity. This study offers valuable insights into the process of identity construction among second generation Cambodian-Americans.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

An increasing number of refugees and immigrants are entering the United States. For their children, growing up in America can be extremely difficult (Zhou 2001). Many second wave refugees, who arrived during the late 1970s and early 1980s, were uneducated people from Southeast Asia (Smith-Hefner 1999). Children of these refugee parents often face not only oppression, racism and discrimination but also identity issues (Portes and Rumbaut 2001). Second-generation Cambodians¹, in particular, are plagued with identity problems. Most tend to identify with their own ethnic identity and that of others of similar oppressed backgrounds. They may see themselves as refugees, Khmer, Cambodian American or a combination of all three. Many do not fit the “model minority” myth and may encounter numerous problems, including identity issues (Smith-Hefner 1999).

Second-generation Cambodian Americans are members of the youngest immigrant ethnic group in the United States and adjusting to American society has been difficult for them (Bankston 2000). Truancy and dropping out of school are major problems for Cambodian high school students in the United States (Goldberg 1999). Compared to 12.5% of Chinese Americans, 14.6% of South Asian Americans, and 8.6% of Japanese Americans, 52% of Cambodian Americans, 59% of Hmong Americans, 49% of Lao Americans, and 38% of Vietnamese Americans have less than a high school education. This is more than double the average in the United States (Ngo 2007; U.S. Census 2000). Furthermore, people from Cambodia are less likely to obtain a high school diploma than other Asian groups. Understanding why this is happening is critical. It has been over 25 years since many

¹ Most Cambodians in Cambodia and the United States refer to themselves as Khmer, but in the English language Khmers are referred to as Cambodians (Smith-Hefner 2000). In this study I will refer to them as Cambodians as Khmer interchangeably.

Cambodians arrived in the Western world and yet their quality of life remains one of the lowest when compared with other races, as well as with other the Asian communities (Smith-Hefner 2006). In the United States, an estimated 30 percent of Cambodian Americans live under the poverty line and 23 percent were on welfare in the year 2000 (Chang and Le 2005; U.S. Census of Bureau 2000). If these problems persist there will continue to be drop-outs and low levels of educational attainment. Why are so many Cambodian Americans failing? With this question in mind, I wanted to start by looking at how Cambodians in America view themselves.

Past research indicates that older Cambodians see themselves as Khmers and sometimes speak little English, while the younger generation of Cambodians in the United States consider themselves entirely American (Lehman and Dassanowsky 2000). Khmer elders also link Buddhism to their Cambodian identity. This thesis explores whether this phenomenon is apparent in second generation Cambodian-Americans or if there is something more involved. The purpose of this study is to investigate ethnic identity among second-generation Cambodian Americans in mainstream American culture. My research questions are: What factors are crucial to ethnic self identification? Do parents, peers, religion and the war in Cambodia affect their view of “Cambodian-ness?” Is this identity something that they perceive? What is it exactly that makes them Cambodian?

1.1 Cambodians in the United States

It is often said that the United States is a nation of immigrants. Almost every person in the United States descends from early settlers and immigrants who arrived from other countries. Asian Americans, too, came as immigrants or refugees. Like many other immigrants and refugees, Asian Americans experience stress with learning a new language, adjusting to new roles and adapting to mainstream American Anglo society (Dang and Pyke 2003).

The United States Census Bureau (2000) estimates that there are approximately 3,310 Cambodians living in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, and the number is slowly growing. According to 2005 American Community Survey estimates, some of the strongest percentage of growth in

the Cambodian-American population was seen in the states of Texas, Florida, Georgia and Connecticut. Since 2006 Texas has been ranked third in resettling refugees from different countries (Batalova and O'Donnell 2007).

The presence of a growing Cambodian community in Texas offers a great opportunity not only to study the importance of ethnic identity among this particular group, but also to add to our understanding of the dynamics of parental participation, peer interaction, language, and religion and how they relate to the self identification of Cambodian Americans. This research is different and unique than past research because it was done in an area of the country that has a small Cambodian population rather than a large one. Most research concerning Cambodian Americans has been conducted in the northeast and western parts of the country: in Boston, Massachusetts and Long Beach, California, both of which have large Cambodian communities. With this thesis we can better understand and assist future refugees who live in areas in which they do not have large ethnic communities from which to seek support.

For many Cambodian youth, the socio-historical context including the experience of fleeing a war-torn country with their parents, the associated personal and political persecution, as well as the acculturation process is an important influence on their adolescent ethnic identity formation (Chang and Le, 2005). Chang and Le note that Cambodian youth are at odds with their ethnic identity and as a result perform poorly academically and engage in delinquent behaviors (2005). Chang and Lee's participants found it difficult to "fit in" because they were having a hard time adjusting to two cultures. I agree that there is a linkage between ethnic identity and social problems. Chang and Le (2005) make this connection between ethnic identity issues and social problems among Cambodian American youth but do not explain the ethnic identity issues. Sam-Ang Sam, as discussed in Lehman and Dissanowsky (2000), also writes that Cambodian youth are plagued by identity problems. They often deal with racism from classmates and with being teased about their foreignness. As a result many second-generation

Cambodian Americans eventually discard their Cambodian first name in favor of an English first name (Lehman and Dassanowsky 2000:309).

In my research, I explore how second-generation Cambodians construct their ethnic identity. What factors influence their labeling themselves Cambodian? The aim of the study is to find out how second-generation Cambodian Americans think about their ethnic identity in North Texas. I seek to answer the questions: what are the criteria for being Cambodian in North Texas? What does it mean to be Cambodian? With which aspects of being Cambodian do second-generation Cambodian Americans identify?

A large amount of research has been conducted in populations where there is a large number of Khmer living together, such as in Boston.² The U.S. Census (2000) estimated that 17,301 Cambodians were living in Boston while only 3,310 lived in the Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas area. What about these Cambodian Texans who do not live in a Cambodian-based community? Geographical location may be an important aspect among second-generation Cambodian Americans. The purpose of this study is not to exclusively compare Cambodian Texas to other Cambodians in other parts of the country but to find out what influences help create second-generation Cambodians' ethnic identity. Furthermore because environment factors influence the culture of a minority group and how they shape their ethnic identity, it is important to note the different Cambodian communities in the United States.

Cambodian Texans interactions with other Cambodians are limited. Unlike Cambodians living in Long Beach, California where they have an established "Khmer Town" similar to that of China Town, Cambodian Texans may come in contact with other ethnic groups more frequently and with their own less-frequently (Bankston 2000). How do North Texan Cambodians form their Khmer sense of identity while not being embedded in a Khmer community (i.e. in a location that is different from Boston or Long Beach, where Cambodians in Texas are the minority within the minority)?

² The Cambodian people and their language are also known as "Khmer" (Smith-Hefner 2000).

Because most Khmer Americans in Texas have settled in urban areas, they have frequent contact with disadvantaged members of other minority groups. Older Cambodians often say that they relate most to their poor Asian, black and Hispanic neighbors and will often distinguish between areas of “poor people from the comfortable middle-class neighborhoods of the Americans” (Bankston 2000:313).

In Texas, Cambodian Americans often come in contact with Mexicans or Mexican Americans who are also a part of a disadvantaged group in American society. Khmers are often seen shopping in Mexican American weekend markets (Bankston 2000). Additionally, “many Cambodians in Texas have learned Spanish and follow Mexican customs in interacting with their Spanish-speaking peers” (Bankston 2000:313). Similar to Mexican Americans, most Cambodian Americans are fairly dark-skinned and aware of prejudice in America. They sometimes develop an inferiority complex due to their physical differences such as skin tone. Many times they blame themselves for their differences and often have feelings of remorse and helplessness (Bankston 2000).

Similar to many other racial minorities, Asians suffer from discrimination and racism. Dang and Pyke (2003) stress that unlike “African Americans who endure many negative stereotypes but are not assumed to be other than American, Asian Americans are racialized as inassimilable foreigners” (p. 150). Asians are often seen as non-English speakers, even if English is the only language they know. While many European immigrants are able to “fit in” the larger white mainstream, even-generation Asian Americans are classified as ethnic minorities and have more trouble adapting and understanding their ethnic identity (Dang and Pyke 2003). As “inassimilable foreigners,” Asian Americans, such as Cambodian Americans, have trouble figuring out their “Cambodian-ness.”

In the United States Asian Americans are often seen by non-Asians as a homogenous group, but in reality they are a diverse group of people. Before 1970, the Asian American community consisted largely of three ethnic groups: Japanese, Chinese and Filipinos. But in

recent times the population of Asian-origin Asians has expanded to over twenty groups. Newly arrived Asian groups are different from Japanese, Chinese and Filipinos. They speak different languages and many of their traditions and cultures are different. Second wave Asian Americans tend to be refugees from developing countries, while established Asian Americans, such as Japanese and Chinese, are from industrial societies and have been in the United States for many generations (Borgatta and Montgomery 2000).

Xiong and Zhou (2005) point out that due to past Asian immigrants' success Asian Americans are dubbed "honorary whites." Being labeled "honorary whites" has had a great effect on the Asian community, especially for those who arrived after 1970. Mia Tuan (1999) argues that Asian Americans are marginalized. They are in a push and pull of what is accepted as "American" and are known as the model minority when compared to other minority groups. Asian Americans are still perceived as foreigners compared to whites even if they have lived in the United States for many generations and have achieved high socioeconomic status (Tuan 1999). What it means to be American, Tuan explains, is associated with being white.

Tuan's (1999) insight into Chinese and Japanese-Americans helps convey how some Asian Americans feel about their ethnic identity; but what about those who do not reach financial success or educational achievement, such as Southeast Asians, particularly Cambodian Americans? Differences in "origins, histories, and timing of immigration, pre-migration, and settlement patterns" greatly affect the development of ethnic group and ethnic identities (Xiong and Zhou 2005:1127).

The majority of Southeast Asians is lagging behind other Asian ethnic groups and is assimilating on a downwards socio-economic spiral. Southeast Asian-Americans tend to be socio-economically more disadvantaged, have lower median family incomes and lower levels of education than other non-refugee Asian American. "Obviously, high family SES backgrounds of the children of Filipino, Chinese, Korean, and Indian immigrants help to set the stage for a very advantageous context of reception and adaptation. In comparison, low family SES backgrounds

of the children of Vietnamese and other Southeast Asian refugees create obstacles, in addition to common immigrant disadvantages” (Xiong and Zhou 2005:1148). Even those who have been in the United States for most of their lives are still looked upon as an inferior group and are “internalizing the disadvantages associated with it” (Xiong and Zhou 2005:1149).

Cambodian Americans are one of the Southeastern Asian groups faced with these dilemmas. I suspect that these expectations and perceptions from the general society of what Asian Americans are suppose to be would lead many Asians Americans, particularly Cambodians, to question their own ethnic identity.

Earlier research conducted specifically on Cambodian Americans has been limited. Research on Cambodians is often problem-focused and does not adequately reflect the range of experiences within the Khmer community. Most of the articles about Cambodians in America focus on the health and mental state of first generation Cambodians. Those who have written about second-generation Cambodians mainly focus on delinquents and their failure rates in the United States. This research does not adequately explain how and why second-generation Cambodians are not doing as well as other Asian minorities (Smith-Hefner, 1999). I speculate that Cambodian-American youths’ struggles may be connected to confusion over identity. In general Cambodian youth have a hard time adjusting to American culture, and sometimes to the Asian culture as well. I see this as connected to the fact that most Cambodians have a different history and culture than many of their Asian counterparts living in the United States.

And unlike their immigrant parents who have some ties with their native country, the second-generation are often American-born and face different types of hurdles (Portes and Rumbaut 1996). One of these hurdles includes their perceptions of their ethnicity and its meaning.

In chapter two, I will discuss the rationale for choosing qualitative methods for this thesis. I also provide a general description of my data collection. I discuss my sample and the methods used to obtain data, including interviews, observations and surveys. In addition, I

explain the process of how this information is analyzed. In chapter three I explore my own personal experience as a second generation Cambodian-American living in North Texas. I write about my childhood experiences, my parents' arrival to Dallas, and the resettlement process. I explain why I became interested in sociology and why I chose to conduct a research about second generation Cambodian Americans.

