The Persistence of Second-generation Cambodian American College Students: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

The Persistence of Second-generation Cambodian American College Students: A Qualitative Study

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This qualitative study seeks to investigate an interesting and understudied case of the persistence and retention of immigrant students in postsecondary education. Specifically, the study examines the way family dynamics of second-generation Cambodian college students influence their success in postsecondary education. Currently, much of the academic literature examining Southeast Asian Americans concentrates on other ethnic groups besides Cambodians, who are less numerous in education, and pays little attention to the unique convergence of family, cultural, and historical forces and conditions at play in these young adults' educational experience in the United States. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to build on previous works that are similarly related to the issues at hand, and to develop a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the educational trajectory of these young people, with the ultimate hope of improving their educational experiences. In addition to field observations on the college campus,

twelve semi-structured interviews with six second-generation Cambodian American students and at least one of their parents or guardians were used to explore how family dynamics contribute to the students' progress through college toward their undergraduate degree.

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I never imagined myself live past 25 years of age, let alone, finishing my PhD degree. There are too many people in my life to give thanks to. First, I am forever indebted to my oldest sister, who pushed me toward academic achievement at the highest level. Although she passed away from breast cancer during my doctoral studies, her life continues to inspire me as she finished her bachelor's degree and visited our homeland, Cambodia, during the same year she passed away. Second, I want to thank my mom who lived through genocide and overcame many obstacles and challenges in trying to begin a new life in a new land while raising seven children, in which I will always remember her sacrifice and perseverance. Third, I want to thank my church community, Mars Hill Church Rainier Valley, who supported, encouraged, and prayed for me during my tenure as a graduate student. I will never forget their sacrifice of love and generosity. Fourth, I would like to thank the community of scholars in the College of Education. There are too many to recognize as the list ranges from the past and present staff at the Office of Minority Recruitment and Retention to my amazing friends and colleagues. Fifth, I would like to thank the faculty in the College of Education and supervisory committee, specifically, Marty Howell, Mike Knapp, James Antony, Manka Varghese, and Tracy Harachi. Thank you for your support, encouragement, mentorship, and guidance; especially, thank you for believing in me. Sixth, to the second-generation Cambodian American students who opened their stories to me, I hope this study captures your experiences accurately. Thank you for sharing your life with me and with those who read this study. Lastly, I want to thank my wife, Jessica Lee Malfitana Pon, who has been a source of encouragement to me during the last phase of my dissertation.

DEDICATION

To the Cambodian community locally, nationally, and internationally, especially those who lost loved ones during “The Killing Field,” including my father, grandparents, and relatives. Also, to my beloved oldest sister, Sothida Nov, who will never know how much of an impact you had on my life.

Preface: Personal Narrative

By the late 1970s through early 1980s, Cambodia went through a period of unrest that resulted in a civil war fused with turmoil and remnants of the Vietnam War. Many Cambodians fled Cambodia to escape the tyranny of Pol Pot's regime (dominated by the Khmer Rouge), and the genocide that happened afterwards, also known as the 'Killing Field'. Ultimately, Pol Pot wanted to create a classless agrarian society by placing everyone in concentration camps to work in the fields for at least 14 hours a day with little food or rest. He executed the educated class to rid the country of any signs of Western influences. As a result, an estimated 2 million or more Cambodians lost their lives. In this period of violence and chaos, education for the general population of Cambodians was out of reach because the Khmer Rouge made sure that "…intellectuals were dishonored as devotees of foreign rule and bourgeois civilization" (Weinberg, 1997, p. 160), and since most Cambodians were forced into labor camps to do manual labor, few ever had the chance to be educated until they fled the country. In due course, a huge number of Cambodians emigrated to America as refugees; most of these refugees were peasants and farmers with very little formal education, a crucial factor in how their children would do in American schools.

My own story illustrates the pattern dramatically. Before "Year Zero," a term coined by Pol Pot, life in Cambodia was typical for our family. We lived in Battambang, where my father was a high school teacher. My older siblings went to school and my mother took care of the house. My mother had the duty of raising six children. She did have thirteen in all, but seven died at a very young age due to miscarriages or some form of illnesses. For some apparent reason, all seven were boys. Year Zero referred to the beginning of the "Killing Field," which spanned from 1975 to 1979. As part of this atrocity, at least 50 of my relatives had already been

killed prior to my birth. Among these were my father, all of my grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins.

In 1979, my mother was pregnant with me. A few months later, the soldiers found out my father's identity. With some help from one of his friends, he and his friends fled to Thailand. As they got to the border of Thailand, my father decided to come back for his family. My family resided in the village of Nikum, which was transformed into a concentration camp during the Pol Pot regime. When my father got to the village, he knew his time had come to an end. These were his last words to my mother - if I was to be born a girl, name me Paula-nikum. If I came out to be a boy, he wanted me to be named Nikum after our home village as a remembrance of our struggles. Soon after that conversation, the soldiers came and took him to the field to be executed. That was the last time anybody saw of my father.

After a few short months had passed, the Vietnamese soldiers invaded Cambodia from the East. As rumors of the Vietnamese soldiers approaching north central Cambodia, the whole village was in chaos. Everybody from the village fled to the monastery to hide. My mother and older siblings followed the crowd towards the monastery. What seemed to be a misfortune turned into a blessing as my mother fell into a big ditch. My older siblings and my Godfather helped her out of the ditch. We found out much later that all those who hid in the monastery were executed. As soon as my mother got out of the ditch, she immediately felt some contractions and went into labor. She was carried into my Godfather's hut. My older siblings traveled across the village and nearby villages to look for a maidservant to deliver me. My Godfather and his wife ended up delivering me that night. Because of great complication, they thought my mother would not have survived the night. Everyone thought I was dead. Therefore, they placed me in the corner of the hut and focused on taking care of my mother. When dawn arrived, my mother had survived the

night. To their amazement, I survived the night as well. They took me from the corner and brushed some ants off of my body.

We stayed in the village for another two weeks until my mother regained some strength. We had to make a decision. If we were to stay in the village, we would be immediately executed if found by the Khmer Rouge or Vietnamese soldiers. If we tried to flee to Thailand, there would be little chance of making it to the Thai refugee camps. In the northern region of Cambodia near the border of Thailand lies a field of land minds. With the invasion of the Vietnamese and traveling through the vast jungle on a journey that route would take three to seven days, and the chances of survival would be slim to none. Nevertheless, we decided to try to escape.

