

CULTURE AND ETHNIC IDENTITY AMONG SOUTHEAST ASIAN GANG MEMBERS

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INTRODUCTION

The "immigration issue" has become the issue of the 1990s and a hotbed for public policy debates in state and federal politics. In the midst of these heated political debates are the immigrants themselves. Clearly such controversies impact their everyday life and yet an often unasked question is how they experience and construct a sense of self in light of their "place" in public debates.

Although sociologists have had a long-standing interest in the study of immigration and ethnic identity especially in the U.S., the principal concern has centered on the social structural aspects of acculturation and adjustment (Pedraza 1994). A secondary concern in acculturation theory focuses on the psychosocial aspects of adjustment whereby the "marginal man" tries to balance two different cultures, and either eventually "assimilates" or experiences stress. According to this framework, culture conflict and stress may result in deviant behavior.

This assimilation approach, however, fails to address the tremendous changes associated with, what many observers describe as the "new immigration." Among the most significant changes are the decline of a "traditional mainstream culture," the complex layers of multiple cultures of American society, the growth strengthening of group boundaries and ethnic nationalism, and globalization (Edmonston, Pasell 1994; Jennings 1994; Ong, Bonacich, Cheng 1994; Rumbaut 1995). The challenge is to explain the ways in which the "new immigrants" and their families retain, redefine and negotiate a sense of self.

Several scholars recently have moved in this direction, calling for a theoretical and methodological approach which focuses on the ways individuals experience and adjust to the impact of structural factors (Hurtado, Gurin, Peng 1994). At this level of analysis, individuals are not "pushed" or "pulled" toward one line of action over another (i.e., normative or deviant), but actively negotiate their environment and interaction with others. Accordingly, individual modes of adjustment and the construction of a social and ethnic identity are

understood within the context of the immediate and larger social forces of everyday life. As Nagel rightly suggests, ethnic identity, and by extension social identity, is

the result of a dialectical process involving internal and external opinions and processes, as well as the individual's self-identification and outsiders' ethnic designations. (1994)

This framework offers a more dynamic approach for understanding the differences in experiences and definitions of self among the different generations included in the new immigration. That is, we would expect significant differences between younger and older immigrants in the construction of identity. The dialectical process, noted by Nagel, would be differentially experienced as different age groups encounter different social institutions and structural forces. In connection with youth, cultural studies has underscored the dynamic, fluid, and active negotiation of identity construction among young people (Brake 1985; Hall, Jefferson 1976; Hebdige 1979).

We adopt this framework to uncover the social processes by which groups of young immigrant men construct a distinctive ethnic youth identity, specifically, that of the Southeast Asian gang member. Using qualitative interviews with gang members, we explore how a number of structural and institutional forces impinge on, experienced and defined by these young men, and the ways in which they create a new social identity.

ACCULTURATION, DEVIANCE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY

As Pedraza (1994) recently noted, the study of immigrants "...is as old as social science itself in America." From the early work of Park and Burgess (1921) and Thomas and Znaniecki (1927), through the later work of Gordon (1964), immigration to the U.S. has been characterized as

...a natural evolutionary process that as time passed would yield an inevitable outcome.... usually conceptualized as acculturation and

structural assimilation. (Pedraza 1994)

Acculturation referred to the psycho-social process by which immigrants learn to live in the midst of a different society by acquiring cultural knowledge and skills pertinent to the new wider society. This newly acquired knowledge is in addition to the specific traditions that the immigrant possesses from their own cultural enclave. Over time, however, the immigrant sheds those native cultural traditions which are no longer appropriate, and moves into the "mainstream" (Dubois 1993). Although many scholars have criticized the functionalist basis of assimilation theory, they underscore the significance of the concept of acculturation because it captures

an important psycho-social aspect of the immigrant experience, the problem of meeting the normative demands of two different cultures. (Rodriguez, Adrados, De La Rosa 1993)

Moreover acculturation and its relationship to stress has been seen as a significant theory in explaining the development of deviant behavior. From this standpoint, the newly arrived immigrant attempts to deal with the often conflicting cultural demands of their own "traditional" culture and their newly adopted culture. These conflicts can result in the development of either stress within the individual himself or herself or strain between the individual and his or her family. These stresses and strains can, in turn, lead to a host of deviant behaviors such as the involvement in street gangs, crime and illicit drug use.

At another level, immigrants, particularly young people, may adopt mainstream values and behaviors; however, this does not necessarily guarantee their acceptance in their immediate environment and larger society. Immigrant youth may find themselves falling between two opposite or conflicting identities - too Americanized for their parents' comfort, yet too foreign for their mainstream U.S. peers' liking. By being too foreign for their peers, the youth may find himself or herself liable to physical or verbal abuse. The lack of acceptance in the "mainstream" may be further aggravated by an insensitive educational system and the "politics" of other social institutions. Youth alienated from conventional culture - be it that of their parents or of their U.S. peers - would seem doubly likely to join deviant sub-populations, such as youth gangs, and

carry out deviant activities such as drug sales and illicit drug use (Chassin, Presson, Sherman 1989; Westermeyer 1993). The combination of these various structural factors can, according to acculturation theory, create a situation in which teenagers are at a high risk for developing delinquent behavior.