In chapter four I provide an overview of the relevant literature regarding ethnic identity, acculturation and assimilation. This chapter explores the concept of ethnicity in a pluralist society; there are several possible theories to draw from. Chapter five consists of the historical background of Cambodia, the fall of Cambodia after the genocide, and flight of the refugees. Also included in this chapter is the impact of the refugee resettlement among first generation Cambodian and their children. I next present a results chapter, chapter six, on how four factors affect ethnic identity among second generation Cambodia-Americans. These factors included cultural practice, knowledge about Cambodia, language, and peers.

I conclude my thesis in chapter seven with a summary of my findings and how they answer or illuminate my research questions. I identify relations between my findings and broader questions on ethnic identity and second generation Cambodian-Americans. I examine the strengths and limitations of this research and pose several recommendations for future research. In all, this research seeks to further understand the second generation's sense of ethnic identity by examining different factors. Finally, I provide suggestions for future researchers to grasp a richer understanding of Cambodian Americans.

CHAPTER 2

RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA METHODS

Qualitative methods are best used to better understand Cambodian American ethnic identity. These methods can be utilized to gain new perspectives on things already known and to gain more in-depth information that may be difficult to convey quantitatively. There is not enough known about Cambodian American ethnic identity to be able to select a meaningful hypothesis. "Thus, qualitative methods are appropriate in situations where one needs to first identify the variables that might later be tested quantitatively, or where the researcher has determined that quantitative measures cannot adequately describe or interpret a situation" (Hoepfl 1997:1).

This study is based on individual interviews with those who are of Cambodian descent and were born in the United States. The setting for this research is the Dallas/Fort Worth area. The 2000 census reports that 3,310 Cambodians reside in Dallas-Fort Worth. A more realistic number is around five thousand (Pfeifer 2002). This site is significant because the Dallas/Fort Worth area has the largest concentration of Cambodians in Texas, yet has one of the smallest populations compared to California, which has an estimated 70,232 Cambodians (Pfeifer 2002). As mentioned earlier, past research on Cambodians was conducted in areas like California where there were large enclaves of Cambodians. This research is one of the few studies in which we will be able to see how Cambodians think about and construct ethnic identities in areas where there are smaller Cambodian communities.

According to the Khmer Guided Placement Project, more than nine hundred Cambodians were estimated to have resettled in Dallas, eight hundred in East Dallas and the rest in Fort Worth during the early 1980s and during the next couple of years hundreds and

hundreds of Cambodians were housed in East Dallas, “an ethnically mixed neighborhood, and in the suburbs” (Chen 2004:118). Eventually some Cambodians moved to the suburbs and became more integrated in mainstream society and others who stayed in poor neighborhoods where they first resettled “depend on social workers for help and [they] had no choice but to interact with institution[s] of the larger society” (Chen 2004:118). Soon after, they build a Buddhist temple and were scattered all over the Dallas - Fort Worth area.

Because the Cambodian population is dispersed in North Texas, finding participants for my research was difficult. My participants were scattered all over the Dallas/Fort Worth area. Almost all of my participants were located in different cities.

2.1 Participants

Prospective interviewees were approached through initial contacts at The University of Texas at Arlington, where I used snowball sampling to recruit additional participants. In this method, an interviewed respondent will use their social networks to refer other people who could potentially participate in or contribute to the study. Since the assumption was that most people will recruit their friends into the sample, and they may share a great deal of similarities, I only interviewed one of the people suggested by each existing subject in order to limit any bias that could have occurred.

Another technique that I used to recruit my respondents was by posting up flyers around campus. The flyer had a list of criteria for possible respondents, along with my personal email and phone numbers so that they could contact me. My time spent recruiting participants was exciting yet tiring. No one responded to the flyers nor was I able to easily find participants, due to the fact that so many of my potential participants were scattered all over the Dallas/Fort Worth area. Over 70 percent of my participants did not know any other Cambodians.

Overall, I managed to conduct individual interviews with twelve second generation Cambodian-Americans. Respondents were all born in the United States and have parents who entered this country as refugees from Cambodia. Eight interviewees were female and four were

male. Their ages ranged between 19 and 27; their average age was 23. Most were born in the Dallas/Fort Worth area. Those who were not born in the Dallas/Fort Worth area were born in California but were raised in Texas. None of the participants were married nor did they have any children. About 75 percent of the interviewees resided at home with their parents. The others lived with roommates. The highest level of education obtained by my respondents was a bachelor's degree. In this study, one participant graduated from college, eight are in college, two graduated from high school and one did not complete high school. The majority worked entry level jobs and some were unemployed or were students.

Table 2.1 Participant Demographic Information

Participant Identification	Pseudonyms	Sex	Age	Education	Year Family Resettled in U.S.
Participant 1	Sopheary	F	21	Some College	1970s
Participant 2	Mealea	F	20	Some College	1980s
Participant 3	Sam	M	27	Some College	1981
Participant 4	Rithisak	M	27	Less than High School	1981
Participant 5	Julie	F	19	Some College	1978
Participant 6	Tevy	F	20	Some College	1980
Participant 7	Arun	M	25	High School Graduate	Unknown
Participant 8	Kalliyan	F	23	Some College	1987
Participant 9	Soriya	F	24	College Graduate	1982
Participant 10	Jorani	F	23	High School Graduate	1980

Table 2.1 – *Continued*

Participant 11	Ryan	M	22	Some College	1984
Participant 12	Devi	F	26	College Graduate	1981

2.2 Interviews and Surveys

Interviews ranged from one hour to three hours in length. A semi-structured interview design was implemented for a much freer exchange between interviewer and interviewee (Esterberg 2002). This design made it easier to probe and explore the topic of ethnic identity among second generation Cambodian Americans.

Roughly 70 percent of the interviews took place at the participants' homes, while the remainder of the interviews took place on a college campus, such as in a study room in a library. All interviews were tape-recorded with participants' approval and were transcribed and, where necessary, translated by me from Khmer into English. Interview questions centered on participants' ethnic identities in various contexts (family history, religion, language) and general questions about their childhood and educational experiences.

In addition to interviews, I collected data using a demographic survey with each participant. After each individual interview, each participant was asked to complete a demographic questionnaire to gather information about their age, sex, birthplace, family structure, public assistance and year of resettlement, education level and parent's occupation.

I paid close attention to the participants' dress, demeanor, body language, facial expressions and tone of voice; these were written down as precisely as possible. Field notes were written down a couple of minutes after the completion of each interview without participants' present. Before I started interviewing my participants I observed their interaction with others in their household.

Individuals in this study had parents who resettled in the United States mainly in the 1980s; only one participant's family came during the 1970s. It gave me a great opportunity to conduct this research because they have grown up virtually in two cultures and as young adults

they were able to speak about their experiences. They were able to share their personal stories and their struggles with their own discoveries about who they are and where they came from.

2.3 Data Analysis

When I completed my first interview I began data analysis in the field and the process of gathering my data. After each interview and transcription I stored data in individual folders on my personal computer. All my field notes, documents and transcriptions are organized chronologically. I chose to separate transcripts of interviews from my field notes and assign each interview a code number such as “participant 1, participant 2” and so on. In addition, to protect the identity of my participants I am using pseudonyms for every individual I interviewed.

After the interviews were transcribed, transcripts were open-coded. Open coding allows themes and categories to emerge from the data and eventually for the researcher to see “patterns and commonalities and develop a focus” (Esterberg 2002:158). As I became more familiar with my data I developed codes and highlighted themes. After open coding, I focused on the several key recurring themes and used my memos as a guide to help shape my thoughts and understand my data. During the analysis process, I found common themes that enabled me to pinpoint what is most important. I used those themes to develop a typology of ethnic identity types among second generation Cambodians that will be detailed in the following chapters.

CHAPTER 3

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Esterberg (2002) states that often qualitative researchers “look at their own lives to see if they can find anything interesting to study, an unusual angle or puzzling event of phenomenon” (p. 26). I began this study by looking into my own life. My own identity as a second generation Cambodian American who has lived her entire of her life in Texas and is a product of two cultures must be acknowledge in the interpretation of these data. I expected that some of my experiences would mirror those of my interviewees. It was important to regularly reflect upon how my ethnicity, gender, class, and graduate student status might possibly influence their responses. I was fully aware of the similarities of my experiences and attitudes to those of the participants and I fully acknowledged this insider knowledge. I did not want to influence their responses by my own behavior or knowledge. As an insider, I found that it was much easier to get information from my participants because they found that I was very much relatable. They were able to speak in Khmer and I was able to understand them. I was fascinated by how much they were willing to open up and as an insider it was important to get the most out of an interview. I did not engage in any conversation regarding other issues or topics not related to my research. Nevertheless, I approached this study as an insider and used my status as a source to draw my participants in. I am committed to interpreting this research responsibly and thoroughly.

In this chapter I discuss my own personal experiences and my journey as a second generation Cambodian-American. I feel that it is important to include my own experiences in my thesis so that individuals are able to see my own perspective of how I personally struggle with my own sense of ethnic identity.

During my childhood years my family was constantly moving to different parts of the Dallas Metroplex and I never established a place for myself in any community. I never put much thought in who I was or where my family's roots were. As I got older, the curiosity grew in me and I questioned these things because I was asked many times what being Cambodian is and what was it all about, and I had a very vague idea. As a Cambodian or Khmer American, I find my ethnic identity difficult and confusing at times. I had no idea what it meant to be Cambodian. While reading many articles, I came across a particular article written by Tuon Bunkong, a Cambodian graduate student at the University of Massachusetts who seems to feel the same way I do. Bunkong (2002: 1) wrote:

I do not listen to Cambodian music. I listen to British rock bands, like the Who, the Cure, the Smiths, Joy Division. I remember crying on numerous occasions while listening to Pink Floyd's album, The Wall, because the narrative talks about my story of alienation, madness, and freedom. Am I still Cambodian even though I listen to these "white" bands? I love fish and rice, staples of Cambodian food. However, I know very little of Cambodian history and its literary tradition. Am I still Cambodian? I have a better grasp of the English language than the Khmer language, but I abhor Cambodian politics. Am I still Cambodian?

Bunkong's description of how he felt was exactly how I felt. Who am I, Cambodian or American? What are the criteria of being Cambodian? What does it mean to be Cambodian? At a very early age, I thought that being Cambodian meant that I had parents who were from that country and shared the same history with other Cambodians. Being born to Cambodian parents was enough for me to identify myself as Khmer, despite being born in America. While growing up I was unsure of how I was supposed to maintain my cultural and ethnic identity while interacting with other groups.

3.1 Resettlement

When my parents first arrived in the United States they were set up with missionary families. Classes were held for Cambodian refugees to learn English and people were encouraged to go to college. My father took advantage of this opportunity and went to a community college where he received a certificate for his completion in English proficiency. With the certificate in hand, he was able to teach church officials to speak Khmer and help other Cambodian refugees.

Our family went to church on a weekly basis. My parents probably did not really understand who these people were but they knew that in order to fit in we must attend church. They were compelled to participate in church rituals because church members had helped sponsor my family to come to Texas. My parents felt that it was the right thing to do to show them our appreciation. In Cambodia, my parents practiced Buddhism and felt that to be Khmer was to be Buddhist. Our Cambodian ethnic identity was beginning to crumble due to the lack of temples and the constant bombardment of the Christian missionaries pursuing my parents to join.

3.2 Community Interactions

When we came to Texas, we resettled in a very poor, crime ridden neighborhood. Once my parents arrived to Dallas with my two older sisters, I was the first child to be born on American soil. Growing up in Dallas I felt as if I were stuck in between two cultures. I found it very difficult to adjust to the American life, largely due to my family's inability to understand or fit in to American society. My family's culture, beliefs and traditions were different from the predominant white American culture. It was quite difficult because most Cambodian refugees came from rural areas and had few relevant job skills and little familiarity with mainstream American culture (Lehman and Dassanowsky 2000).