We traveled during the night and hid during the day so we would not be seen by anyone. As the last day approached, the weather was treacherous as it rained heavily. We had to travel through the mud and across water that was waist deep. During the early afternoon of the last day, my body froze and turned purple. Everyone thought I was dead. Because of the exhaustion from the journey and the emotional buildup, they wanted my mother to leave me in the field. She refused to leave me in the place where my father was executed, but instead wanted to bury me in a new land. The journey continued with my mother carrying me in her arms. In the late afternoon, we reached a vast field with no coverings. In the middle of the field a big plastic bag was found to place me. If I didn't die of hypothermia, I still could have died from suffocation. We finally reached the border of Thailand as night approached. The crossing into the new territory gave my family a sigh of relief. The rain ceased for a moment as they built a fire. My family and my Godfather took the plastic bag and opened it. As they prepared to bury me, the Lord breathed that breath of life into me and I breathed again. Everyone knew it was a miracle. Instead of mourning, they rejoiced!

Although I was blessed to be alive, from the stories told by my mother and siblings, refugee camp bore a strong resemblance to the concentration camp. Families were placed in sections enclosed by high fences. Due to a history of war between Cambodia and Thailand, the Thai soldiers treated the Cambodian refugees harshly. There were instances where some of the Thai soldiers killed some of the Cambodian men and raped the women. My sisters and brother would have to carefully sneak out of the camp to the market to buy and sell food to feed the family. This went on for about two years. Fortunately, my Godfather knew how to speak English. When it came time to fill out sponsorship paperwork, he helped us to fill it out properly. Our first choice was the United States and our second was France. We rejoiced when we found out that our paperwork had gotten approved and we were on our way to America. I often wondered how different life would be if we had been sponsored to France instead of the United States. I am glad that the sovereignty of God led us to America.

We were sponsored to live in Rochester, Minnesota, after living in the refugee camp for two years. While living in Rochester, the earliest memory occurred when I was three years old. My family and I were at Rochester Airport in Minnesota awaiting my aunt, uncle, and cousins' arrival. I can't remember specific family members who were present. But, I do remember staring out the window as I stood in awe of the airplanes flying in and out of the runway. I stood there mesmerized by the airplanes. Not paying any attention, when I turned around, everyone was gone. I scanned the area, but there were no signs of them. Once I realized I was left behind, I cried and cried as I wandered around the airport. By God's grace, two female flight attendants, one Black and one White, came to my rescue. Both were gentle and showed great compassion as they comforted me. Both kindly walked and introduced me to one of the captains. While they were trying to locate my family, I got to wear the captain's hat and he bought me peanut M&Ms.

To this day, peanut M&Ms are my favorites! Finally, after what seemed to be an eternity, my family came back and got me. My brother claimed he came to my rescue, but I have no recollection of him doing so. I couldn't remember anything else about Rochester besides going to pre-school even when it snowed outside. My older siblings had to work as cleaners in the hotel to support the family, and the younger siblings and I had to attend school. If we were not in school, all I can recall was being left alone to play outside of our apartment with my cousins and other Cambodian children.

After three years in Rochester, we moved to Tacoma, Washington, in part to escape the extreme weather, but mainly because my older siblings found employment. Throughout my childhood and adolescent years, because we lived in the projects of Tacoma and the tragic experiences my family had gone through, I experienced a downward progression towards a loss of identity and a sense of hopelessness. I grew up in poverty with endless family conflicts, in which I fell into a deep depression at a young age. In addition, most of my friends were members of street gangs, and I was on my way to becoming one of them. The only bright spot in my life was my ability to perform well in academics despite my disadvantages.

Education allowed me to escape the horrid life and provided me the opportunity to live the life I had always dreamt about. I have been fortunate to be alive and have given the opportunity to escape the cycle of poverty and violence. As a result, I want to give others the same opportunities, especially the people of Cambodia. Thus, the ultimate reason for the birth of this research.

Chapter 1

The Research Problem: The Retention of Cambodian Immigrant College Students

Postsecondary education has played a vital role in the history of America. By the early 1900s, across the country there were 110,000 students attending over 1,000 institutions (Seidman, 2005). By the that time, the nation had become firmly industrialized and increasingly urban, both of which increased the need for college education as a means of producing managers and professionals to run the increasingly organized and complex work of the nation. By the mid-1900s, there were over 2 million students in over 1,800 colleges. And, by the 1970s, approximately 11 million students enrolled across many types of institutions, in which institutional leaders began to seriously think about the retention issue (Seidman, 2005). A report by American College Testing stated that 25.9% percent of freshmen at four-year institutions nationwide do not return to school the following year. In addition, at highly selective institutions the dropout rate had been 8 percent, and at less selective institutions it had been as high as 35 percent; where as, at open-enrollment institutions, the departure rate had been nearly 50 percent (Seidman, 2005). In short, across the spectrum of higher education, institutions were failing to keep large numbers of students in postsecondary education, especially in the least selective institutions.

As the number of students in higher education, especially immigrant students, continued to increase, the issue of retention became more complex and in need of further examination. And the growth of the immigrant population in younger years means that the postsecondary situation is likely to continue and even worsen. For instance, by 2005, there were over 35 million

immigrants residing in the U.S., making up 12.4 percent of the total U.S. population. This means a significant proportion of the population of students in public school is comprised of immigrant students. Immigration accounts for virtually all of the national increase in public school enrollment over the last two decades. Schooling is particularly important for immigrant students. For them, it is the first sustained, meaningful, and enduring participation in an institution of the new society. Today, increasingly immigrant children spend more time in schools than ever before in the history of the United States. Therefore, it is imperative to explore issues of retention among immigrant students.

The immigrant student retention phenomenon is complex, and the number and diversity of immigrant groups in the US complicates the problem for scholarship even further. These groups come to the United States and to educational institutions with different histories, cultures, social and family resources, and community connections. To understand the way these matters operate in the educational trajectories of immigrant students means paying attention to particular immigrant groups, and to consider the possible unique patterns that may emerge as they encounter educational institutions in a foreign land. One of the least studied and understood of these groups are Cambodian Americans. This research will focus on college retention of these Southeast Asian immigrants with a special focus on second-generation members of this group. Second-generational status refers to students who are native born in the United States with at least one foreign-born parent.