Assimilation and acculturation theory can be seen, therefore, as a potential candidate for understanding the development of ethnic youth identity and delinquent behavior. However, despite the seeming usefulness of such an explanatory account, it nevertheless possesses a number of significant weaknesses.

First, because acculturation is based on the premise of a natural evolutionary process, human action is conceptualized in deterministic terms. Many writers (Kibria 1993, Kivisto 1989) have noted that theories of assimilation and acculturation portray the immigrant "...as being passively acted on by the forces of change" (Kibria 1993). The acculturation model views immigration as a process whereby the immigrant gives up one culture, readily accepts another and moves into the mythical American "melting pot." The paths are fairly well defined, and as Dubois (1993) indicates, immigrants are pressed into pre-existing categories which fit other interests. In Dubois' own study of ethnic identity among Southeast Asian school children, he found little correspondence between the preconceived categories of assimilation and the negotiated identity of these youngsters.

Second, as Adrados (1993) points out, acculturation suffers from bi-polarism whereby the newly arrived immigrants abandon their "traditional" culture and adopt the mainstream culture of the host society. While there are questions as to whether there is a "mainstream culture" in contemporary American society, it is clear that this bi-polarism in acculturation theory leaves little room for today's complex plurality of cultures and sub-cultures. Immigrants may not readily accept the ways of the "conventional culture," but negotiate a social identity which blends multiple cultures. It may well be, then, that an immigrant group, in this case immigrant teenagers, in attempting to establish a "new" identity which is neither their own "traditional" culture nor the mainstream culture, may adopt elements from existing sub-cultures. As a reaction to these limitations, various writers have produced an analysis which provides a more active role for the migrant and

incorporates a greater sense of "human agency" (Adrados 1993; Kibria 1993; Nagel 1994). According to this framework, individuals are actively shaping and negotiating a social and ethnic identity based on their interaction with others in immediate settings and within the broader social structure. As Nagel notes, this renewed interest has led to the development of a model

...that stresses the fluid, situational, volitional and dynamic character of ethnic identification, organization and action - a model which emphasizes the socially "constructed" aspects of ethnicity. (1994)

This approach emphasizes also the way in which individuals create and develop social organizations or social practices which can act as symbolic forms or resistances against the pressures of the host society.

In a slightly different context, but extremely relevant to this study are the efforts of the British cultural studies scholars who have described the active resistance and distinctive development of identity, symbolic rituals, and subculture among young people, particularly those from the working classes (Hall, Jefferson 1976; Hebdige 1979). Very recently, a small but growing number of American criminologists have advocated for a similar approach to studying style, criminal identity and subculture (Ferrell 1995; Miller 1995). Style and identity are acquired through a process of interaction with others - peers, authorities, institutions, media, mass market - and dialectically, becomes the basis for interaction. As Ferrell rightly notes:

Style serves as a ready and visible medium for negotiating status, for constructing both security and threat and for engaging in criminality...For each person style becomes the medium for "presentation of self" and for defining that presented self as lodged within the larger stylistic orientations of the group, subculture and community. These orientations, though, do not emerge from within the group alone but under the weight of heavy advertising campaigns, manipulative marketing strategies, and media saturation. (1995)

As we discuss below, our data suggest that the Southeast Asian youth we interviewed have been active agents in creating a distinctive ethnic identity and social organization.

Moreover, their unique style is not only a marker for status, but also an expression of their notion of masculinity in American society.

RESEARCH METHODS AND LOCATION

Research Design and Methods

The data for this analysis are based on in-depth interviews with Southeast Asian gang members, and extends on our previous comparative research on ethnic gangs in Northern California (Joe 1993; Waldorf 1993). The sampling frame was based on a snowball sampling approach (Bernacki, Waldorf 1981). Ninety-one male gang members, from thirty different gangs, each with its own name and its own characteristics, were contacted by two trained Vietnamese interviewers. Although the age range varied between 14 and 38 years old, the vast majority of those interviewed were 18 or under (68%), and of these 56 were still attending school. More than four out of five (84%) were Vietnamese or Chinese/Vietnamese, and only 5 respondents were born in the United States, and hence the majority of the sample were first generation refugees. While the number of years our respondents lived in the U.S. ranged from 2 to 18 years, the median number of years was 13.