3.3 Interactions with Peers

During this time I was more comfortable socializing with my own group, those who were lower class Cambodian refugees like me. However, when we moved to a neighborhood where the majority was white, I started to question my own identity. This was a period in my life where I first came in contact with the idea of the “model minority.” Meaning that, most people perceive Asian Americans as being highly educated, wealthy, possessing the ability to achieve high occupational status, and as unaffected by mental health problems and crime (Lai, Lin, Nagasawa and Wong 1998). The assertion of Asian Americans as a “model minority” has become the dominant theme in the media and has had an impact on the general public (Lai et al. 1998). This popular stereotypical perception has had a negative effect on many Southeast Asians and on me personally.

Throughout middle school my classmates constantly wanted to cheat off of me, thinking that I was the smartest kid in school. But the reality was that I did not know how to speak or write English properly. I was ridiculed by other students and some teachers for not living up to the image of a proper Asian American. I struggled to be at the top of my class but when I did not succeed I became rebellious.

Ngo (2006) makes it known that “Southeast Asian Americans are uniquely positioned both within and outside this discourse of academic success” (p.10). On the one hand, Southeast Asians are lumped with other Asian American groups and viewed as part of the “model minority”; and in contrast, they are portrayed as “gangsters, high school dropouts, and welfare dependents” (Ngo 2006: 10). Those who were at the end of this spectrum were Cambodians. Cambodian American students struggle with language learning, score lower on standardized tests, have lower grade point averages, and drop out at a higher rate than Vietnamese and Hmong American students (Ngo 2006). The perception of Asian Americans often is either of a high achiever or a delinquent; for most Cambodians this involves being seen as a delinquent. Many operate on the assumption that Asian Americans are entirely capable of succeeding on

their own or on the belief that they are too lazy and do not deserve assistance. Ngo (2006) expresses that “discrimination and alienation” is masked by the United States achievement ideology and profile of Asian American success, where hard work and education creates success. These beliefs often result in the denial of support to Southeast Asian Americans (Ngo 2006: 60). The traits identified with the “model minority” do not only involve educational achievement but also the perceived notion that Asian Americans are wealthy.

Such a perceived notion caused my classmates to assume that my parents were wealthy and owned a store. In actuality, my father was a janitor and my mom was (and still is) a factory worker who did not speak a word of English. Most Cambodian families who resettled in our area were also disadvantaged. This phenomenon was happening to many Cambodian communities around the country, with Cambodian Americans living under the poverty line and on welfare (Chang and Le 2005; U.S. Census of Bureau 2000).

3.4 Language

Language was also a big part in my socialization. My family primarily spoke Khmer, our native language, yet at school I spoke English. If I did not speak English well, many teachers and students assumed that I was unintelligent. Many of my peers constantly made fun of my lack of language ability. My ethnic role confused me. I felt that I was not Asian enough or American enough. I was (and still am) conflicted with my identity. During the whole process of my early socialization, trying to make sense of my “Cambodian-ness” was quite challenging.

3.5 Interest in Ethnic Identity

During my junior year in college, I became curious about my own ethnic identity. I started to wonder if there were other second generation Cambodians who felt the same as I did. The majority of my friends were non-Cambodians and I have always had an urge to make some kind of connection with other Cambodians. People that I have met through the years have asked me about my ethnicity. Their interest sparked my curiosity. Most people who have

approached me have never met a Cambodian before until they met me. I was always the first and only “Cambodian” they came across.

At a very early age, my parents were too busy to tell us about their stories about Cambodia and what happened to them during the war. Throughout my life, friends and even strangers would question me about my background. As a result I started to ask my parents about Cambodia. My father was very eager and pleased to tell me about the history of Cambodia and the struggles my family faced during the war. At one point my parents spoke about how they were captured and separated during the war and almost died. We lost family members and my parents had friends and neighbors who were murdered during the war. Others died from starvation, forced labor and/or heat exhaustion. I became more and more intrigued with their stories and started to research Cambodia’s past. As I became more aware of Cambodian history and was trying to find my own place and identity, I began to analyze everything around me.

During my sophomore year in college I took an introductory class to sociology. I was fascinated with how sociologists study patterns of interaction among people and why people behave the way they do. Immediately I changed my major to sociology because I wanted to understand the world around me, literally. I grew up in a household where I was stuck between two cultures and I was quite confused about what it meant to be “normal.” Sociology gave me a great opportunity to learn about my environment and help me discover some key issues about race and ethnicity. This study gave me a chance to explore and learn about other second generation Cambodian-Americans.

CHAPTER 4

ETHNICITY AND ASSIMILATION: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This thesis focuses on the ethnic identity of second generation Cambodian youth. The term ethnic identity is a very complex concept. It is important to get some sort of idea of what the meaning of ethnic identity entails. In this chapter, I outline the different viewpoints of what constitutes “ethnic identity.” I explore the theoretical framework related to ethnic identity. I also summarize the process of assimilation and acculturation as it relates to the process of ethnic identification.

The phenomenological meanings of ethnicity and race touch deep feelings in many people around the globe and occupy much of the world’s attention. The concept of ethnicity can be puzzling and conflicting. Many issues that arise during the process of forming an ethnic identity are apparent in the United States. What constitutes a certain ethnicity? What does it mean to be an American, Asian or Black? What are the components of “truly” being an American? Does one’s appearance, such as the color of one’s skin, define one as being an American? Or is it up to us to see ourselves as Americans, despite what society or the world tells us?

4.1 Ethnic Identity

Ethnic identity can sometimes be very complicated and difficult to comprehend, especially in a multi-ethnic society such as the United States. When attempting to understand the concept of ethnicity in a pluralist society like America, there are several possible theories to draw from. One of the first ideas regarding the subjective meaning of ethnicity was put forth by Max Weber. Weber stated that ethnic groups are those “human groups who entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both or because of memories of colonization and migrations” (quoted in Cornell and Hartmann 2007:17). He goes on to say that it “does not matter whether or not an objective

blood relationship exists.” The *fact* of common descent is less important than *belief* in common descent. “What matters is not whether blood relationship exists, but whether it is believed to exist, meaning that ‘not what is, but what people perceive” (Weber quoted in Cornell and Hartmann 2007:17).

Ethnicity is best understood as a “self perceived inclusion of people who share a common cultural heritage that is not shared by others with whom they are in contact” (Romanucci-Ross, Tsuda and De Vos 2006). These traditions generally include “folk religious beliefs and practices, language, a sense of historical continuity, and common ancestry or place of origin” (Romanucci-Ross, Tsuda and De Vos 2006: 4). Cornell and Hartmann (2007) argue however that if we use these criteria to distinguish an ethnic group, then to us “lawyers, military families, university students, hip-hop enthusiasts, the citizens of Switzerland, prison inmates, physicists, and numerous other groups potentially join: Polish Americans, the Chinese minority in Malaysia, and the Kurds of Iraq, among others, in the pantheon of ethnic groups” (p.18). We can also say that women are also part of an ethnic group and they too have been discriminated against but are not consider being an ethnic group. Most people who encounter such terms probably believe that they know the meaning of the words such as ethnic, ethnic group and ethnicity. But in reality these concepts are slippery and difficult to define.

In simple terms, ethnicity is a shared cultural heritage. People define themselves, and others, as members of an ethnic category based on common ancestors, language, and religion, which give them a distinctive social identity (Macionis 2006). It seems that one of the most important factors of being part of an ethnic group entails looking at a group’s physical characteristics. More specifically, ethnicity reflects the understanding shared by members of ethnic groups: what it means to be black, white, Mexican, Jewish, and so on. For example, Cambodian Americans, have distinctive physical traits, share the same language and history and many practice Buddhism, so their ethnicity is self-identified as Khmer.

However, ethnicity is constructed by external social, economic, and political processes which often cause people to create malleable ethnic categories and definitions. A person's concept of themselves, along ethnic lines, can be situational and changeable (Nagel 1994). For example, a three-year-long study of second-generation Cambodian, Dominican, and Portuguese children in the United States indicates that their ethnic identities do change. This study was conducted to examine several aspects of emerging ethnic identity in childhood. Boyd, Coll, Lanarre, Marks and Szalacha (2007), found that older children demonstrated greater ethnic identity exploration than younger children, suggesting that exploration of ethnic identity increases with age. When it came to ethnicity being situational, Portuguese children tended to racially label themselves as "Whites." Boyd et al found being labeled "White" was positively associated with greater amounts both of in-group and out-group social preference, reflecting a greater overall social comfort while identifying with the White majority.

Groups tend to meet society's demands by depending on the role of ethnicity that will benefit them most; a tendency which was seen in the Dominican children (Boyd et al. 2007). In the United States being Black often holds more negative associations than being White. In comparison with Whites, Dominican children found their race and ethnic identity conflicting. The color of their skin identified them as being Black, which they found displeasing, because the dominant view of being Black is negative. They were more in favor of being classified as "Latinos" because they did not want to be negatively stereotyped (Boyd et al 2007). These Dominican children used their ethnic identities instrumentally in pursuit of their own goals. Like the reality of race, the reality of ethnicity is socially constructed. It is changeable, contingent and diverse (Macionis 2006). Nagel (1994) argues that the construction of ethnic identity is the result of both structure and agency, the "dialectic played out by ethnic groups and the larger society" (p. 152)

If we look at race and ethnicity as a social construction in an economical and political process, race and ethnic identity are "built, rebuilt and sometimes dismantled over a period of

time” (Cornell and Hartmann 2007:30). Cornell and Hartmann (2007) used the example of the genocide in Rwanda. They wrote on how the Hutus and the Tutsis believed that they were of a different race. The dominant beliefs were that Tutsis were taller, lighter in skin and more intelligent compared to the Hutus, who were shorter, darker and not very smart. The Hutus claimed that the Tutsis did not want to share their land with another race. Their language, custom and culture were fairly similar, which identified them as having the same ethnicity, but when it came to race they declared that they were different (Cornell and Hartmann 2007).

Some people may find this observation puzzling because there appears (to outsiders) to be hardly any differences between the two groups, but the Hutus and the Tutsis believed that they were different. What others may actually be seeing is a power relationship. Notice that the Tutsis were lighter so they were considered to be smarter compared to the Hutus. They and those around them began to divide themselves into certain groups, mainly due to economic and political reasons. This power relationship can be seen in many places and times. Ethnic identities are created over time and place, as are racial identities, so there are complications in their identification.

Jary and Jary (1991) pointed out that an important distinction can be drawn between groups that have consciously sought to assert their ethnicity and those that have been designated as ethnic minorities by more powerful groups. Most Khmer who arrived in the United States were from rural and poor areas. They were trapped by powerful and dominant groups, who forced them to change their traditions, culture and beliefs. For the American-born, Cambodian identity may be the preference but “Cambodian-ness” is and can become a state of mind. One may say that they are Cambodian without even speaking a word of Khmer. The process of ethnic identification is very complex. Ethnic identity is no means fixed but rather is often situational (Xiong and Zhou 2005). Xiong and Zhou argued that “ethnic identification is likely to be a social psychological expression of the process of group formation, which can

persist indefinitely because of group members' ancestry, history and current lived experiences" (2005:1141).

4.2 Assimilation, Acculturation and Segmented Assimilation

Thomas (1994) defines assimilation as the blending of culturally distinct groups into a single group with a common culture and identity. The theories of assimilation and acculturation presented here form the theoretical framework used in this thesis. In theory, assimilation is the blending together of cultures, usually resulting in members of the less powerful groups replacing many of their beliefs, values and practices with those of the larger culture (Holt, Rinehart and Winston 1995). Cambodians living in the United States are the less powerful group and had to adapt to the American way of life and lose part of their ethnic identity. But this theory of trying to integrate immigrants has changed.

Most recently the concept of "acculturation" is more favorable than assimilation (Thomas 1995). People started to realize that instead of conforming to the dominant society culture, they can choose and pick what is important to them. This is why the term acculturation is more acceptable than assimilation.