Locating Cambodian Americans in a Broader Spectrum of Immigrants

Before we deal specifically with the college retention phenomenon of second-generation Cambodian-American immigrant students, some distinctions among the major Asian American ethnic groups will help to locate and at the same time bring into focus this group. This is necessary, as the identity of Cambodian-Americans has often been embedded within the broader category of "Asian Americans," which makes their experience invisible to educators, scholars, and the general public.

According to the national data from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program Freshman Survey administered by the UCLA Higher Education Research Institute (2007), Asian Americans are currently the fastest growing sector of the US college-going population. From 1980-81 to 2000-01, Asian Americans' total enrollment grew from 286,000 to 978,000 (Hune, 2006). Furthermore, the total Asian American population in the United States consists of approximately 4 percent, while in U.S. higher education, Asian Americans make up approximately 5.9 percent of total enrollment (Lee, Lee, Mok, & Chih, 2009). Although Asian Americans thus appear to be overrepresented in higher education, this fact does not represent the reality for the full range of Southeast Asian students. Quite frequently, Asian American students are stereotyped as a uniformly successful minority group. This phenomenon of depicting Asian American students as achieving at a high scholastic level has been conceptualized and coined in a term called the "Model Minority Myth". Implications rooted in this myth present a misleading picture of the educational experiences of all Asian American students – not all are uniformly successful academically, not all can "make it on their own" without help from others, and not all are equally and strongly motivated to succeed. This misperception is compounded by the fact that, all too often, statistical data on Asian Americans are aggregated into a monolithic category that masks the salient differences and similarities among Asian American ethnic groups. This

tendency has detrimental consequences for Southeast Asian immigrant students — such as forms of invisibility and inaccessibility to academic support and services (Weinberg, 1997). We will now explore some of these differences in the next section.

These misperceptions in higher education sphere are a reflection of a larger pattern in society at large. There, Asian Americans are usually combined into a monolithic category in society without recognizing the diversity and distinct characteristics within each ethnic group. Yet, according to the 2000 US Census, 48 ethnic categories are identified under the umbrella of "Asian American and Pacific Islander." These categories become even further diversified when multi-ethnic and racial combinations are considered.

Following the Vietnam War, immigrants and refugees from Southeast Asia flooded the scene in America. Based on data from the Office of Immigration Statistics – US Department of Homeland Security, admittance into the US who arrives from each country with refugee status consists of 88.3 percent Laos, 52.4 percent Cambodia, and 50.1 percent Vietnam. Their subsequent experiences in America have been unique, both from each other and from other Asian ethnic groups, and the circumstances of their arrival, as sudden refugees from a war zone, have meant that they had to meet greater challenges than other Asian ethnic groups. For example, poverty is one of the major barriers Southeast Asian immigrant families must face in their day-to-day life. According the 2000 US Census Bureau, 29.3 percent of Cambodians, 18.5 percent of Laotians, and 16.6 percent of Vietnamese in the US are living below the poverty line, compared to other Asian groups such as Chinese (13.5 percent), Koreans (14.6 percent), Asian Indians (9.8 percent), and Filipinos (6.3 percent). As manufacturing jobs, the traditional occupation for immigrants, quickly dwindle in the US, service sector jobs are becoming a more likely source of income. Like other Americans who have few workplace skills, many immigrants

find themselves at the lower end of the socioeconomic hierarchy and often face a life of poverty. Additionally, immigrant parents from these backgrounds may have little understanding of or ability to negotiate the educational system or other systems for their children. Immigrant children often must serve as linguistic and cultural translators for their parents who lack adequate English language abilities. As a result, it is extremely difficult for Southeast Asian immigrant communities to move upward economically (National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education, 2008).

Another clear distinction between Asian Americans and Southeast Asian immigrants is the glaring difference between their educational attainments at the postsecondary level. For instance, educational attainment of bachelor's degree or higher among all Southeast Asian groups in the U.S. are 9.2 percent for Cambodians, 7.7 percent for Laotians, and 19.4 percent for Vietnamese; compare to 48.1 percent for Chinese, 43.8 percent for Koreans, 63.9 percent for Asian Indians, and 43.8 percent for Filipinos. One explanation for the low educational attainment of Southeast Asians is the US merit system where families with high educational and cultural capital generally push their children into advanced degrees and the professions, especially among immigrant families seeking to gain a foothold in the highly competitive American system. Immigrants who are not professional elites in their native countries, or who come from impoverished rural areas of Asia and the Pacific, often have little human and cultural capitals to transfer to the information and financial driven economy of the US (National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education, 2008). The lack of cultural capital of Southeast Asian families, and of Cambodian American families in particular, points to a potentially important point of investigation in the retention phenomenon.

Now that Southeast Asian immigrants and other common Asian American groups have

been clearly distinguished, we will turn our attention specifically to second-generation Cambodian college students. And as the above statistics have suggested, Cambodian-American are more different from the norm than other Southeast Asian groups, in terms of educational attainment and living in poverty. Academic literature that discusses the experiences of Cambodian immigrants in education remains quite scant even though this field of study continues to grow. A majority of Cambodian immigrants are still affected by low educational attainment rates, poverty, and other socio-economic challenges. By 2009, the Cambodian American population in the US was at approximately 277,000. It is estimated that 38.5% of Cambodian American adults ages 25 and over did not graduate high school and 65.8% of them have no postsecondary education (National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education, 2011). In part, their differences from other Southeast Asian groups are a matter of degree, with Cambodian Americans more acutely affected by socio-economic challenges than other groups. But in addition, although they share common struggles with many immigrants from Southeast Asia, the issues are magnified much more due to a history of genocide in Cambodia.

College Retention Theories and the Cambodian American Student

The social location of Cambodian American immigrant (largely refugee) families among the spectrum of Southeast Asian groups and indeed all Asian American ethnic groups sets the stage for a closer look at the college retention dynamics of second-generation Cambodian Americans. The definition of retention in postsecondary education is complex and multifaceted. It deals with the institutional and personal level, where “retention” is an institutional measure

and “persistence” is a student measure (Seidman, 2005). A Persister is defined as a student who enrolls in college and remains enrolled until degree completion. In contrast, a student who leaves the college without earning a degree and never returns is a Non-Persister. Institutional retention is the measure of the proportion of students who remain enrolled at the same institution from year to year. Other types of retention include: Systemic retention, retention within a major or discipline, and course retention. Systemic retention focuses on the student and deals with tracking them as it accommodates the frequent occurrence of transfer or reenrollment at another campus, in another state, or in another institutional type. Retention within a major or discipline takes a more limited view of the topic by viewing retention within a major area of study, discipline, or specific department. The smallest unit of analysis with respect to retention is that measured by course completion. Since this study is interested in students’ graduation in higher education, the definition of systemic retention will be used for the purpose of this paper.