The interview process consisted of three stages. In the first stage, the respondent answered questions from a qualitative life history schedule, which explored the problems individuals had experienced in Vietnam and in the U.S. during the process of their migration and early period in the U.S. Stage two involved questions from a quantitative interview schedule which covered such topics as basic socio-demographic data of the respondent, work and criminal histories, patterns of drug use, activities of gang members, drug sale activities and violence experienced by gang members. The third and final stage was an in-depth focused interview which explored such topics as history of the gang, history of the individual's involvement in the gang, activities of the gang, both social and criminal and, finally, its social structure. The interviewers were bi-lingual and conducted the interviews in both English and Vietnamese, depending on the respondents' preference. In many cases, a mixture of both languages were used. The interviewers also assisted in the translation and transcriptions. Once interviewed, the respondent was asked to refer other gang members. Through this process, we were able to establish chains of

contacts.

We also conducted 16 interviews with individuals who work closely in various capacities with Southeast Asian gang members. They include officials and line workers from the local and state police, judiciary, juvenile detention, probation, social work, and a youth serving community agency. These interviews were based on a thematic guide to probe respondents in the areas of their perceptions of the Southeast Asian community in San Jose, and their views on delinquency and gang organization among Southeast Asian youth. Seven of the 16 respondents were Southeast Asian.

The Research Setting and Context

The research locale was the city of San Jose in Santa Clara county, which, after Los Angeles and San Diego, has the largest Southeast Asian population in California. Since 1950, the general population of San Jose has exploded. Whereas in 1950 the population was 95,000, by 1970 it had grown to 459,000. Today it stands at 782,000. Much of its expansion since 1970 has been due to the development of the computer technology industry in Silicon Valley, which has proved a powerful magnet both for domestic migration to the area as well as international migration. Part of this latter migration has been the influx of refugees, especially from Southeast Asia (Meinhardt, Soleng, Tse, Yu 1985-86).

The flow of Southeast Asian migrants to the U.S. began in earnest in 1975 with the fall of Saigon. Before 1975, the total number of immigrants admitted into the U.S. since 1955 was 18,558. In 1975, a total of 133,633 refugees and immigrants arrived. On arrival, they were placed in resettlement camps in different parts of the country and then, after a short period of time, rehoused. By the end of 1975 all resettlement camps were closed. This initial wave of refugees, as many writers have noted (Gordon 1987; Kibria 1993; Rutledge 1992), would prove to be very different from future waves of Southeast Asian refugees. To quote Rutledge:

They were, by comparison, better educated, wealthier, and had political connections with the U.S. government. Many of them spoke English.... They included high-ranking soldiers, professional people, who had worked with American personnel or companies in Vietnam, ethnic Vietnamese, who had been

educated within the United States educational system and individuals who had family ties to America. (1992)

After 1975 the number of Southeast Asian refugees, especially Vietnamese, arriving in the U.S. diminished and it was not until 1979 that the flow of migration began again to reach the volume that it had in 1975. The peak year was 1980 when a total of 171,000 Southeast Asians arrived. This new wave, however, was significantly different from the first wave. Whereas the first wave of newcomers were predominantly Vietnamese, in these latter waves, not only were there large numbers of Laotians and Cambodians present, but also many different ethnicities. These immigrants included ethnic Chinese, the Cham from southern Vietnam, the Khmer both from Cambodia and Vietnam, the Montagnards from the mountain areas of northern and central Vietnam and the Hmong from the Highland of Laos. After 1982, the flow of immigrants, especially Vietnamese, began to taper off, and by 1988, those resettled under the Refugee Act had fallen to under 40,000 a year. Finally in February 1994, with the ending of the trade embargo between the U.S. and Vietnam, the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees announced that fleeing Vietnamese refugees would no longer automatically be eligible for refugee status. This decision effectively marked the end of large scale migration from Southeast Asia.

Although it is difficult to know the exact numbers of Southeast Asians in San Jose, it is estimated that there are approximately 80,000. The majority of these newcomers live on the Eastside of the city, which is a typical inner urban deprived area. This area is home to 15 percent of the city's population and is the most ethnically diverse area in the entire county of Santa Clara. The ethnic breakdown is 45 percent white (including Hispanic), 28 percent Asian and Pacific Islander, 6 percent Black and 30 percent listed as "other". One-fourth of the adult Eastside population does not speak English well or cannot speak it at all. The population of Eastside is young, family oriented, poor and uneducated. For example in 1991, 50 percent of the population was under 25 years old, and one third is under 18. The Eastside population suffers from many of the major problems facing U.S. cities, including poverty, overcrowding, a high crime rate, high unemployment, and a school drop out rate of

percent, nearly double the rate for the whole county.

This then is the environment in which our Southeast Asian male respondents live. Like in many low income inner urban areas, life for newly arrived teenage immigrants can be confusing and difficult, and the environment may be particularly hostile. These young immigrant males face pressures both from attempting to adjust to the ways of a new society as well as from their parents, who may expect their children to succeed in ways that are restricted to them (Kibria 1993). Under these pressures, some Southeast Asian teenagers, far from fulfilling the "model minority" stereotype of them as class valedictorians, may negotiate instead an alternative culture, that of a youth gang and involve themselves in a series of delinquent behaviors.