The term acculturation originated in anthropology, and is defined in a group of processes. "Acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups" (Berry, Phinney, and Sam and Vedder 2006). Acculturation is a process in which members of one cultural group adopt the beliefs and behaviors of another group. Although it is usually in the direction of a minority group adopting habits and language patterns of the dominant group, it can be a give and take situation, meaning that the dominant group also adopts patterns from minority groups.

In studying second generation Cambodian-Americans and their ethnic identity, it is important to examine the process of adaption and the explanation of different forms of integration. Portes and Rumbaut (2001) put forth that various minority groups undergo a

process of segmented assimilation where “rapid integration and acceptance into mainstream America” are affected by several factors (p. 45). The rate of integration among first and second generation Americans differs in their experience. Second generations are affected by what happen to their parents before and after resettlement. The first factor is the history of first generation and what they brought with them to this country. First generation have their own individual features such as their age, education, occupational skills, wealth and knowledge of English (Portes and Rumbaut 2001).

The second factor is by the rate of acculturation among parents and children and the manner on how “normal” their integration was. The more similar the minority group is to mainstream society, in terms of physical appearance, class background, language and religion, the more favorable their reception and the more rapid their integration. Thirdly, the cultural and economic barriers faced by second generation youth in their pursuit of successful adaptation. In the realm of social relations, regardless of their class origin and the knowledge of English, nonwhite immigrants face greater obstacles. In American culture the “darker a persons’ skin is the greater is the social distance from dominant groups” (Portes and Rumbaut 2001:47). Minorities are confronted with the challenges of adaptations. Refugee families live difficult lives as they adjust to new communities and new cultures. Lastly, Portes and Rumbaut (2001) outline how family and the community help confront these issues. All these factors subsequently affect second generation adaptation in the United States and later how they view themselves.

For the second generation, the process of self ethnic identification is more complex compared to the first generation. They are stuck between two cultures and must define themselves in multiple reference groups and are classified into a variety of group labeled by their peers, schools, ethnic community and the larger society (Portes and Rumbaut 2001). Second generation tend to take their ethnic identity for granted and pay less attention to it unless pressured by parents or society. When the second generation is faced with threats, persecution ad exclusion they become more aware of their ethnicity. In addition language

adaptation relates to ethnic identity. Immigrant adults seldom abandon their original language even while learning English. Past research has indicated that there is a connection between language and self-identification where losing a language is losing one part of one's identity and cultural heritage (Portes and Rumbaut 2001).

There are many theories and views on ethnic identity and acculturation versus assimilation. A theoretical framework was used to get a basic understanding of what ethnic identity entails. One thing that is evident is that there are many factors involved and that there may not be a solid view of one's own ethnic identity or group. Furthermore, if ethnic identity is socially constructed; influenced by economics, politics and society's views, then a person's history must too influence ethnic identity. These issues of history and politics will be explored more fully in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5

ETHNIC IDENTITY: HISTORY AND RESETTLEMENT

As I discovered through my interviews (and will be discussed in-depth in later chapters), one of the major factors that plays a role in establishing Cambodian ethnic identity is past history. To really understand why Cambodians behave the way they do, one needs to know about their history and how they came to resettle in the United States. In this chapter I will examine events of Cambodian history which have greatly affected the course of Cambodia, its people, and their resettlement in the United States. This chapter explores what many refugees had to go through from when the war ended to resettlement.

The period of Cambodian history from 1975 to 1979 is considered one of the darkest periods of human rights violations in modern history (Powers 2003 and Smith-Hefner 1999). About a quarter of the Cambodian population died in one of the worst genocides of modern times, and yet so few non-Cambodians are aware of this history (Etcheson 2005). Before 1975 few people of Cambodian ancestry lived in the United States, but that changed when war broke out in Southeast Asia. Many Cambodians who came to the United States did not come of their own will but by force. They did not come to seek a better life, but to save their own.

5.1 Cambodian History

Cambodia, approximately the size of the state of Missouri, had a population estimated at 7.3 million before the genocide. The country's population consisted of 90 percent or more ethnic Khmer. Other ethnic groups included Vietnamese, Chinese, Cham (Muslim Khmer), Khmer Loeu or tribal peoples, Eurasians and Indians. Buddhism was the religion of 95 percent of the population while Islam, animism, and Christianity were also practiced (Welaratna 1993).

Cambodia is an ancient country with a history both pride and pain to the Cambodian people. During the 1400s Cambodia lost territory to both the Siamese (now Thai) and

Vietnamese, and during the 1800s was under the control of these countries. Cambodia was sealed off from outside influences that were beginning to affect other Southeast Asian countries. In 1864, Cambodia came under French rule, and later gained independence in 1953 under the control of the hereditary monarch, Prince Norodom Sihanouk (Williams 2005). During the 1960s, war in surrounding countries was raging across the border of Cambodia. The country was vulnerable and became subject to bombing raids by American forces. These raids, dubbed by President Nixon as Operation Menu, caused many to lose their lives (Powers 2003). In 1970, the Prince was overthrown and a new government named the Khmer Republic, led by Lon Nol, was established. This group had strong relations with the United States, which caused many Cambodian inhabitants to react negatively towards them. Such negative feelings toward the Khmer Republic led to an increased favoritism of the Cambodian Communist Party called the Khmer Rouge (Williams 2005).

The Khmer Rouge, or the Red Cambodians, was led by a man named Pol Pot (Smith-Hefner 2006). Pol Pot, whose real name was Saloth Sar, was born to a peasant family in central Cambodia. He studied in Paris and returned home in 1953 (McGuire 1991). Pot implemented his own application of Marxism. He outlined a dictatorship which involved creating a primitive peasant society which consisted of mostly Cambodian farmers living in rural areas. The working class was less influenced by him and his party, unlike the peasants. Many of the peasants were homeless, famished, and in poor shape physically and emotionally. They thought that by supporting Pol Pot's regime they would have a better life. The Khmer Rouge seized the capital, Phnom Penh, after a five year civil war and the defeat of the American backed Lon Nol government. After the defeat of the Khmer Republic, the Khmer Rouge began its genocidal campaign in Cambodia (Powers 2003). Vast numbers of people were killed and buried in mass graves. Furthermore, in order to save ammunition, the victims were often killed by using hammers, axe handles, spades or sharpened bamboo sticks. Many victims were

required to dig their own graves. The soldiers who carried out the executions were mostly the young men and women from the peasant families (Welaratna1993 and Etcheson 2005).

The Khmer Rouge regime arrested and eventually executed almost everyone suspected of having connections with the former government or with foreign governments, as well as professionals and intellectuals. Ethnic Vietnamese, ethnic Chams (Muslims), Cambodian Christians and Buddhist monks were the demographic targets of persecution. During this time temples were destroyed, monks defrocked or killed, and rituals were forbidden. The estimated number of dead ranged from 1.7 to 2.3 million, equaling more than one quarter of the total population of 7 million. Eventually, in 1979, Vietnamese troops invaded Cambodia to help stop the genocide, which forced the Khmer Rouge to flee westward toward Thailand (Welaratna1993 and Etcheson 2005).

All aspects of Cambodian everyday life including government, education, religion, finance, markets, agriculture, transportation, communication, family and festivals were virtually destroyed or changed due to the Khmer Rouge. Nearly every Cambodian had to move, most lost everything they owned, and virtually everyone had relatives and neighbors who were killed. Cambodians lost their past as well as their country, and many feared they had lost their culture (Smith-Hefner 1999).

5.2 Resettlement

In the mid-1970s, many Cambodians traveled westward towards the Thai border and into Thailand because of rumors of food and refuge. Finally in 1979, the international response led to the organization of several refugee camps for 160,000 refugees. An estimated 350,000 or more refugees lived in Thailand outside of the camp, and about 100,000 fled to Vietnam, where the United Nation High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) provided them with aid. When they arrived at the refugee camps they only thought of temporary refuge and eventually returning home to their family. "They feared the Khmer Rouge, they feared the Vietnamese, they feared everything Cambodia had become" (Haines 1996:239).

Over the course of time, Thai officials became unhappy about having large numbers of sick and destitute refugees taking up residence along the western border. Consequently, Thai officials turned away thousands of refugees until Western countries assured them that the refugees would not take up residence in Thailand but would resettle elsewhere. Countries such as Australia, Canada, France and the United States took in these refugees and allowed them to resettle (Hefner 2006). More than one million refugees from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam were resettled in the United States after the end of the Indochina War in 1975. Approximately, 150,000 were Cambodian refugees who were paired up with American churches and families or those who were willing to sponsors these refugees (Welaratna 1993, 2006 and Ember and Levinson 1997).

5.3 Resettlement and Assimilation

As many Cambodians were beginning to resettle in different parts of the country, the American government made an assumption that it would be best for these Cambodian refugees to be scattered in different parts of the country so that they could assimilate at a faster rate (Smith-Hefner 2006). In the resettlement process Cambodian refugees were purposely dispersed throughout the United States due to government policy, the availability of sponsorships, and the relative absence of family ties and previously established ethnic communities in the United States. The majority of the refugees resettled in California, followed by Massachusetts and Washington State (Melvin et al. 1997).

Many refugee programs and Americans treated these refugees as a homogeneous group with similar expectations and experiences. Many American relief workers were unaware of how different Southeast Asian groups were from each other. From the Khmer point of view, Americans did not appear to realize that these groups of Southeast Asian refugees were different. The groups consisted of school teachers, farmers, bureaucrats and even soldiers, yet they were all lumped together as one. Smith-Hefner noted that the majority of Cambodian refugees resettled in the United States went no further than the primary grades in Cambodia,

and there was virtually no exposure to English compared to other Southeast Asians (2006). So this implies that many had worked on farms and were manual laborers. It would be quite difficult for them to adjust to Western Society where it is important to know how to use technology or even use simple appliances such as microwaves. Many Cambodian refugees could not read or write in their own language, so it would be very difficult for them to do so in English.

Most American immigrant education programs had been designed to teach immigrants to abandon their “inferior traditions,” thus implying that the Cambodian way of life was one of laziness and dependence (Haines 1996: 242). Immigrants were taught American attitudes, values, and behaviors in the hope that they would become “free, democratic, rational, hard working and self sufficient” and hence better able to integrate into the American life (Haines 1996: 242). Trying to integrate certain ethnic groups and enable them to meet the requirements of mainstream society can be very complex and even harmful, since the development of ethnic identity can be quite personal and individual. For many Cambodians, being placed in the United States has been a roller coaster of trying to make sense of what it truly means to be Cambodian American (Smith-Hefner 2000).

5.4 Previous Research on Cambodian Americans

As mentioned earlier, previous study conducted specifically on Cambodian Americans has been limited but significantly important to examine. In this section I will examine past research to help further understand the Cambodian population after their resettlement.

Studies show that many Cambodian refugee family experienced traumatic events during the war. A cross-sectional, face-to-face interview was conducted on 586 first generation Cambodian Americans adults from Long Beach, California. All the participants in this study had been exposed to trauma before immigration. Ninety-nine percent of these participants experienced near-death due to starvation and 90% had a family member or friend murdered. High rates of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), major depression, and low rates of alcohol use disorder were also found among first generation Cambodian Americans (Berthold, Chung,

Elliot, Marshall and Schell 2005). PTSD and depression was also found in Cambodian refugee youths (Clarke, Sack and Seeley 1996), Majority of the articles written about Cambodian Americans resulted in the same outcome when it comes to mental health issues. In addition to their poor mental health status, Cambodians in general are assimilating downward and are not doing as well as other ethnic groups. It is notable that Cambodian youths are adjusting to American school environments much less successfully than Vietnamese and Lao youth (Kim 2002). In addition, Cambodians have been the least able to maintained integrated social network and pass on Khmer cultural values. Bankston and Hidalgo (2006) found that Cambodian children and adolescents who maintain close ties to their families and to non-American cultures can often adjust better to American society in the long run than those who became alienated from their families' traditions and values.

As this chapter has shown, simply being transported to a safer country was not the end of their struggle as refugees. They now were left to deal with a very different set of problems. Dealing with this past and present trauma and grieving over all that they lost, awhile trying to settle in a new land proved to be very difficult for many. As will be shown in the following chapter, all of these issues experienced by first generation Cambodian subsequently affected their children who experience their own personal struggle, wrestling with both their American and Cambodian identities.