Furthermore, within the patterns of systemic retention apparent for individual Cambodian American students, the study will focus on individual persistence, and will seek to understand this individual persistence from the students’ perspective.

Where Conventional Theories of Retention Fall Short

Tinto’s seminal work on retention (1993) features two conceptual lenses - The Rites of Passage and Egotistical Suicide. The Rites of Passage encompasses the stages of separation, transition, and incorporation. Each serves to move individuals from youthful participation to full adult membership in society (p. 92). According to Tinto (1993), “For most high school graduates, the passage to college is a movement from youthful associations to more mature ones, and for many adults returning to college it frequently entails a shift from one pattern of

association with family, employers, and friends to another" (p. 94). During stage one, *separation* requires individuals to disassociate themselves, in varying degrees, from membership in the communities of the past, most typically those associated with the family, the local high school, and local areas of residence. While in stage two, *transition* is a period of passage between the old and the new norms (p. 97). In Tinto's perspective, the degree of change it entails depends on a number of factors, among them the degree of difference between the norms and patterns of behavior associated with membership in past communities and those required for integration into the life of the college. It should be noted that the scope of the transition also hinges upon the degree to which individuals have already begun the process of transition prior to formal entry (p. 97). Stage three, *incorporation*, integrates students into the communities of the college (p. 98).

Tinto's other conceptual lens, Egotistical suicide, is that form of "suicide," which arises when individuals are unable to become integrated and establish membership within the communities of society (p. 101). In other words, failure to become integrated and establish membership means students are likely to drop out before graduating from college. This lens provides a way of understanding how colleges, comprised as they are of differing social and intellectual communities, come to influence the leaving of their students (p. 104). The model posits that, other things being equal, the lower the degree of one's social and intellectual integration into the academic and social communities of the college, the greater the likelihood of departure (p. 116). Furthermore, other things being equal, the greater the contact among students the more likely individuals are to establish social and intellectual membership in the social communities of the college and therefore the more likely they are to remain in college (p. 118).

Although Tinto's retention theory is widely cited among retention scholars, others critiqued his work by expanding on his theory to provide greater explanatory power. For

instance, John, Cabrera, Nora, and Asker (2000) find strong economic influences on students' persistence. They state, "It has been revealed that students' perceptions of their ability to pay are integral to the commitments students make to their institutions." Furthermore, students' perceptions of their ability to pay "can influence their academic performance and the extent and nature of their academic integration." According to these scholars, they show that academic integration is much more complex than Tinto had presented. While these scholars use an economic model, another scholar, William Tierney, cross-examines Tinto's model from a critical theory perspective. He closely looks at students who were considered "at risk" of college departure. He defines these at-risk students as low-income, urban Black, and Hispanic students. He further explains that departure depends "on the extent to which the identities of such students are affirmed and incorporated into the cultures of colleges and universities. Tierney strongly believes that colleges and universities need to modify the cultures of their institutions to accommodate individuals or groups of students who are at risk of departure.

While these retention theories have wide currency in higher education research, they don't work particular well in the case of the Cambodian American immigrant student. One of the major flaws in Tinto's model, especially when theoretically applied to Cambodian immigrant students, is his notion of separation and integration. The assumption behind separation is that a Persister must leave his/her old world behind in order to be successful in college. In other words, for Cambodian immigrant students to separate themselves from their families and communities, assumes or implies that their "old world" is culturally deficient, or otherwise an obstruction to their advancement in education and ultimately American society. Historically, this notion of separation echoes what took place in Native American boarding schools in the late 1800s and early 1900s where many Native American students were forced by U.S. officials to "separate"

themselves from their family to spend their primary and adolescent life in boarding schools to be educated the ways of Western ideals (Takaki, 2008). The purpose of the separation was to reduce or eliminate any family influences on Native students toward Native American ways. Yet, in the case of Cambodian Americans at least, the "home community" and family ties may be a source of psychological nourishment, identity, and security, in what has been an extremely insecure, even threatening world. In such a circumstance, it is just as likely that separation called for by Tinto's theory might make the immigrant student less secure, more confused about who they are and where they fit.

Furthermore, the concept of integration assumes a mutual acceptance by both the institution and the student. The two entities relate to each other through an asymmetrical power dynamic, which places the onus on the student to adopt cultural norms of the entity that holds the power, the institution, rather than the other way around. The institution and its culture reflects those in a position of power – typically, people who are White, heterosexual, male, middle-class, and holding Judeo-Christian values. For reasons that are both obvious and subtle, Cambodian American immigrant students may feel alienated from or simply not aligned with these attributes of those in power, and hence feel placed in a disempowered position.

As a result, Tinto's Retention model doesn't apply well to minority students, in this case, Cambodian immigrant students. In short, Tinto neglects the cultural aspect of retention, and along with it the ethnic group in a question brings with it a particular history of oppression or trauma, which might affect the students' experience of college, sense of identity and purpose, and so on. In essence, Tinto's concept of integration amounts to *assimilation*, which necessitates a process of separation, a cultural adaptation that requires minority individuals to break away from their traditions, customs, values, language, etc. (p. 128). If this is the case, then it's nearly

impossible for Cambodian immigrant students to separate themselves completely from their "old world" and become integrated into the new world of a dominant host country culture. Unfortunately for those whose skin color is not White, the best-case scenario for immigrant students of color is to be seen and treated as "honorary Whites."

The main idea behind classical assimilation is that immigrants are pulled in the direction of the host culture, but are drawn back by the culture of origin, and then, through regular contacts with the host culture, they are pulled back again (Zhou, 1997). Through this painful bipolar process, eventually, immigrant groups from underprivileged backgrounds are expected to eventually abandon their old ways of life and completely "melt" into the mainstream society. Minh Zhou (1997) has challenged the cultural absorption ideology of assimilation as she coined the term, "segmented assimilation". She observed three possible patterns of adaptation (segmented assimilation) most likely to occur among contemporary immigrants and their offspring:

> …The first pattern mirrors that of the white middle-class; the second leads straight into the opposite direction to permanent poverty and assimilation into the underclass; and while the third associates rapid economic advancement with deliberate preservation of the immigrant community's values and tight solidarity" (Zhou, 1997, p. 975).