EXTERNAL PROCESSES: SURVIVING IN A HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT

Southeast Asian teenagers are situated in several layers of interaction, and attempt to deal with conflicts and stress which emanate both from their family situations and from their life as teenagers in the wider society. A common theme among our respondents was the fragmentation of their family during the immigration process to the U.S. In many cases, one parent, usually the father, left for the U.S., and the rest of the family followed some years later. This pattern of immigration dramatically altered the traditional family structure such that the parent who journeyed to the U.S. with the children, usually the mother, assumed the role of both parents, even when the family was finally reunited. As some of our respondents indicated, their relationship with their fathers were tenuous at best.

Paul is a 16 year old Vietnamese male who immigrated at a very young age with his mother, three older brothers, and an "uncle" (i.e., close family friend). They escaped on a fishing boat, landing on an island near Thailand. After several months, they were able to get to Thailand and remained there for four years. They have been in the San Jose area since immigrating to the U.S., and have reunited with the father who had left for America prior to the family's escape. Paul resents his father, believing that he abandoned the family when he left for the U.S. years before them. Paul indicates that while he is "very close" to his mother, his interactions with his father are strained. As he states, "every time I went to juvie

[juvenile hall], it is my mom talking to me. My dad just sitting there looking at me. I don't get along with my dad."

In other instances, the teenager was separated from both parents, and immigrated to the U.S. with other adult relatives. One or both parents sometimes reunited with the relatives and children at some later point. When this occurred, the teenager was often torn between loyalties to their relative, who they come to perceive as their "adopted" parent and their natural parent. William's case illustrates the stress resulting from conflicting familial loyalties and being thrust into a "guardianship" role.

William is a 17 year old Chinese Vietnamese male. His father who is still in Vietnam arranged for him, his siblings, grandmother and aunt to escape Vietnam in 1979. After stopping briefly in the Philippines, they lived in Oregon for two and a half years. They then moved to the San Jose area since his aunt, who he describes as his "step-mom", found a job in the computer industry. After settling in the San Jose area, his natural mother was able to immigrate to the U.S. and was relocated in the Los Angeles area. He and his sister moved to Los Angeles to live with their natural mother, but found this to be a "difficult period," and moved back to San Jose to live with their aunt whom they felt was "more loving and caring." At present, his mother has been trying to "claim" him back, and while he expresses a sense of loyalty to her because she is his natural mother, he states that he has "greater respect" for his step-mother. According to William, "my step-mom, she was always there for me from the time I was small, all the way up. Basically I look at her [as] more of a mother than my real mom." Paradoxically his natural mother now lives in San Jose with him, his sister and "step-mom." He indicates that he "looks after her" as she has not been able to obtain employment and is on welfare. Because he left his father at an early age, he knows his father only through the occasional letters and requests for money to be sent back to Vietnam.

Another source of tension develops from the expectations and changing relationship between teenagers and their parents. As Kibria (1993) has noted, Vietnamese families place "tremendous pressure" on their children to act as "gatekeepers" in negotiating with the wider society and in achieving academic success

and thereby ensure the future prosperity of their families. By virtue of being at school, refugee children more than their parents are exposed to and are more likely to adopt central values and aspects of conventional identity and behavior. This may cause considerable inter-generational tensions in refugee families (Gold 1992; Kibria 1993). In many Vietnamese families, parents find themselves because of their inability to speak English, reliant on their children. This reversal of roles can lead to a decline in the legitimacy of parental authority, and consequently weaken parental control over their children.

Southeast Asian teenagers' ability to succeed at school is often hampered by language difficulties. This was particularly apparent for our respondents, because, as we noted above, nearly all of them are first generation immigrants who came to the U.S. at varying ages from 2 to 18. Those who came to the U.S. as teenagers were more likely to feel frustrated with their language differences and frequently dropped out of school.

Despite language problems in school, few respondents felt discriminated against by school authorities. Several respondents described their elementary school teachers as being especially attentive and caring. As many matured into junior high and high school, they found the school environment indifferent.

Like in high school, you know, they don't care, they don't care. It is your life and if you want to mess it up, you mess it up. But when I was like little, they tried to help me.

Many found themselves being labelled as being troublesome and expelled for prolonged absences from classes or fighting with other students. They took a pragmatic view of their circumstances, and did not perceive this as negative labeling but as the consequence of their misbehavior.

As our respondents moved into their teen years, race and ethnicity increasingly became important in their interactions with others. As one respondent reflected, "when I was little, I just played with anybody. But now, I don't know, you have to be with your own kind." It is at this point that they often faced physical and verbal abuse from their contemporaries in school who taunted them with racial stereotypes. In response to this prejudice, they may endure the abuse, retaliate or decide to join a street gang as a way of

protecting themselves (Rumbaut, Ima 1988). Most of our respondents described a process in which they initially endured discriminatory remarks and took the "beatings" but gradually realized that there is "safety in numbers." It is in this interactional setting that they found themselves seeking others who are similarly situated, joining together for mutual protection, getting into fights, and dropping out of classes.