CHAPTER 6

FINDINGS

In order to measure the degree of connectedness among second generation Cambodian-Americans in this study, I created a typology. The typology in this study was developed after analyzing the data. I found common themes in my participants' level of connection to their Cambodian ethnicity by looking at whether their experiences affected them in a negative or positive way. The different levels of connection are shown by how much the participants knew about Cambodian culture and history, and how often they participated in cultural activities. During analysis, certain themes popped out. For instance, participants who said that they were proud to be Cambodian knew a fairly substantial amount of information about Cambodia and their parent's past. They felt that they were more involved with their family history and were able to understand the difficulties their parents had faced during the war. The analysis revealed that many participants understood the levels of sacrifices their parents had made to give them a better life and in turn this increased their sense of ethnic identity.

The categories I used to measure the results of my research are peers, language, cultural practice and knowledge of family history. Peers and language were two predetermined factors in my research, and I added cultural practice and knowledge of family history after analyzing my data. I chose the above factors because they all showed a good level of significance from the research I have read and the research that I conducted. Peers was one of the factors that I chose to include in my study because I felt that if my participants socialized with those of the same ethnic background, their sense of Cambodian-ness would heighten. I chose language as a measure because previous research shows that there is a connection between language and ethnic identity (Portes and Rumbaut 2001).

It was difficult to specifically pinpoint what factors were significant when determining how second generation Cambodian developed their ethnic identity. So I began asking my participants several questions about their life and as they answered I was able to better determine which factors were most significant. I was able to add two additional factors after organizing my findings. Cultural practice and Knowledge of family history showed up as very significant when developing or heightening ethnic identity.

Before I used these factors I researched them to make sure that they were important factors in determining ethnic identity. Past research conducted by Smith- Hefner in the Boston area showed that when participants were asked about what being Cambodian meant, most agreed that being Cambodian means being a Buddhist. Being a Buddhist is not just a religion but part of the Cambodian culture and plays a vital role in determining ethnic self identity. This research interested me greatly as a potential factor and became very evident after I gathered the results of my research,

The second factor I added was knowledge of family history. My participants' sense of Cambodian-ness was measured by looking at how much they knew about their individual family's experiences in the war and in resettlement. I also examined if they expressed their appreciation for their parents' ability to share certain information about their history. Several participants in this study felt more connected to their parents and gradually formed a tight bond with them. They developed a sense of Cambodian pride.

In addition, I found it important to ask each participant how they felt about being Cambodian. I examined how these participants felt about being Cambodian and went over the interviews to see what factors affected the way they felt about being Cambodian. Participants, who were extremely proud of being Cambodian were aware of their parents' experiences and were exposed to Cambodian culture and tradition.

Three of the four factors that I used helped determine if the participants' sense of identity heightens or lessened. These three factors include awareness of family's history, cultural practices, and language. The fourth factor that proved to be insignificant was peers.

When speaking about being familiar with Cambodian history and tradition, a belief in common ancestry is one of the fundamental elements in the definition of ethnic identity. Cultural ethnic groups pass on symbols, language, and other components of the cultural heritage to the next generation. The individual's ethnic cultural heritage is a source of pride and group identification. For Cambodians, trauma is a central element of their past history. They equate their parents' survival with ethnic pride.

6.1 Culture and Practice

Cultural practice and greater knowledge about one's own ethnic culture may enhance feelings of belonging to their ethnic culture. Here I examined how significant cultural and traditional practices had an effect on my participants' sense of ethnic identity.

Researchers have found that children who have a heightened sense of ethnic identity have mothers who endorsed family obligation expectations (Costigan and Su 2009). These obligations involve taking part in household tasks and staying home to participate in family activities (Costigan and Su 2009). Cultural practice is significant when it comes to ethnic identity.

The importance of Theravada Buddhism is significant in the socialization of the Khmer community (Smith-Hefner 2006). This can be seen in Smith-Hefner's research (1999). She interviewed 175 Cambodians in the Boston area about what it means to be Cambodian. An older Cambodian woman living in Boston stated that to be Cambodian is to be a Buddhist, and most of Smith-Hefner's respondents agreed. Buddhism is the official state religion of Cambodia and is listed on Cambodian citizen identity papers. This connection indicates that they are part of the original historical citizenship of Cambodia, although those who have lived in Cambodia for

quite some time and adopted their language, custom and Buddhist religion would also receive Cambodian citizen identity papers. They too become part of Cambodia.

Buddhism is extremely important to Cambodian culture and tradition. But Cambodians tend not to force their ideas onto anyone. Even parents tend not to force Buddhism on their children; instead children play a very passive role when practicing Buddhism (Smith-Hefner 1999). Khmer children may accompany one or several members of the family to worship and yet stay outside to play. Children are taught to be courteous and polite and must carry out this type of behavior throughout life which is part of the Buddhist teaching (Smith-Hefner 2006).

Like Smith-Hefner, I also found engagement with traditional Khmer culture to be important to my participant's ethnic identity development. Based my own observations, about 85% of my participants have pictures or sculptures of a Buddha in their homes. My participants participated in cultural practices and traditions in a variety of ways, some more than others. Many of my participants said that their parents asked them to participate in cultural traditions but that they were never forced to do so. It was important that they learn some Cambodian rituals and traditions. These traditions included going to the temple and practicing Buddhist beliefs. Parents wanted their children to be more involved in the Khmer community. Even though they wanted their children to practice the Buddhist faith, it was often difficult for them to do so because of the lack of temples and their parents working long hours. Through analyzing my interview data, I created a typology of the stages of ethnic identity development which involves cultural participation among my participants.

6.2 Exposed, Self-Educated and Disassociated

Most of the participants in this study were in one of two categories except for one individual. I call the first category the "Exposed" because these six participants have always been exposed to Cambodian culture, history and tradition from a very young age. The second category, the "Self Educated" only became educated about Cambodia through pursuing information themselves. This category consisted of five participants. There was only one

participant who did not fit into the Exposed category or the Self-educated category; he is in the category I call the “Disassociated.” Rithisak is the only participant who is in neither of the categories because he was unaware of Cambodia’s history, culture and traditions.

The Exposed consisted of individuals who have a heightened sense of ethnic identity and are very aware of Cambodian culture. They were proud of being Cambodian. The Self-educated also had a good deal of ethnic pride though they were not as knowledgeable as the Exposed about Cambodia, its history, or their families’ experiences. The Self-educated became more intrigued about their own ethnic identity as they grew older.

The Disassociated, comprised of one participant, is characterized by little knowledge about Cambodia. Even though it was just one person, the findings showed how significant the factors in the other categories were when measuring ethnic identity. The goal of my research is to get the deepest possible understanding of second generation Cambodians. Rithisak’s perspective was definitely as important as the other participants in this study. His personal view and understanding of his own ethnic identity, detailed in table 6.1, was very different from the other two categories. I believe that had I had a bigger sample, there would have been more people in this category.

Table 6.1 Category Characteristics in Comparison

	Cambodian Cultural Practice	Education of Cambodia	Khmer Language	Primary Friends
Exposed Devi Julie Sam Sopheary Soriya Tevy	Highly involved in tradition and cultural practice on a daily Basis.	Parents freely spoke to them about their background. Knew the ins and outs of their parents’ past. They were aware of basic information.	Spoke Khmer fluently Parents spoke Khmer to them in the household. Parents thought speaking English was important but there was no emphasis on it.	Mainly non-Cambodians unless they were family Had few Cambodian friends.

Table 6.1- *Continued*

Self-educated Arun Jorani Kalliyon Mealea Ryan	Participated in cultural practices on a moderate level.	Knew a fairly good amount of information about Cambodia from personal research rather than obtaining information from their parents	Spoke Khmer fluently Parents spoke Khmer to them, but wanted them to speak English as well.	Mainly non-Cambodians unless they were family members. Had few Cambodian friends.
Disassociated Rithisak	Limited amount of time practicing Cambodian culture.	Does not know the history of Cambodia well. Parents refuse to speak about their past	Fluent in Khmer, parents told him that he could only speak Khmer.	Mainly non-Cambodians unless they were family members. Had no Cambodian

The Exposed participated in ethnic activities. They went to the Buddhist temple almost every week. Many of the participants in Exposed had family members who practiced Buddhism religiously. Almost all of the houses I entered had paintings of the temple Angkor Wat. Julie described her house as having a shrine in “the back room” and walls filled with pictures that represented Buddhism. Julie’s grandmother was adamant that she participate in cultural practices such as wearing a traditional white outfit while praying.

The Exposed is very aware of their ethnic traditions and practice. They are very well informed by their family members of what Cambodian traditions entail. For example, Sopheary described a day when her parents wanted her to get a blessing from the monks at the temple to get rid of her “bad luck.”

They wanted me to go get “soroak” (blessed with water) again sometimes this year cause I got into a car accident a couple of weeks ago. I want to say maybe like a month and a week and a half ago. And then my mom thought that I was having like bad luck or something. And yea she was like, “You need to get “soroak” again.” I got “soroak” but you know how when you do it too many times, the good luck doesn’t work anymore? I’ve already been like “soroak” like

twice in a life time. I'm only 21. (Laughs) So I'm like, "No, I think I'm going to take my chances."

Sopheary and her family live quite close to the temple. She's been involved with the Cambodian community throughout her childhood. She enjoyed the fact that her parents requested that she be blessed. She was happy that her parents made an effort to involve her in Cambodian traditions. The Exposed knowledge about Cambodian culture, practices, rituals and traditions surpasses those in the Self-educated Group and Disassociated. During their childhood all my participants in Exposed Group, Self-Educated Group, and Disassociated attended traditional and cultural practice, but as they grew older those in Self-educated and Disassociated participated in Cambodian practices less frequently while those in the Exposed participated regularly.

Compared to the Exposed, the Self-educated was unaware of their parent's background while they were children. It was not until they were older and they educated themselves that they gained knowledge about Cambodia. While the Exposed parents willingly educated them about Cambodia and their experiences at a very young age, the Self-educated had to approach their parents about their history and culture. The Self-educated consisted of individuals who were fairly aware of their parents' migration to the United States, but not in the great detail known by the Exposed.

Rithisak, in the Disassociated category, lacked knowledge about Cambodia and its history. He was not able to give a lot of details about his family or Cambodia. His parents refused to have a discussion about their background or about the events that occurred in Cambodia. Rithisak did not learn about his culture through research, although he did visit Cambodia where he was able to learn more about his country. Despite educating himself about "present day" Cambodia he still had a vague idea about Cambodia's dark past and still knew little about his parents past experiences.

As mentioned earlier, most Cambodians see Buddhism as an important part of Cambodian identity. Many Cambodian parents practice Buddhism. In general my participants felt that being Buddhist is a whole way of life and it is not simply a religion.

All my participants had parents who practiced Buddhism in Cambodia but who attended church when they first arrived in the United States. Many refugees believed that if they converted to Christianity, they would be able to resettle in an affluent western society (Smith-Hefner 1999). All were sponsored by churches and were involved in the Christian faith during their childhood. All of my participants had similar experiences attending church during childhood because they saw it as an American tradition. Soriya in the Exposed category described herself as a Buddhist.

We're all Buddhist in our house. When my mom came, apparently they were baptized and stuff. Because, when we were in Mineral Wells we went to church. My parents didn't go; they just put us in van. His preacher and his wife, they live in the neighborhood that helped them, they took us to church. I remember the rest of my life we've been going to the temple and stuff but after today I go to the temple all the time. So I say we're Buddhist.

She went on to describe the importance of the bracelet. The bracelet was something that she wears to protect her from harm. Soriya said that she always wear the bracelets because it keeps her safe.

I practice just like, I wear the bracelet thing. These (She shows me her bracelets), my dad got it from Cambodia. This one [is] from my grandpa; he's like a monk. He's on and off. He's a monk when they want him to be. And these two my dad got from Angkor Wat. I try to follow the rules but I already broke a couple. (Laughs) So I don't know if they still work.