In the first pattern of adaptation, immigrants are fully assimilated into the dominant culture. The second pattern shows that immigrants are marginalized into poverty. Lastly, the third pattern, immigrants are able to separate or shelter them selves from the dominant culture while achieving economic upward mobility. As pointed out by Zhou, the process of integration is not as simple as Tinto presented. In the next chapter, I will introduce a fourth path, true cultural integration that is not outlined by Zhou. It points toward a way forward that finds strength in a continuation of the

immigrant's "old" culture and cultural identity at the same time that the immigrant becomes "fluent" in the dominant host country culture.

Furthermore, when one brings a different theoretical lens to bear – concerning power asymmetries in society rather than the process of cultural processes – a different aspect of the retention equation comes into view for Cambodian Americans. Before Cambodian immigrant families in large waves appeared on the scene, in the United States context, Asian Americans had been denigrated as outsiders or aliens for the past century and a half (Kim, 1999). Kim (1999) argues that Asian Americans specifically have been "racially triangulated" vis-à-vis Whites and Blacks in the field of racial positions. Her theory suggests that for the purpose of controlling the distribution of power and privilege, those from the dominant (White) group categorize Asian Americans via two processes or dimensions: (a) Asian Americans are labeled as being superior to Blacks (i.e., the model minority stereotype) yet still inferior to Whites, and (b) they are labeled as inherently unassimilable foreigners (perpetual foreigner stereotype). The idea behind this latter stereotype is that maintaining a highly ethnic lifestyle is often misinterpreted as distance from and resistance to the mainstream culture; thus, Asian Americans are often believed to be unassimilable (Kim et al., 2011). Once these stereotypes had been solidified in the U.S., Cambodian Americans who came during the 1980s, had to deal with the implications of them. A main area in which these stereotypes play out early in immigrants' lives is in education, and for our purposes in this study, at the postsecondary level. The assimilation process implied by Tinto's concept of integration, along with the perpetual foreigner stereotype of Asian Americans, reveal serious flaws in this conventional view of retention. These ideas do not admit the possibility that, for reasons that are part cultural and part historical circumstance, Cambodian Americans may persist—and there by be "retained" in postsecondary education—*without*

assimilating in the classical sense, and perhaps even *because* they do not fully assimilate, but instead find some other source of secure identity and cultural strength.

Towards a More Culturally Appropriate Retention Theory

The crux of Tinto's model hinges on ideas related to rituals of academic and social assimilation into the mainstream of college life (Tinto, 1993). His theory can be modified to provide greater explanatory power for Southeast Asian immigrant students, by enabling analysis of retention through a cultural lens. Culture is defined as "a complex constellation of values, mores, norms, customs, ways of being, ways of knowing, and traditions that provides a general design for living, is passed from one generation to generation, and serves as a pattern for interpreting reality" (Howard, 2010, p. 51). In other words, within the context of retention, culture involves the difficult negotiation between understanding the implicit interpretations that have been built over time and students reconstruction of such meanings (Braxton, 2000). In considering retention from a cultural viewpoint, idea of the "cultural capital" is especially useful. According to Bourdieu, cultural capital is:

> a symbolic, rather than material, resource. It has no intrinsic value, other than the ways in which it can be converted, manipulated, and invested in order to secure other highly valued and scarce resources, including economic capital. Moreover, it is a type of knowledge that members of the upper class value but is not taught in schools (p. 98).

Furthermore, he states, "Individuals with access to similar types and amounts of capital share a common habitus" (1971).

He defines *habitus* as, "a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions" (p. 99). In addition, this habitus fosters a common representation of the world in a class-specific manner at a cognitive, taken-for-granted level. As a result, certain preferences and

tendencies become routinized as part of an individual's worldview. Bourdieu emphasizes the important role that educational institutions serve in acting as intermediary agents through which individuals optimize existing capital in order to accumulate greater shares of economic and cultural capital later in life, in which he states, "cultural capital has a strong positive impact on college completion, graduate education, and educational attainment" (p. 103).

From a cultural capital point of view, departure from college studies may be due to failure to meet either social or academic expectations that are congruent with the organizational habitus, or because of the difficulty of understanding the cues from the organizational subsystem. This has great implications for Cambodian immigrant students. The lack of cultural capital for these students is a reality based on the socio-historical context of their arrival to the United States as refugees. Although other refugees experience great difficulty during their first arrival into the United States, the uniqueness of the socio-historical context of Cambodian immigrant families is embedded within an experience of genocide, a period of great individual and collective trauma as I have recounted in the Preface.

To reiterate the historical background of Cambodia, by the late 1970s through early 1980s, Cambodia went through a period of unrest that resulted in a civil war fused with turmoil and remnants of the Vietnam War. Many Cambodians fled Cambodia to escape the tyranny of Pol Pot's regime (the Khmer Rouge), and the genocide that happened afterwards, also known as the 'Killing Field'. Ultimately, Pol Pot wanted to create a classless agrarian society by placing everyone in concentration camps to work in the fields for at least 14 hours a day with little food or rest. He executed the educated class to rid the country of any signs of Western influences. As a result, an estimate of over 2 million Cambodians lost their lives. In this period of violence and chaos, education for the general population of Cambodians was out of reach because the Khmer

Rouge made sure that "…intellectuals were dishonored as devotees of foreign rule and bourgeois civilization" (Weinberg, 1997, p. 160), and since most Cambodians were forced into labor camps to do manual labor, few ever had the chance to be educated until they fled the country. In due course, a huge number of Cambodians immigrated to America as refugees; most of these refugees were peasants and farmers with very little formal education, which plays a crucial role in how their children will do in American schools.

Acknowledging this background allows us to investigate the unique predicament of Cambodian immigrant youth face, specifically, how their parents' limited educational background and the task of navigating through both the dominant culture and their native culture might play out in their educational trajectories. More specifically, it sets the stage for certain kinds of family dynamics to play out, that are rooted in the parents' unfamiliarity with education and the American educational system, their impoverished circumstances upon arrival in the United States, and their adherence to traditional Cambodian immigrant values and culture. Ultimately, this cultural background sets the stage and trajectory of Cambodian immigrant students' college success.