Paul recounts his antagonistic encounters with other students which began at age 14, and the ways in which these hostile experiences and his solidarity with others like him, solidified his ethnic identity:

When I came to L.A. and San Jose it was different. That is when it started because people were treating me so bad in school. Black people, they look at us as immigrants and they keep telling us to go back to our country and we shouldn't belong here...they always start things with us. They beat me up and they beat my brother up... that is when me and my brother we begin to have friends and then we got them back...

Yeah I am a citizen... Not really feel Americanized because I still have the Vietnamese and Asia blood in me. Sometimes I walk on the street, people still think of me as an Asian, not as American. So the citizen thing basically just helped me out but doesn't change what I think of myself.

The development of such a gang can be seen as a protective mechanism created by the teenagers to deal with a hostile situation. In fact, the occurrence or the possibility of physical or verbal abuse was given as a major reason for why our respondents joined a youth gang. For example, one respondent replied:

I joined for protection. That was the first thing we did because racism was getting out of hand. If one of us was walking at night and a black guy seen you, he would have jumped you right away. So that's one of the reason to join a gang, for protection.

Another respondent was even more emphatic about needing to join a gang for protection:

You go out and there is a lot of chance that you get into a fight. When you get into a fight, you

need your friends to back you up because you know that the person who wants to fight you is not a "nerd." He wants to fight and he has someone back there too. So you need these guys to come and back you up. That is why you join the gang. That is the only reason to join the gang.

These external factors motivate Southeast Asian teenagers to create or seek out an environment in which such pressures are reduced. Sanders (1994) found that the origins of Southeast Asian gang members in San Diego was also related to the need to collectivize for protection against other youth, particularly gang members. Moreover, as in his study, we found that Southeast Asian gang members were involved not only in intra-ethnic but also inter-ethnic gang fighting. This finding is also similar to the experiences of our other Asian American respondents in the San Francisco study (Waldorf 1992).

Interestingly, although many of our Southeast Asian respondents perceive and identify themselves as relatively Americanized, they are quick to defend those who they define and treat as "FOBS" (recent arrivals).

Oh, the FOB? Like sometimes they get on my nerves but then I feel sorry for them. Like I am thinking that could have been me. I have cousins that just came over. So like those other kids make fun of them. I see them try hard too you know.

Like the FOB can't speak English. But then I don't hang around them, I hang around with people that could speak English. Because I am not good with my Vietnamese language. I hang out with Vietnamese kids but then we would like be speaking English. If anything goes on like with other people, like Mexicans, they were like mistreating them and stuff like that, they all stick up for them, they are my own people.

By adopting a youth gang culture, they rid themselves not only from the dangers of the wider society but also they can lessen the pressures on them from their families. To many of our respondents, the gang operated as a fictitious "family" community which took the place of their own families. Gang members often referred to the gang as a "separate family" or their fellow members as "brothers" who would supply friendship, support and attention. This latter characteristic -attention-

was also given by some of our respondents as another reason for joining. Unlike those members who complained of the pressures, these teenagers seemed to be complaining of the lack of pressure, in that their families paid too little attention to them. This lack of attention is not surprising given the pressures that operate on their parents, who are often working at two or more low paying jobs as a way of surviving financially. In fact these two reasons were not necessarily antithetical, but can be seen as two sides of the same coin. Because of pressures on the parents to survive, they may be able to give only minimal time to their children and in that time they may concentrate solely on issues of academic success as opposed to listening to the other more general difficulties faced by these teenagers in surviving in an urban high school.

In such a situation, their friends in the gang become a substitute for their family and, at least for a while, more important. As one respondent noted:

Back then my friends [in the gang] meant more to me than my family. I put them ahead of myself, ahead of my family. I would do things for them that they just said if they needed it, I would do it. But not for my family.

Life in the gang provided an alternative and protective milieu, which unlike the family setting where academic achievement and success was pushed, demanded instead a different set of loyalties and responsibilities.

The security of the collective becomes even more salient in our respondents' interactions in public settings (other than school). The majority of our respondents described heated encounters and harassment by local law enforcement prior to and subsequent to becoming a gang member. This is due to the aggressive surveillance strategies of the police which dates back to the late 1980's when officials and the media began to identify Southeast Asian gangs as a new type of gang organization. These gangs were characterized as being particularly dangerous because not only were they perceived to be very violent, but, because they possessed a loosely knit organization and were highly mobile, they were thereby extremely difficult to investigate. As one national newspaper noted

the neighborhoods are being plagued by increasingly violent gangs and new criminal

enterprises that law enforcement officers say may come to rival the Mafia in its heyday. (*New York Times* 1991)

Part of law enforcement's suppression strategy also included the recruitment of Vietnamese speaking police and probation officers. Importantly, gang members found both Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese speaking officers treating them with contempt.