Jorani in Self-educated category described her family's religious practices as something more complicated, and odd.

It's complicated what my parents are, because they, you know, they're born Buddhist and whenever they were sponsored over here, the people that sponsored them, baptized them. And then I have friends that always ask me all the time about what I am and you know I say that I am Buddhist but I mean I still believe in God. You know and then that's how my mom raised us to do was to know that Buddhism is more if a way of life. But if there is only one God, you could still believe in it, you know.

All my participants agreed in some aspects that Buddhism is more like a part of their culture, rather than just a religion. Buddhism is a way of life and part of their identity.

The majority of my participants, self- identified as Buddhists, followed by Agnostic and Atheist. Many of my participants bounced back and forth from one religion to another. When I asked Rithisak in the Disassociated category about his religious preference he chuckled and said,

Let see, that's a good question. Neither. I don't believe in anything so, sorry. I went from, I was Buddhist, then Christian, and now I'm, what's that one word? ...Atheist, yea I'm kind of like an Atheist because I don't go to church or the temple. The only time I go to the temple is when my parents make me drop them off, other than that I don't have any religious faith.

As mentioned earlier, participants have a complicated relationship to religion because their parents came from a country where they believed that to practice Buddhism is to be Khmer but they feel that in America since Christianity is the dominant religion, to practice Christianity is to be American. A large number of Khmer refugees who first resettled in Dallas, Texas were resettled by "conservative, evangelical Protestant churches" (Smith-Hefner 1994:36). Cambodians felt obligated to attend church services to repay their sponsors for their kindness. Churches offered an array of social institutions for second-generation Cambodian Americans, a place where they were able to socialize with other youth (Smith-Hefner 1994).

The participants that I interviewed all changed their religion at one point during their lives. Buddhism was something that was taught to them. Values, brought to the United States from “home” (Cambodia), were passed down to them by their parents. Tevy in the Exposed explained that “It’s what they raise us up to be.” Tevy expressed that being a Buddhist was more part of her family culture and she sees that she is also a Christian, but if she had to pick a religion she would place herself under Buddhism.

Well since I would claim Buddhism more than Christianity since I haven’t been baptized. I say like it relates because to me like what I was taught was... from what I read was, Buddhism isn’t really a religion, you know. Like they say it’s more of a way of life. So it helps me to keep kind of tradition alive...It reminds me to remember like, where my parents are from. Cause then every time people ask me like how can you do both, I’m like well Buddhism is more of a way of life and so it keeps me to be grounded and to remember what my parents struggles are and that I am not over Americanized because it is the last thing I want because she (mom) sort of got there.

Tevy believed if she did not claim Buddhism, it would be hurtful to her mother. When she said that “the last thing” she wanted was to become Americanized and declared Christianity as her religion, she said that it would have mocked her mother’s struggle as a Cambodian refugee.

Cambodia has been a nation where the majority of Khmers were Theravada Buddhists long before their migration to the United States (Smith-Hefner 1999). Given that the majority of the population practices Christianity in the United States, where churches overwhelmingly outnumber Buddhist temples, the pressure to convert to Christianity may affect their sense of identity if Buddhism is watered down (U.S. Census Bureau 2009). But in this case Christianity has not had the effect on Khmer refugees that it reportedly has had on other Southeast Asian refugee groups (Smith-Hefner 1999). Smith-Hefner (1999) report that 90 percent of her Khmer participants are Buddhist and Christianity has not had the effect on Boston-area Khmer

refugees. Cambodians identify Theravada Buddhism with the Khmer nationality (Smith-Hefner 1999). But in the case of North Texas Cambodian, this may differ due to the fact that they are located in the Bible belt.

At a very young age, my participants participated in Christian church activities and functions. They looked at the Christian church as more of a social institution where they could socialize with others and Buddhism was more “of a way of life.” Interestingly, for my participants, having a strong sense of being Khmer does not necessarily mean being Buddhist. Their ethnic identity heightened due to their involvement with Buddhism, whether or not my participants identified themselves as being Buddhist, Agnostic or Atheist.

6.3 Knowledge about Family's History

Second generation Cambodians in this study most strongly identified themselves as Cambodian through the tragic events that happened to their parents. As outlined earlier, during the 1970s, Cambodia faced with a period of darkness. The Khmer Rouge embarked on an organized mission to reconstruct Cambodia. They went to towns and cities forcing the inhabitants to leave. Those who refused to leave, obey orders or did not leave fast enough were killed. Anyone who was in professional fields such as law, teaching, and science was killed. Those who escaped were put into unpaid labor camps where they became weak from overwork; many starved to death. Children were separated from their parents and were forced to work in labor camps. The Khmer Rouge shut down schools, hospitals and factories. Religion was banned, monks were killed and temples were destroyed (Etcheson 2005; Powers 2003 and Smith- Hefner 2006)

All of my participants had family members who were either murdered or died of starvation, and their parents, along with some family members, were the only survivors. Those who escaped the war were scarred with the memories of the genocide.

Children and adults tend to interact with one another based on past shared experiences (Berry et al. 2006). Cambodians, who fled their murderous country, were scattered in a number

of countries across the world. They were, however, able to maintain strong connections with one another (Smith-Hefner 2006). Being tossed into a strange and unfamiliar country made Cambodians come together and bond. Stories of struggle shared by their parents and family members brought a sense of belonging and ethnic pride in second generation Cambodian-Americans (Smith-Hefner 2006).

For Cambodians, trauma is a central element of their past history. They equate their parents' survival with ethnic pride. I explore how these factors affect their degree of connectedness with their "Cambodian-ness". "Cambodian-ness" may mean a strong connection to their past collective trauma which can lead to a sense of bonding. Cambodian American youths may not speak a word of Khmer but may share an understanding of each other's history. Shared stories that are shared among the parents and children may increase the feeling of pride and belongingness. I felt that it is important to discuss some of these stories. Julie shared a story about how her grandmother and her family during the war.

I'll give you the background of my grandma and my family...during the war, the Vietnam War, you know the Vietnamese to what I understand I think they were trying to take over Cambodia. The thing is my step-grandfather, he was in the war. He was fighting with the Americans, A lot of families died and one of the survivors is my mom... He (her grandfather) was fight for the country. They killed him, he died.

Julie in the Exposed mentioned that whenever her grandmother spoke about her loss "she wants to cry, because she had nine kids and only three of them made it over. A lot of families died and one of the survivors is my mom." Another participant in the same category, Sam, described how his dad escaped death during the war.

Well my dad when he fled to Thailand...they wanted to kill him actually. The crazy story behind that it that, well most of the Communist, well the communist came to his house that day and one of the communist was his friend right, and

they're getting ready to kill my dad and they told his friend to go out there. They didn't know that they were friends and all and to go out back to shoot him and so they took him out back and he had to take off his clothes to show that they killed and threw him in the water and after that, that's when he fled to Thailand. So during the whole trip to Thailand...he walked day and night to head towards Thailand and he told me that he had to sleep in some trees just so that other animals won't attack him.

Sam's story of his father fleeing for his life was one of the many stories that were told by my participants. Many of my participants' parents, aunts, uncles and grandparents shared their stories of survival and loss while others felt that the less the children know the better. Since these events happened fairly recently, the stories and images of what Cambodia has become are still in the minds of their parents. The parents brought along much of their own culture, their knowledge and images of Cambodia, which they essentially constructed and passed down to their children in a different parts of the world, through their traditions, values and practices (Smith-Hefner 2006).

Parental involvement can affect children's ethnic identity (Smith-Hefner 1999). In the case of the Exposed, their ethnic identity was very strong from their childhood, because their parents shared information with them. Participants in Exposed category have parents who freely spoke about Cambodian history and their own past experiences. Many of their parents went into great detail about the tragedies. Sopheary's mother once described a moment when her sister was about to be eaten by other starving Cambodians during the war.

Yea, cause I remembered watching Ripley's. And I was like "Mom watch this, it's crazy, they're talking about Cambodians and like Cannibalism and stuff." And she was like, "You know they tried to eat your aunt over there." And I was like, "What? No way! No way!" And I asked her and she was like, "Yea, yea. She was like, she was abnormally fat because everyone else was starving so

all you can see was skin and bone and this one still had meat on her and so they were like, "What the hell!"

Sopheary and many others in Exposed had open communication when it came to speaking about their parents' past. They were fascinated with stories told to them and were eager to learn more about Cambodia. Julie, Soriya, Sopheary, and Tevy mentioned that in school they started to read and write papers about Cambodia.

In the Self-educated category their ethnic identity was not as strong when they were children because their parents did not share information about Cambodia with them. Their ethnic identity gradually strengthened, however, when they gathered more information from their parents and from other resources such as books about Cambodia, the war, and resettlement.

The Self-educated was uninformed by their families of what had happen in Cambodian during the 1970s. When they were children their parents never spoke to them about their homeland. They rarely spoke about the war and genocide that took place in Cambodia. As they grew older, however, the Self-educated became curious about where they came from, which led them to do their own research. Many asked their parents to share information. Their parents only told their children about their history when they were asked to do so. As they aged their parents became more open to sharing stories about their experiences and history, such as in the case of Kalliyon. Only when she became curious about her background and culture was she was able to approach her parents about their history.

Kalliyon explained that she knew some basic details about what occurred in Cambodia through her high school reports. I asked her when and how her parents immigrated to the United States to which she replied "When? I know it was like in the 1970s, cause I've done stories like this too in high school papers and I know that it was sometimes then." During childhood, Kalliyon was uncertain about her parents' background because they did not give her many details except that they were refugees. Her parents thought that she was just too young to

know about the tragic events that happened in their lives, but as she got older they were more willing to tell her about Cambodia. Kalliyān's experience was similar to that of Mealea; both of their parents gave them little information about the genocide. Mealea did not ask her parents about the war, instead she asked her uncle. She found out that three of her uncles "died during the Khmer Rouge and starvation and all that, so he (Mealea's uncle) started to get all teary-eyed. So we had to stop that. Because I was like "I'm sorry, I didn't want to make you cry." So I don't really get deep with it to him." Mealea explained that she did not want to continue the conversation with her uncle because she saw how upsetting it was to bring back a painful memory.

Some of my participants' parents were more open than others to speak about Cambodia's dark past while others just plainly refused to give their children any kind of information. Both Self-educated and Disassociated (Rithisak) had parents who were not willing to tell their children about Cambodia when their children were young. My participants mentioned that the reason why some parents were not willing to discuss about what happen in Cambodia was that it would bring back painful memories and it hurt too much to speak about the past. Their parents felt that it would not matter or make a difference in their children's lives. Particularly for those in the Self-educated, the participants said that their parents thought that if they told their child too early it would affect them negatively when they got older. Most felt that they did not want to burden their children with the horrors that haunted them. But unlike the Self-educated who gradually got information as they aged, Rithisak had parents who just plainly withheld from their children any kind of information about their background.

In the case of Rithisak (Disassociated), he was the only participant who knew little about the war in Cambodian. He stated that his parents never told him about Cambodia. No one in Rithisak's family wanted to discuss about their past. He did not understand why neither his parents nor his family members wanted to have a discussion about it. Discussing his parents, Rithisak stated

They don't talk about the history. They say it's better not known than to know. I even tried asking my grandparents about it. Even they don't want to say. They don't tell me how they got here, who was sponsored and that was it, like their journey to here they don't want to speak neither does my aunt, my dad. So basically we are left in the dark.

Rithisak mentioned that he wished his parents and family would tell him about his family history. As he stated, he felt "left in the dark." Rithisak's lack of knowledge about his own family's history made him feel excluded and somewhat resentful. He was the only participant who wished that he was not Cambodian. I asked him if he were proud to be Cambodian and he said "No," he would rather be another race. I asked him why and he replied "I guess it's because the way I grew up." I see his feeling towards his ethnic identity as being connected to his parents' refusal to tell him stories about Cambodia.