While there are many conditions and interactions within the families of which Cambodian immigrant students are a part of, several aspects of immigrant daily life are likely to overshadow the others. First, obligations to the family are likely to be held as a strong value by all, especially the older generation in the family. Second, parents are likely to hold especially high expectations for their children's success in school, and may as well hold specific expectations about the focus of their offspring's studies. And, while both these conditions apply widely to Asian immigrant groups, their manifestation for Cambodian Americans is more extreme, and their educational consequences potentially more profound.

Family obligations. Family obligations may impede Cambodian immigrant students' academic progress. The necessity to adapt to a newer culture and English as a second language become barriers that can create several dilemmas between 1st and 2nd generation Cambodian immigrants (Chan, 2004). According to Sucheng Chan (2004), children learn English a lot easier than their parents, and so they can communicate with individuals in American society much sooner. This leads to a role-reversal as children become de facto spokespersons for their families when interacting with English-speaking outsiders, a position that affords for them more power in relation to their parents than they otherwise would have. This shift of familial power relations can cause disagreements within the household, especially if children are considered to be defying elders' and parents' wishes. The pressure to be a translator is just one of the many difficulties that 2nd generation Cambodian immigrant students struggle with and its effects on role-reversal causes estrangement among family members. This estrangement occurs because parents strictly control their children, yet at the same time, they must also rely on their children as intermediaries in American society. This intergenerational experience as a translator and mediator between two different cultures are factors that affect Cambodian immigrant students. Particularly these students are forced to grow and become more mature at an earlier age to look after family matters, and as well as navigate between both their native and English languages. As natural cultural mediators, some of these students may use their navigation skills to excel in school. Consequently for other students, family obligations may hinder Cambodian students' academic progress as they neglect their schoolwork to meet their family needs.

High parental expectations. A different kind of family dynamic that influences the educational experiences of Cambodian immigrant students is the issue of high parental expectations, specifically expectations of high performance and educational pathways and

attainments. High expectations to excel in school refer to the pressure placed on students to obtain straight A's as any other letter grades are deemed a failure. As for educational trajectories, Cambodian immigrant parents want their children to major in one of four majors – medicine, law, business, or engineer – because those are the majors believed to produce the highest income. Quite frequently, many Cambodian immigrant parents experience feelings of uncertainty about their family's future, and thus they want their children to pursue occupational paths that are both stable and economically rewarding while other Cambodian parents want their children to enter professions that fill existing needs in the community.

Cambodian immigrant parents are often unaware of the many choices and opportunities offered in the U.S., and tend to encourage their children towards typical career options. Yet many Cambodian immigrant youth would like to explore the array of alternatives that are available to them. Cambodian immigrant parents wishes for their children's success in education, and for particular pathways through education to occupations, constitutes a different kind of family obligation, one that is not always wanted by the youth in question. The inability to resolve the internal conflict between commitment to one's own intellectual pursuit and an obligation to the family is a common source of psychological burden for Cambodian immigrant youth. Fear of failure, at times, becomes paralyzing as students feel the weight of responsibility not only for their personal success, but also for their family's reputation. For instance, in an ethnographic study by Reiboldt & Goldstein (2000), the authors interviewed five Cambodian families within a span of two years in California. In one of the interviews, the author captures, in the voice of a parent participant, the cultural dissonance between high specific parental expectations and their children's desires for a different trajectory, as the parent participant says, "The reason I force them [the children] to study is because we [the parents] are old now. Also, we don't have many

relatives live here to take care of them when we're gone." In the next section, we will explore the implication of Cambodian immigrant students' socio-cultural background in the college setting.

The College Experience of Cambodian Immigrant Students

Issues arising from family obligations and high parental expectations are common among Cambodian immigrant students. These issues carry over to the students' college experience as their socio-cultural background allotted them little cultural capital or preparation for college success. They typically complain about their parents not understanding them while they face daily dilemmas in trying to navigate through two worlds, their native culture and the mainstream culture or the 'habitus' of college institutions. Again, to revisit Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, the lack of cultural capital among Cambodian immigrant students produce challenging predicaments as they enter a new world.

Upon arrival on college campuses, Cambodian American students encounter a new environment in which their cultural roots and historical circumstances, no less any particular family pressures they are experiencing, are not well understood or recognized. In addition, the campus environment and institutional policies may do little to provide the kinds of supports that such students might need to manage their new surroundings effectively. Furthermore, this postsecondary environment is likely to be, in varying degrees build on racist principles and assumptions, however, subtle or subconscious these may be. For example, in a qualitative study of 10 Cambodian American students, Chhuon and Hudley (2008) found that participants perceived little social support upon their arrival at the university and linked their early academic struggles to an inability to access adequate support on campus (p. 19). Similarly, in a quantitative study of 2,967 first year students, Johnson et al. (2007) found that African American, Hispanic/Latino, and Asian Pacific American students reported a less strong sense of belonging

than White/Caucasian students due to social dimensions of the transition to college (p. 525). In addition, Lee et al. (2009) found that over a third of students had experienced racial discrimination on campus and expressed high concern for race relations (p. 207). Lastly, Museus (2008) investigated 12 African American and 12 Asian American students college experience and gave an explanation to the low graduation rates of minority students as attributed to their inability to find membership in the cultures and subcultures of their respective campuses (p. 568). Another common theme within all four articles was that ethnic student organizations could play a useful role in ameliorating the alienating experience of many such students.

Ethnic student organizations played an instrumental role in minority students' adjustment and integration for college success. Chhuon and Hudley (2008) discovered that the Cambodian Club was a vital resource to the participants' integration into university life, in which they shared about one participant's experience, "For Sokpatra, participation in the Cambodian Club was a pivotal experience that helped her navigate her adjustment into the university" (p. 23). In one of the findings of the Johnson et al. (2007) study, they stated, " Multiracial/Multiethnic students, finding their residence hall environments to be socially supportive and inclusive was significantly related to their sense of belonging" (p. 537). In the final example, Museus' (2008) discovered that "ethnic organizations facilitated the cultural adjustment and membership of minority students by serving as sources of cultural familiarity, vehicles for cultural expression and advocacy, and venues for cultural validation" (p. 576).

Though not explicitly explored in these studies, it is possible and even likely that these kinds of supportive structures and institutional climates provide a safe space in which Cambodian American immigrant students can work out their own resolution to the tensions between family pressures, identity with a home culture, and the strategic absorption of new

cultural ideas from the host country culture. Conversely, absent of this kind of “safe space”, Cambodian American students are likely to experience intense struggles, with implications for their ability to persist in their postsecondary education.