Even the Vietnamese cops, you know, they treat us like dogs... One time I got caught, and they say they would take me in the back and beat me up... They say a lot of shit, talking bad about Vietnamese, like, 'you people come over here and eat welfare and make trouble.' That is messed up.

To combat a series of "home invasion" robberies, the local police responded with an intensive public relations campaign in the Southeast Asian community, and initiated an intelligence gathering mechanism, namely, a "mug shot" book with photographs of Southeast Asian men. Asian American activists called for end to the use of this book, arguing that the book, containing photos of persons never convicted of a crime but photographed in the course of traffic stops, was racist (Turner 1992).

Our respondents were fully aware of the "mug shot" book, and many described having their photos taken and being harassed by the police.

Yeah, they took pictures of every single one. Not only in our group but other people too. When we go to the coffee shop, they pull the whole coffee shop out, everyone [is] out of there and they took pictures of everyone, even the older people.

The police they know us all. They know who is who among us. One time they come into our house and they booked us all because one of us [was] on parole. When somebody is on parole, they can come into the house at any time. After the search, they couldn't find anything but they booked us in jail. They take photographs... over nothing. All of us are in the mug book. Sometimes someone sitting in a coffee shop, they would come in and take pictures. They take pictures of everybody.... The police do jack us up. They don't actually hit us but they push us into the cars so that we get bruised up and hurt.

Several respondents believed that police practices were rooted in discrimination and racism.

Well they shouldn't put a book just for Vietnamese. Do they have one for just Mexicans? It's not right, for my picture to be in the book because it implies a lot of things to people. What if somebody that looks like me did a robbery and then the lady sees his face, and then they show her a book and my face is on there. You know, it is just implying, putting thoughts into people's heads. I don't think it is fair. They [the police] say, 'you Asians are a problem.' They are all racist.

CONSTRUCTION OF A NEW IDENTITY

There are a variety of pressures that our respondents and other Southeast Asian teenagers must find ways to cope with to survive. One of our respondents notes that while:

Some kids went to school and they got picked on and could live with that. Perhaps they are more mature. But that wasn't something I could put up with.

Yet what factors are relevant in the youth's experience and construction of the identity? In other words, what aspects distinguish those who come to identify and define their world within gang culture compared to those who don't? While family tension or conflict may be relevant, it alone can not account for our respondents' gang membership. One comparative study of gang and nongang members suggests that gang members' perceptions of greater levels of labeling by authorities, in particular school officials, is a significant factor distinguishing the two groups (Esbensen, Huizinga, Weiher 1993). While this may be a significant factor, the above discussion suggests that racial tension or conflict at school with other ethnic groups was even more salient in respondents' school interactions. In addition, negative encounters and definitions by law enforcement authorities are also central to the construction of a collective identity.

In so doing, they crafted together a new identity which was neither their own "traditional" culture nor mainstream U.S. culture. Instead they constructed a community with its own collective identity, its own boundaries, its own membership rules, its own purpose and its own symbols. In creating such a "symbolic community" (Cohen 1985) they took elements

from other urban youth gang cultures, whose origins lay in Latino, African-American and Chinese-American neighborhoods. They even adopted gang elements which had been portrayed in mass media films.¹ They then molded these diverse elements to suit their own needs and requirements. To examine the details of this culture and its origins in other existing gang cultures, we will explore the characteristic features of Southeast Asian gang organization. In outlining these elements, we do not imply that each of the thirty different gangs that we located were identical. In fact, at least from the perspective of the gang members, each of the gangs were different and were seen to attract different types of members.

Gang Organization

In terms of general gang organization, our data suggests that most of the Southeast Asian gangs in this study exhibited little hierarchical divisions. This characteristic was similar to the pattern exhibited by Latino and African-American gangs included in our San Francisco study (Waldorf 1993) but was in marked contrast to the pattern we found among that city's Asian American gangs (Joe 1993; Toy 1992). When we asked the question: "Is your gang divided into older and younger members?", the majority of our Southeast Asian respondents said that there was no hierarchical differences within the gangs based on age. This was the case even when, as in the case of two of the gangs, there existed different generations.

The absence of an internal hierarchy, and a clearly defined leadership seems to suggest that Southeast Asian gangs fit the typology of horizontally organized gangs (Moore 1991; Moore, Garcia, Garcia, Cerda, Valencia 1978; Sanchez-Janowski 1991). The groups in our study, however, were not as mobile and changing as those described in Vigil and Yun's (1990) study of Vietnamese gangs in Southern California.

Others have noted that there is often a relationship between ethnicity and gang organization. In East Los Angeles, Moore et al (1978) found Mexican American gangs to be informally organized. In Milwaukee, Hagedorn (1988) found some Black gangs to be more formal in their organization. However, the specific features and context of a community also influence the gang's organizational characteristics (Moore 1991; Spergel et al 1994). Taylor (1989) and Skolnick (1989) suggest

that the purpose of the group (e.g., drug dealing) is an important factor in gang organization.