My main finding in my research is that for second-generation Cambodian youth in North Texas, there is a significant connection between education about Cambodia and the development of a positive and solid Cambodian ethnic identity. In most cases it was very apparent that the significance and presence of a positive Cambodian ethnic identity was directly proportional to the amount of influence from the parents. Those who had a strong ethnic identity had family members who told them stories about their loss and struggles during the war. Even though they were born in America the participants who had parents who shared information freely with them felt strongly about being Cambodian. Sopheary (Exposed) stated "I was born here and you mean how like Asian parents, or Cambodian parents, but I feel like the reason why they came here from Cambodian and escape all that refugee stuff and the killing fields and you know so we can have a better life." After learning about her parents' perseverance and history, Sopheary, like many of my participants in the Exposed, developed a heightened sense of ethnic identity, unlike those who had parents who did not want to speak about their past. As

for those in the Self-educated, they were proud of being Cambodian after gathering information about Cambodian on their own.

As mentioned earlier, Rithisak wished he was not Cambodian. He strongly believed that it would have been better off if he were not Cambodian. He knew little about his family's background. He was not sure what year his parents arrived in the United States or what had happened to his family members during the war. Rithisak said that he does not know much about Cambodia and indicated that he did not really care for Cambodian history. However he also stated that he wished his parents would tell him about Cambodia but they refused to do so. Rithisak's responses to my question about his family history was either "I don't know" or "good question." At the end of the interview he mentioned that his older sister, who was born during the war, may have more answers than he does, but she does not speak to him either about their ordeal.

Unlike Rithisak, the rest of my participants were proud to be Khmer. Those who had a strong identification about being Cambodian learned about their history from their parents. They were able to tell me when their parents arrived in the United States and what had happened to them during the process. They were more than willing to share their family history. The majority of the participants I interviewed were able to tell me when and how their parents arrived in the United States. Some went a little deeper and told me horrifying stories about how their relatives died. Many of my participants told me that their parents wanted them to know about their survival and perseverance. Julie (Exposed) stated that her parents spoke about it "all the time! They want us to know." She was very proud that she is Cambodian.

Sometimes participants were unable to answer my questions and they were adamant about finding the answers for me. So they asked if I wanted their parents to come and speak to me personally. Because I was interested in what *they knew* about Cambodia, not in getting the "correct" answer, I asked them to answer the question as best as possible themselves.

Participants were more than willing to try to find an answer to all my questions about their family history. Arun in the Self-educated asked me if I wanted him to call his mother to see what year they actually immigrated to Texas while others like Kalliyen were willing to get parents from another room to get accurate information. Kalliyen also in the Self-Educated stated, "Do you want me to ask my parents? They're in the living room, I could ask?" They felt very comfortable communicating with their parents about their history. Arun also showed me a tattoo that was written in Khmer that says "Child of Cambodia." He was very happy to show it to me. Like many of my participants, his ethnic identity heightened when his parents shared their stories about their history with him. Rithisak's behavior was different than those who lack a strong connection with their Cambodian identity. Most participants were extremely happy and grateful that someone took the time to ask them about their background and history. It made a difference when their parents spoke to them about their past. Rithisak's parents refused to speak to him about Cambodia and he, in turn, would rather be another race, while participants such as Tevy in the Exposed had a strong sense of ethnic identity because her parents shared stories and tales about their journey to the United States. Tevy said:

I'm proud to say I'm Cambodian. Nonetheless I'm proud to say that I am Cambodian and if you say that why do I think that I'm Cambodian, I guess I would have to say my family. That's my ancestors. Just because I was born in the United States doesn't mean I have to be all American.

Tevy had a strong connection to her family's history and background heightened her sense of identity. For children of immigrant families, acculturation is shaped in large part by their families and communities (Berry et al. 2006). Interactions with peers, parents and other adults are part of their acculturation and help form their ideas of ethnic self identification.

The direct correlation between parents' involvement and the level of ethnic identity in the individuals I interviewed became clear during the interviews. This correlation is very significant. It was clear that my participants' ethnic identity heightened when their parents

shared past experiences and events; and that identity weakened when parents refused to share information with them. For the Exposed, they were educated about Cambodia at a very young age while the Self-educated learned about Cambodia through their own research and later inquired information from their parents.

Learning about the history of Cambodia appears to have had an effect on the participants' perception of their ethnic identity. Xiong and Zhou argued that "ethnic identification is likely to be a social psychological expression of the process of group formation, which can persist indefinitely because of group members' ancestry, history and current lived experiences" (2005:1141). This thesis shows how history and heritage has a great impact on an individual's ethnic identification and how strongly they feel about it.

6.4 Language

Language is another factor that affects second-generation Cambodian-Americans and their sense of ethnic identity. Most of my participants were excited to be able to speak to someone in their native tongue. My initial encounters with my participants showed me the high level of significance language can have on an individual. Most of my participants said that it was really difficult to find other Cambodians to whom they could speak Khmer (besides their family members) and to whom they could related as Cambodian.

Portes et al. (2001:113) put forward that "language is much more than a means of communication." Language is closely linked to the development of self as well as mental ability. It is also a way to identify oneself or others as a member of a particular group. The use of the same language creates the bonding effect of national identity and ethnic solidarity (Portes et al. 2001). For some second-generation Americans however, being able to speak their ethnic language well can negatively affect their ethnic identity.

Studies show that second-generation Chinese-Americans find it rewarding to speak Chinese in China, but do not articulate in many ways how being bilingual benefits them in the United States (Lu and Shi 2007). Language can be seen as a social barrier. In the case of

Rithisak, he was fluent in Khmer but chose not to speak a word of Khmer when he was being interviewed. I asked him if he spoke Khmer fluently, and he said “yes”, but compared to all my other participants Rithisak was the only one who did not say any word in Khmer. All the other participants spoke English and Khmer during the interviews. Rithisak mentioned that his parents forced him to speak Khmer and never English at home. If he spoke English, he and his siblings were punished. Similar to second-generation Chinese-Americans, Rithisak felt that speaking his native tongue does not benefit him unless they are in their home country (Lu and Shi 2007). Rithisak expressed that if he were able to speak and write English better than Khmer it would have benefited him more in the United States.

I could further myself in school. Because English is a second language to them (his parents) and if it wasn't, I think that they would become more successful... After my visit to Cambodia I would say that I am pure Cambodian but Americanized now. If I had a chance to either live here or in Cambodia. I would live in Cambodia...It's more better [sic] if you can interact with other Cambodian people.

He felt more comfortable in Cambodia because he was able to speak Khmer and interact with other Cambodians. Rithisak felt important in his own country and saw himself as an asset there instead of the problem he feels he is in the United States.

Most Cambodian children grow up largely in Khmer-speaking households, and in this study all the participant grew up in this type of household. In Boston, where there is a large Cambodian population, parents say that knowing how to speak Khmer is not enough to maintain their culture and ethnic identity (Smith-Hefner 2006). Previous research has shown that parents feel that knowing how to read and write Khmer is essential for their ethnic identity. They want their children to learn how to read and write Khmer (Smith-Hefner 1999). Williams (2005) states that Cambodian and Hmong elders view the maintenance of traditional norms to be central to maintenance of ethnic identity. “These parents feel, as Khmer do in general, that to be Khmer is

to speak Khmer” (Smith-Hefner 1999:138). As mentioned earlier, only Rithisak had parents who did not want their child to speak English in the household. Rithisak described a time where his sister was being punished for speaking English. “Yeah when we were growing up my dad, they use to beat us up because we were talking English in the house. Even if my sister would be like ‘can you get me a glass of water?’ he would slap her.” Speaking Khmer in his household was extremely important and sometimes physical punishments were used. All other participants in this study did not feel that they were pressured to speak Khmer.

When I first met the participants in the Exposed and the Self-educated, they were very excited that I was interviewing them. Soriya in the Exposed told me that she was “happy” that another Cambodian was interviewing her. She explained that the only other Cambodians she ever encountered were family members. Julie mentioned that it “was just nice” to be able to speak Khmer to another person.

In recent times there has been a loss of the Khmer language because Cambodian parents felt that it would be more beneficial for their children to adapt to the dominant language of the culture. Levy et al. (2005) stated that in France, Cambodian parents felt that it was more important to master the French language than Khmer. Participants in Exposed and Self-educated felt that their parents thought speaking English was important for them to be able to function in American society. Tevy mentioned that her parents wanted her to speak English because it would be more beneficial, but not to forget where she came from. Julie, also in the Exposed, described a moment where her parents were speaking English to her but she told them to speak Khmer.

Whenever they can't say something in English I was like mom “just say it in Cambodian. You know I know you don't have to try. I've just rather...” Like they think that it's so cool whenever me and my sister sit there and really speak Cambodian with each other. We would just make fun of it because everyone knows like we talk like American people would try to speak Cambodian...and

like talk to each other and make like actual sentences and situations and scenarios to each other and my dad, he loves it like he just eats it up. He's like, "awe" and starts laughing and was like, "How did you know that and that word?"

When Julie told me this story her face was full of excitement and she was laughing throughout the story. She, like many of my other participants, thought it was "fun" to speak Khmer and felt that their parents were proud that they still maintained their ethnic language.

According to past research, Khmer parents do feel that in order for their children to maintain their ethnic identity they must know how to speak Khmer, but many of their children found it was very hard to do so with the lack of Cambodian communities around them (Levy et al. 2005). Similar to that of all my participants, they found it difficult to find other Cambodians to converse with in their native tongue. The Exposed and the Self-educated, who enjoy speaking Khmer, and Rithisak, who does not, found it difficult to maintain their language because there are few Cambodians living around them. Additionally if they do meet other Cambodians, many do not speak Khmer well. Mealea in the Self-educated best described how language affected her and many of my participants.

[My parents] can speak English but it's the FOB-ish kind. Yeah they have a strong accent on them. Yeah I use to be really good in speaking Khmer, I guess it kind of stopped because of schools and I have no one to speak it with and mine is like I speak it but it's broken. They say it's like "ka-bareek" ("black" (slang)) Khmer. Like my little cousin he speaks it but not a lot because his parents speak to him in English. Like my parents, aunts and uncles they still speak to us in Cambodian. They speak with us in English but mostly in Cambodian. But, so it's still instilled in me.

Participants in both category the Exposed and the Self-educated expressed that they were not fluent in Khmer. Similar to Mealea, they felt that they spoke Khmer the way a foreigner would try to speak the language. Even though the Exposed and the Self-educated felt that their ability to

speaking Khmer was not as strong as their parents', they still felt very proud that they were able to "hold a conversation."

In conclusion, participants who felt that they were not pressured to speak Cambodian or English had a higher sense of ethnic identity. Those in the Exposed and the Self-educated wanted to learn how to speak Khmer. Rithisak, however, felt that the ability to speak Cambodian fluently did not help in any way. He felt that if he were able to speak English more in the household he would have finished high school. He did not speak a word of Khmer during the whole interview, unlike all of my other participants. It appears that those who were forced to speak Khmer had their sense of ethnic identity lessened, while those who had more freedom to speak both languages had their sense of ethnic identity heightened.

6.5 Peers

Most Southeast Asian youth have adopted the dress, hairstyles and manners of American teens. Similar to many newcomers, they began to take on the outward cultural traits of their American peers, but internally their ethnic identity remains strong and specific. Cambodian-Americans operate out of a "number of identity systems, which at times overlap, but more often are in conflict" (Ascher 1989:1) with being Southeast Asian (Cambodian), American, and refugee and most experience some sort of identity formation crisis. Other researchers have found that Cambodians see themselves as Cambodians because "not only do they rarely make friends with American students, but they have few cross-ethnic friendships with other Southeast Asians" (Ascher 1989:1).

Compared to Ascher's (1989) study, my participants *did* have friends who were mainly non-Cambodians. All of the second-generation Cambodian-Americans in the study identified that many of their close friends as Blacks, Hispanics, and other Asian ethnic groups (such as Chinese, Laos, and Vietnamese). The few Cambodians who were their friends were family members or childhood friends. Sam in the Exposed mentioned that he has Cambodian friends that he has kept in touch with since he was a child.

All my Cambodian friends that I grew up with that I met through my parents, they're actually all my close friends...I have a diverse group. I have all Southeast Asian friends. So they're pretty mixed...I have a good handful of friends [who] are not Asians.