The challenge in programs that seek to prevent dropouts is not to develop ways for people to integrate or assimilate into the system, but instead to change that system by way of programs, activities, events, and curricula that affirms and honor individual identities (Braxton, 2000). Furthermore, the manner in which institutions empower students is based on a cultural understanding of their local contexts and how such understandings might be incorporated into the basic fabric of the institution. This research attempts to understand such local context in a qualitative manner from a small sample size of second-generation Cambodian American college students.

Focus for Research and Research Questions

While existing research discussed above highlights some possibilities in the Cambodian American student persistence story, the academic literature on issues related to the challenges that Cambodian immigrant young adults are sparse. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to build on previous works that are similarly related to the issues at hand, and to develop insights into the College experience of Cambodian American students that will ultimately help postsecondary institutions improve these students’ educational experiences and academic achievement. The purpose of the research is not to develop improved approaches directly; rather, it is to develop the understandings that will help to develop such approaches. As argued in the earlier section, due to the nature of culture and their socio-historical background embedded within the country’s genocide, Cambodian American students’ experience in American

educational institutions is quite more extreme than other Asian ethnic groups. Yet too easily, much of the literature on persistence and college retention frames or implies that their experience reflects a “culturally deficient” background in the sense that their home culture acts as a barrier to their assimilation into the mainstream culture of their host country and that what they must do to succeed is to separate from their home culture and integrate with the host country culture. These assumptions are either stated or implied by theories that are widely used to explain how these students, if not all others, make their way into and through the world of postsecondary education. And by implication, Cambodian Americans as a group are easily seen as simply that group that has the farthest to go, in a journey that leaves home culture behind and educational success ahead.

To be sure, in spite of the barriers they face, the entry of Cambodian American students into college is a testimony to their high level of resilience. This easily missed fact frames their experience in a more positive light than most research to date. Resilience refers to positive patterns of adaptation or development manifested by individuals who have experienced a heavy burden of risky or adverse conditions (Rink & Tricker, 2005). Furthermore, resiliency factors speak of strengths or assets that exist not only within individuals, but also within their communities, schools, and families – seen in this way, resilience is not just the property of an individual (the “cultural equivalent of the “self made man” in the economic sphere). Rink and Tricker (2005) find that positive factors such as bonding to school and community, good communication and problem solving skills, and an ability to make and keep friends positively influence youth away from engaging in negative health behaviors. In addition, the study reports that connectedness to community promotes academic achievement. While concepts of resilience have largely been developed within psychological literatures and without reference to the

cultural processes or the cross-cultural encounter that immigrant students face, the notion raises some interesting possibilities. Specifically, it is possible that Cambodian American students can draw on various cultural strengths – that is, sources of resilience – that develop in their close connection with family and even in the historical context of the genocide from which this immigrant group has come. Hopefully, this research will shed new light on the ways these sources of resilience may interact with the constraints that family conditions may pose in Cambodian American students' academic experience and strengths, and ultimately, contribute to their success.

Furthermore, the point of investigation in this research will be on issues affecting second-generation Cambodian immigrant students. Second-generational status refers to students who are native born in the United States with at least one foreign-born parent. These students often speak English fluently, and may appear to be comfortably settled into their new host country. Yet their situation often masks a complex set of socio-cultural factors that may influence their educational experience. On the one hand, they have generally grown up more familiar with and comfortable with many aspects of the host country culture, but this familiarity may simultaneously intensify the issues they may experience as family members, or it may sharpen their desire to find "Cambodian meanings" in their college experience. Of all the socio-cultural factors that may influence Cambodian immigrant young adults' academic performance, the way family dynamics interacts with the conditions of college education for these students will be one focus of the investigation.

Central to these second-generation students' lives and educational experiences is a complicated set of family dynamics. According to Zhou (2004), a common theme among children of Asian immigrants is an emphasis on familial obligations and high parental

expectations. Her findings indicate that family obligations and high parental expectations, though not necessarily negative, are major factors that may either impede or improve Asian immigrant students' academic progress. Building on this research, the study proposed here will take on the task of unpacking the ways these family dynamics can shape the second-generation Cambodian students' educational trajectory, specifically to distinguish how and where family dynamics enhance and support the educational experience (as a source of resilience), and where and how they impede it. Where Zhou's study focuses on the general category of Asian American, this study will focus on Cambodian-Americans specifically, and will pay special attention to the way their particular cultural and historical circumstances that may give their family dynamics added or different meanings than that experienced by other Asian Americans.

At the same time, the study will be close attention to the way the college environment itself exerts a different set of forces and conditions that influence Cambodian Americans' movement through a college education, and at the same time may color how they manage the family dynamics noted above. The unique circumstances of the Cambodian-American immigrant students arrival in the U.S. educational system (and their parents' arrival in the US, to begin with), and their continuing immersion in a home culture that struggles in its new surroundings have set in motion a different set of retention dynamics that current theories do not explain well. The existing research hints at what the key forces and conditions might be, and how they could affect these students' college experience, but we need to go farther to understand the nuances of cultural interplay between the students' family and their respective academic institutions. The college institutional environment presents new possibilities to the students, not anticipated by their parents' view, at the same time that the college turns a blind eye to their cultural backgrounds and strengths, or else treats them in stereotypical ways. These cross currents create

a central issue for the sense making that these students must do to form a clear image of their journey through college.

To help illuminate this phenomenon, this study aims to answer the following question: How do family dynamics of second-generation Cambodian immigrant young adults shape their college experience? Research questions guiding this study are:

1) To what extent and in what ways do the students' family culture, history, aspirations, and interfamily dynamic influence their postsecondary experience?

a) In what ways does this familial perspective shapes the students' own views of their education and their educational goals?

b) What types of support do they receive at home, and what consequences does this support (or lack) have for their postsecondary education?

c) What are common issues that Cambodian young adults experience in their home, and what are the implications for this education?

2) To what extent does the college culture influence students' postsecondary experience?

a) How do the students think or feel about their respective postsecondary institutions? In what ways do they feel welcomed or hostile?

b) In what ways do they feel supported or lack of support from faculty and staff (e.g., for managing specific academic issues, or for the more psychological and cultural dimensions of persistence in college)?

c) In what ways are they involved in the school's social and/or academic activities?