Joining The Gang

To date there has been an extensive literature on the initiation process or "rite de passage" of potential gang members (Padilla 1992; Vigil 1988). The process by which new members, especially those coming into Latino gangs, are incorporated into the group - frequently referred to as "jumping-in" - has often been associated with some form of physical tests. According to Vigil and Long (1990) this process can serve "...to test member's toughness and desire for membership....and to enhance loyalty to the group." From our data, two types of gang entry exist. The first is a formal process and similar to that outlined for the Latino gangs, and the second is more informal.

In those cases where some form of formalized initiation took place, the actual content of what was required varied from having cigarette burns inflicted; doing a particular deed to prove oneself, such as stealing a car; or more "traditional" method of accepting a physical "pummeling" from gang members. In a couple of cases, the initiation involved more than one method. For example, one respondent described a fairly lengthy process which involved both "hanging around" and being "jumped in."

They [potential members] hang around with us and then they get to know us and then they ask if they could get jumped in. And then we ask all the old members, the members of EST [a Vietnamese gang] like guys that have been in it. We ask them, do you think he is down? Should he be in it? And then if we get the advice from everybody and if they say, no then we can't get them in. If they say, yeah we get them in.

One respondent noted that although initially they had adopted a "jumping in" process, subsequently they had decided to do something else.

They were trying to jump people in but then we didn't think that was right so we just let them kick back with us for awhile and see if they are down or not. Like take them to do a driveby or maybe like tell them to beat some guy up or something. See if they are down.

This use of "jumping-in" methods, although disliked by some of the gangs, was nevertheless clearly identified as a Latino or Mexican gang trait.

1) Do you guys have any initiation rites?

R) No like if somebody wants to join we don't need to jump them or beat them up or have them do something. At first we let them kick back with us for like a couple of months, two or three months and see how their attitude is. Then like if we see that they are good enough like they are not going to be a traitor then we just ask them if they want to be in. And if they say, yes, then they are in. We don't need to do those Mexican style like beating them up.

Interestingly enough, one respondent, when asked about the origin of this Latino cultural trait, noted that the idea of using the initiation of "jumping-in" had come from "...watching movies and stuff, like Colors and stuff like that and we just started copying them."

The informal process of joining the gang involved prospective members "hanging around" or "kicking back" with the gang for varying periods of time which could last anywhere from a couple of months to a whole year. If during this period, the potential recruit could show that he "was down" then he became accepted as a member. Whereas some of the members found "being down" difficult to describe, others did not.

1) What do you have to do to be accepted as a member?

R) You just have to be down. When the homeboys need you, you got to come right away. And you have to be able to do everything. Like if one of our members get shot at or something we all have to go and see what's up with him and see how he wants to deal with it. If he wants to deal with it anyway we take care of it for him.

Gang Insignia

Although Vigil and Yun (1990) has suggested that Vietnamese gangs do not fit the pattern of street gangs as typified by African-American and Latino gangs, we found that there were many gang characteristics that were similar to other street gangs. For example, while Vigil and Yun (1990) stated that Vietnamese gangs avoid using "conspicuous gang symbols," we discovered that many of our respondents told us that symbols,

including cigarette burns, tattoos and colors were used as a way of marking out one gang from another. Many respondents also made reference to what they perceived to be as "distinctively" Mexican, Black and Chinese.

In one gang, the color green was an important gang marker:

1) And do you have colors, jackets, hats or special clothing?

R) We support all green.

1) Why is that?

R) Because there is red and blue already. And it is like we like the color green because we want to start out for Asian, different than red and blue. And so we start wearing green and then everybody is liking it and then they start wearing green. It is like Asian color now.

A second gang marker, that of tattoos, was also common amongst members. The most popular type of tattoos were either the initials of the gang name, or dragons and tigers. Whereas the use of dragons and tigers is unusual for Latino or African-American gangs, it is not uncommon for Asian gangs to use this particular motif.

Furthermore, although the majority of our respondents admitted to having tattoos, it did not seem to be the case that they were compulsory. For example, one respondent having described the type of tattoos he had, replied to the question: "Did everyone have tattoos?"

No basically they just have like the three dots that really means a lot. It depends on them if they want to get it or not. We don't force them to get it. But whoever wants to get it can. I really wanted to get this because I know I won't betray them or anything. I was the one that made it up with my friend.

These symbolic markers establish a sense of solidarity among members and confirm a distinctive identity for the members. At the same time, these markers serve as displays to others of their collective ethnic youth identity.