Similar to Sam, some participants in the Self-educated also have Cambodian friends who they have known since elementary school. One of the major differences I found, however, was that some of the participants in the Self-educated had fewer Cambodian friends compared to the Exposed. Most participants in the Self-educated had not stayed in contact with their Cambodian friends compared to the extent that those in the Exposed had. Kalliyon in the Self-educated stated that when she was a child she had Cambodian friends, but when she started her junior year in high school those friendships faded away. Most of her friends were black. I asked her if she had any Cambodian friends currently and Kalliyon said "no" and she started to speak about a Cambodian family in her neighborhood.

There was a (Cambodian) family down the street. We were good friends then. No one was my age. They (Cambodian youths) were all in junior high or high school. There were a couple of more out there, but we just talk to them because they were right there. They were like four houses down and then we don't want to talk to them anymore...I had more black friends. It started when I became interested in the culture.

Kalliyon and the rest of my participants found it difficult to make friends with other Cambodians due to the community they lived in. They lived in communities where there were virtually no other Cambodians living nearby. The Exposed, the Self-educated and the Disassociated all felt that it was quite difficult to make friends with people of the same ethnic background because "it was hard to find them." Rithisak (Disassociated) lived in a community where the majority of the population consisted of "white people." He grew up hardly with any Cambodian people around him. He said,

When I was in Dallas I hung out with nothing but Hispanics. Basically there is a lot of Hispanic community out there and then we moved over here to Garland. We hanged out with a lot of white people because there was a big white community. And middle school-wise that's when I started having more Asian school friends. I guess mostly Vietnamese. And high school wise full blown Vietnamese and Laos people. But never Cambodian people because you never find them.

Rithisak and all the other participants expressed that making friends with other second-generation Cambodians was quite difficult. There was a small population of Cambodians living among the participants.

As this chapter shows, having friends that were not of their same ethnic background did not really have an effect on whether their sense of ethnic identity was heightened or weakened. Everyone seemed to agree that the ethnicity of their friends did not determine how they felt about being Cambodian. Despite the fact that peer factors did not determine if their sense of Cambodian-ness heighten, other factors in this study did. Being culturally aware of their own tradition and history had a great impact on the way they felt about being Cambodian. Furthermore, these findings suggested that parents who forced their child to speak Khmer had their sense of ethnic identity lessened, while those who had more freedom to speak both Khmer and English had their sense of ethnic identity heightened. Findings from the current study show there were several factors that greatly influence the way second generation Cambodian-Americans in North Texas view their own ethnic identity.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

In this thesis I set out to explore what factors influenced the ethnic identity of second generation Cambodians in the United States. Through the interviews analyzed in this paper I found that these factors included but were not limited to: parents, peers, religion, and the war in Cambodia. My research suggests that ethnic identity is influenced by these factors. The level of significance was evident and thus out my measurement of levels of Cambodian ethnic affiliation, I created a typology. A Cambodian ethnic identity was most developed in the Exposed: those who grew up learning about Cambodian history. As mentioned early, trauma, is a central element of Cambodian past history. Participants who are aware of their parents struggle learned to appreciate them even more and are able to relate to them. These respondents in the Exposed had a good knowledge of history. They showed a sense of pride connected to their parents' pasts and the struggles they had faced. They seemed very eager to learn and felt delighted and honored to be part of my research. They were very eager to learn more about Cambodia and self-reported good relationships with their parents. Culture and practice also had an impact on ethnic identity. The respondents, who had been introduced to Cambodian traditions and beliefs by their parents from a very early age, showed more "Cambodian-ness" than the other groups. Another group that was thrilled about this research was the Self-educated. The participants in this category were pleased to see that someone was placing great importance in studying Cambodians. For example, when I first met Mealea, she was overjoyed about this study and expressed her gratitude. Mealea and the rest of the participants in the Self-educated were proud of being Cambodian. Their desire to find out who they were led them to research Cambodia and afterward approach family members. Even though the parents in the Self-educated did not speak to their child about Cambodia and their background, they were able

to learn about it later in life. Unlike the Exposed and the Self-educated, the Disassociated did not express joy and excitement over this study. Rithisak seemed puzzled when I approached him with my study. He knew little about his family's history and background and rarely participated in Cambodian tradition and practices. Rithisak was the only participant who "wished" that he was "never Cambodian." Compared to the other two categories, the Exposed and the Self-educated, the Disassociated had the less amount of ethnic pride. Language also proved to be noteworthy as the respondents who spoke Khmer by choice felt a considerable amount of ethnic pride.

To my surprise, experiences with peers did not influence ethnic identity as much as I thought it would. From the research that I have studied I expected this category to play an important role in second generation Cambodians ethnic identity. Past research has indicated that a person's ethnic identity heightens when they speak their native language fluently. In addition, their ethnic identity intensifies when they have friends of the same ethnic background. In my study I found neither of these to be the case. The participants in this study showed that family influences and parental involvement were much more significant in determining a sense of ethnic identity. My participants who had exposure to Cambodian and personal family history via their parents were proud of being Cambodian in an environment where there few Cambodians living among them. These participants tend to socialize with other ethnic groups. Their social networks consisted of a majority of non-Cambodians and are less involved in Cambodia activities due to lack of Cambodian establishment.

In comparison, Boston Cambodians benefit from the "social contacts and services available in these larger, adjacent Khmer communities" and many hold their weddings in Boston's Chinatown, and many shop and do business in Chinatown establishment (Smith-Hefner 1990:253). Many attend the Cambodian Buddhist temple in Lynn, Massachusetts and follow major Buddhist holy days and traditions. In North Texas, it was difficult for the Khmer community to practice their faith due to lack of temples. They live in a state where churches

outnumber Buddhist temples. They are likely to be pressured to convert to Christianity. At a very young age they were exposed to Christian beliefs and activities and they attended church. Participants in this study have changed their religion from being Buddhist to another faith and converting back to Buddhism. It is difficult to be a Buddhist in Texas because it is a state that is located in the Bible belt.

In addition, previous research has suggested that Cambodian Americans are lagging behind academically (Go 2005 and Smith-Hefner 1990). Sakamoto and Woo (2007) found that second generation Southeast Asians are disadvantaged in socioeconomic terms relative to whites. Cambodians, Hmong and Laotians tended to have lower levels of educational attainment compared to whites and Vietnamese. Truancy and dropping out are major problems for Cambodian high school students in the United States (Goldberg 1999). On the contrary, the majority of the participants in this study graduated from high school and attended college.

There are a few limitations in this study that should be taken into consideration when thinking about future research in this area. First, the sample size was small (N= 12). This sample bias is a limitation to my study. I think that there is some selection bias in my sample due to the fact that some of my participants referred others who have similar backgrounds. This study comprised only Cambodian-Americans under the age of 28. Therefore, the results might not apply to older second-generation Cambodia-Americans who are at different developmental stages, nor to other Asian or Southeast Asian youth populations. An additional limitation is that the response rate for participant recruitment was low, potentially introducing some selection bias into this study. Although having few participants gave them an opportunity to respond more elaborately and in greater detail and to explore an area. Future research should also examine more diverse geographical areas to determine whether processes of ethnic identity change might be different for second generation Cambodian-Americans who are associated with other Cambodians within their immediate environment. A slight gender bias was also present as I had more female participants. In future research determining whether similar processes of ethnic

identity development occur in different types of samples will be useful. Despite the limitations, findings from this study provide important implications for future research.

The United States receives new groups of refugees yearly and resettles them across the country. As it is a country of diverse ethnic and cultural groups, the inclusion of assessments of other ethnic group (e.g., Africans, Latinos, Middle Eastern groups etc.) would yield richer information about the dynamics involved in the developmental stage of ethnic identity among second generation persons. Findings from this study can help to inform sociologists of how unique and different some populations are. The main goal here to assist the understanding of how second generation Cambodian-Americans learn how to cope and understand their own identity while living within two cultures.

This study focused on the ethnic identity of second generation Cambodian-Americans by examining cultural practices, knowledge of one's family history, language and peers that may serve as significant factors. As Cambodian-Americans are an understudied population, this study contributes to the limited knowledge about the life experiences of second generation Cambodian-Americans who are living within two different cultures.

APPENDIX A

ARE YOU KHMER? FLYER

Are you Khmer? Would you like to take part in a study about Second-Generation Cambodians?

Background: Earlier research conducted on Cambodian Americans has been limited. Research on Cambodians is often problem focused and does not adequately reflect the range of experiences within the Khmer community.

Possible Benefits: Your participation will further your knowledge and understanding about your culture and tradition. You may accrue positive feeling about your participation because there is limited research about your population. With this research we can better understand and assist future refugees. We can also expand our knowledge about Cambodians living in Texas where little research has been conducted.

The Purpose of the research is to explore the experiences and perceptions of second-generation Cambodian Americans.

You may qualify if:

- You have parents who escaped the war in Cambodia during the late 1970's to the mid 1980s.
- You were resettled in Texas
- You are second generation Cambodian (You have to be born in the U.S.)

You may not qualify if:

- You are not fluent in English
- You are not second generation Cambodians.

Location of the research: You will be interviewed in a location where you feel most comfortable and at a time of your convenience.

APPENDIX B

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS

Participant #: _____

Please answer the following questions:

1. Are you...?
 - Male
 - Female
2. When is your birthday, please? (mm/dd/yy) _____
3. Where were you born? City _____ State _____
4. How many years have you lived in Texas? _____
 - in the DFW area? _____
5. Are you married?
 - Yes
 - No
6. Do you have any children?
 - Yes
 - If so, how many? _____
 - No
7. Do you have any brothers or sisters?
 - If so, how many? Brothers _____ Sisters _____
8. Who lives in your household?
 - Please list
 - _____
 - _____
 - _____
9. What are your parent's occupations?
 - Dad _____
 - Mom _____
10. What year did your family resettle in the United States? _____
 - Where? _____
11. Has anyone in your household ever been on public assistant?
 - Yes
 - No

12. What is the last grade of formal education you completed?

- Less Than High School
- High School Graduate
- Some College/ Vocational School
- College Graduate
- Post Graduate

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Guide

1. Family History

- a. Could you tell me how your parents immigrated to the United States? When? Why?
- b. From what part of Cambodia are they from?
- c. What were your parent's occupations in Cambodia?
- d. What type of jobs they have held here in the U.S.?
- e. Do you have any siblings? Any other relatives in America?
- f. Where did you grow up?

2. Religious Identity

- e. Could you tell me about your parent's religious backgrounds?
 - a. And what about your own preference?
- g. Do you believe in and/or practice any precise faith?
- h. How does belonging your faith make you feel about your Cambodian identity?

3. Language

- i. What languages do your parents speak? Are they fluent in English?
- j. What language do you speak with your parents, siblings and extended family members? How fluent are you?
- k. Have you ever enrolled in any Khmer language classes? If yes, why?

4. Community/Regional ethnic identity of family

- l. What was the racial and ethnic composition of the community in which you grew up? Were there any other Cambodians in your town?
- m. If so, did your family socialize with other Cambodian families?

5. Ethnic Identification

- n. How did you identify yourself ethnically in childhood and adolescence?

- o. Did you experience anything different in your ethnic identification after coming to college?
- p. How do you identify yourself at the present time? Why? (Check a box if they identify themselves as any category listed below, if not write it)

- Cambodian
- Cambodian-American
- American
- Khmer
- Other

If other, please explain _____

- q. Can you tell me a little about the people with who you are closest? Your best friends? Are any of them Cambodian? Asian American?
- r. How do you feel when you are with non-Cambodian peers?
- (If the subject felt different ask them) If so, how? Was there a particular incident or experience that highlighted this difference?
- s. If you felt your experiences and views were similar to those of your non-Cambodian peers, what are some of the similarities?
- t. Have you ever been stereotyped because of your ethnic/racial background?
- u. Have you ever experienced any ethnic/racial discrimination?
- v. Are you ever been ethnically misidentified?
- w. How have these experiences influenced your ethnic identification?

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

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