Territory and Turf

In comparing Vietnamese gang characteristics and those of other gangs, there was one significant difference, in particular, the issue of territory or turf. Territoriality has been often considered as a key distinguishing

characteristic of youth gangs (Miller 1975). According to Moore, Vigil and Garcia, the notion of territory implies:

1) that the gang's activities are concentrated within a "turf"; 2) that the turf is relatively clearly bounded; 3) that the turf is defended against invaders and that fights with other gangs center on intentional invasions of territories; and 4) that members and their families live inside the territory. (1983)

From our data, Vietnamese youth gangs seem to have little concept of territory, at least in so far as that described by et al (1983). The absence of a clearly demarcated or bounded territory has been noted by Vigil as an example of the "fluidity" of the Vietnamese gang structure:

In describing Vietnamese youth gangs, we use the term fluid to indicate that the gangs are structured and organized loosely. There is little or no role differentiation and no declared turf, and membership changes constantly. (1990)

Southeast Asian gang members' lack of territoriality is also very likely due to their recent arrival; nearly all of them are first generation immigrants. As ethnographic studies on Mexican American gangs have shown, territory becomes an important marker in established neighborhoods, dating back several generations (Moore et al 1978; Moore 1991).

The majority of our respondents, when asked the question, "Do you claim any particular turf, street or place?", replied that they did not. However, its absence did not necessarily preclude the possibility that the gangs tended to "hang out" regularly in certain places. Such places included convenience stores, pool halls, parking spaces behind restaurants and an area by a creek. The most distinctive public place, however, were coffee bars designed for and owned by Southeast Asians.

All of these public locales were not considered as private gang territory and were often shared with other groups. This refusal to see the area as the property of a single gang was echoed by many of our respondents who, when asked what would happen if another gang whether they shared the place with any other gangs:

R) Well like we kick it there but like different gangs go there too. And then they kick it with us.

Like different gangs we know them and they can kick there too.

I) Okay, so you guys don't mind as long as they don't cause trouble?

R) Yea.

Others did admit, however, that they saw their turf as their territory and would ensure that a rival gang was made unwelcome. Making another gang unwelcome would either entail "dogging them":

....we dog them. If they are like, if we are just sitting there in front staring at them. And then they just go in and buy something, real fast and leave that is it. They never like really come in.

Alternatively, they would resort to fighting the other gang or, in some cases, shooting.

Everyday Life

The everyday life of gang members is similar to other groups that we've studied in the Northern California area (see Hunt, Joe and Waldorf's other article this issue). Although popular portrayals of everyday gang life suggest that members are busily engaged in illicit activities, especially drug dealing, Southeast Asian gang members like other groups make a variety of attempts to deal with and transcend the mundane.

Got up around 12:00 in the afternoon. Just stayed at my friend's house and watched the babies, the kids for them, eat and went home. Took a shower, and came back to the house and just stayed there. We drank up and watched movies. Stayed up till around 5:00 a.m.

We just drink. We like drinking. And like when we drink, there is girls, and just mess around with them. We kick back at friend's house and talk.

CONCLUSION

Three themes emerge from our data. First, the experience of these young immigrant men raise a number of questions about the acculturation process and the development of a distinctive ethnic youth identity. More specifically, we have tried to uncover the complex layers of their interaction with their families, peers, and the community. These interactions, in different ways, create tension and hostility in their immediate environment. The gang, comprised of similarly situated

youngsters, provides a place of refuge to counter the strained interaction with others. Moreover the members' and the group's sense of "self" and "place" emerges as an eclectic identity, rooted in an array of existing youth subcultures.

Second, the picture of Southeast Asian gangs as portrayed in our data is significantly different from that previously suggested by criminal justice officials and the media. More specifically, the contention that Southeast Asian gangs are in some ways more ethereal, and more fluid than traditional gangs does not appear to be supported by our data. In fact, the gangs exhibit many of the social characteristics of other ethnic gangs including possessing identifying names, gang insignia and formal and informal methods of gang initiation. The only clearly underdeveloped characteristic is that of turf or territory and, even here, there is some evidence that at least some of the gangs possessed a sense of turf.

Finally, the adoption or borrowing of gang characteristics from Latino, African-American and Asian gangs suggests a deliberate strategy by Southeast Asian gang members to develop a distinctive ethnic youth identity which suited their own needs and requirements. The existing culture of street gangs, whether in reality or through the eyes of the media, has provided these teenagers with a rich source of ideas and artifacts to plunder in designing their own gangs. In doing so, they clearly exhibit a desire to test out different types of youth subcultures. For example, the use of an elaborate "jumping-in" process used by Latino gangs was adopted, and tested by some and discarded by others. The use of different colors, and especially green, was used as a boundary marker to distinguish themselves from others. Finally, dragon and tiger tattoos, although borrowed from Asian-American gangs, was still used to demarcate themselves from Latino and Mexican gangs in San Jose.

ENDNOTES

¹This is an example of what Klein (1995) has called "cultural diffusion."

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Data for this paper was made possible by funding from the National Institute of Drug Abuse (RO1 DA07530-03).

*Dan Waldorf died suddenly on July 9, 1996.

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