3) How do second generation Cambodian American students make sense of these two sets of influences on their trajectory through college – their home culture as experienced in the family, and the college culture as experienced on campus?

a) How, if at all, does the family dynamic act as a source of resilience, at the same time that it poses a constraint on their educational experience?

b) In what ways, if at all, do these students integrate the two sets of influences into a different vision of their college education and their "success" within it?

Rationale for the Study

This study will explore a more productive way of representing the forces and conditions shaping Cambodian American's college experience, than implied by images of these students as "model minorities" alongside and distinguishable from other Asian American students. There are theoretical reasons, and some empirical evidence, that they face unique challenges in the realm of higher education. Integration or assimilation into the college environment, presented by Tinto's retention theory, creates issue for these students as they have been stereotyped as perpetual foreigners or inability to assimilate due to distinct cultural practices and markers. As a result, by adopting ideas such as Bourdieu's cultural capital theory, research can more fully and successfully explain the educational trajectory of Cambodian immigrant students. The lack of cultural capital in these communities does not imply they are culturally deficient or inferior. Their socio-cultural background, described in the earlier sections, shows that their unique situation denies them proper preparation for the world of higher education. In addition, they come to postsecondary education with a cultural and historical background that differs from other Asian immigrant groups. This, too, may figure in the way they encounter and respond to higher education.

Developing a better understanding of these students' situation and experience in higher education is the first step towards helping institutions of higher learning to support their learning

effectively. One of the major challenges for institutions of higher learning is to understand their own *habitus* and the weight of their responsibility to incorporate Cambodian students' external environment (families) into the college world. It is not sufficient that the institutions provide safe space or social and academic opportunities for these students, rather, they must play an active role and commit to ensuring these students graduate from college or fulfill their personal goals. In doing so, qualitative research is appropriate to explore the retention phenomenon of second-generation Cambodian college students in regards to their family dynamics.

Chapter 2

Framing Ideas and Informing Literatures

To capture the experience of second-generation Cambodian students, this research will draw on several theoretical models. I will modify Bronfennbrenner's Ecological Model to provide a "bird's eye" view of the influential forces shaping the students' educational experiences. In addition, ideas about the process of acculturation will be used to explain the phenomena in more detail. Lastly, the notion of cultural dissonance offers a more focused lens for probing the second-generation Cambodian immigrants' educational experiences in college education. Within this set of framing ideas, the study will offer a conceptual framework that zeros in on the way family forces may influence the retention and shape the perspective of these young adults in postsecondary education.

Framing the Research Problem Within Nested Ecological Systems

As my research problem involves] psychological and cultural forces within families, the influence of institutional forces and structures, not to mention a larger clash of cultures, and the individual student's attempt to maneuver through these conditions, it will help to locate the work in a theoretical space which acknowledge all of these dimensions. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model provides a broad and practicable set of framing ideas, in which to locate my investigation of the educational experiences of Cambodian immigrant students (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Bronfenbrenner mentions four ecological systems: the micro-system, meso-system, exo-system, and macro-system. The micro-system is defined as "a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given face-to-face setting with particular physical, social, and symbolic features that invite, permit, or inhibit, engagement in

sustained, progressively more complex interaction with, and activity in, the immediate environment" (Evans et al., 2010). For instance, the immediate interaction of Cambodian immigrant students with family members, friends, and teachers, peers, or others within their schools would constitute one or more microsystems that have immediate and intimate implications for the student's educational trajectory and persistence. At this level of ecological analysis, the theorist attends to the nature and consequences of interactions *within* each of these microsystems.

The second and larger ecological system, known as the meso-system, is composed of a network of relationships among the various overlapping and interacting micro-systems in the Cambodian immigrant student's life. Within this ecological sphere, and with reference to the scope of Cambodian immigrant college education experience, the interaction *between* family dynamics (and even home community) and the various microsystems within schools comes into sharp focus.

Bronfenbrenner's third ecological system, the exo-system, involves the indirect influence of the larger community setting—in particular, the larger host community—upon Cambodian immigrant students. For example, exo-systemic relationships with Cambodian immigrant students may include the possible influences of school board, the local government, institutional policymaking, the transportation system, churches, and industry, to mention only a few of the possible influences from the larger host community context. These influences are primarily impersonal, indirect, and unidirectional. They create conditions in which the microsystem interactions take on meaning, run up against constraints, encounter possibilities or opportunities.

Finally, the macro-system consists of the overarching pattern of micro-systems, meso-systems, and exo-systems characteristic of "a given culture, subculture, or other extended social

structure, with particular reference to the developmentally instigative belief systems, resources, hazards, lifestyles, opportunity structures, life course options and patterns of social interchange that are embedded in such overarching systems" (Evans et al., 2010). Due to the socio-historical and political context of the U.S., racism in all its forms constitutes a potentially powerful influence of the macro-system, with particular implications for Cambodian immigrant students. How does racism play out in the schools among immigrant youth? How does macro-systemic influence shape immigrant student's college experience? Answers to these questions allow us to grasp more fully the context in which microsystem interactions occur, and the possible meanings that particulars will develop or sustain within them. Because Cambodian American college persistence is always played out against a background of racist beliefs and institutional structures, this largest ecological space must be taken into account.

In sum, this research focuses on the micro-system (interactions *within* family and school), the meso-system (interactions *between* family and school), and the macro-system (dominant cultural influences on immigrant youth, their families, and their encounters with schools). The exo-system is beyond the scope of this paper. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model gives a general holistic view and provides a workable theoretical framework for investigating various socio-cultural factors influencing the educational experiences of Cambodian immigrant students. But within that theoretical space, my study focuses on specific kinds of processes, in particular, the process of acculturation, which Cambodian-American students and their families are experiencing as immigrants in a culturally different host country.

Acculturation and Acculturative Stress

Ideas about acculturation help the study to focus on the relationship of Cambodian immigrant students and their families to a new dominant culture within the school setting.

Acculturation is defined as changes that occur in beliefs, values, and behaviors of ethnic individuals as a result of contact with, and desired or undesired adaptation to, the dominant culture (Berry, 1997). In this case, ethnic individuals refer to Cambodian immigrant families, and the dominant culture is mainstream American culture. Furthermore, the acculturation process begins at the moment of 'contact and interaction between two or more autonomous cultural groups' (Berry, 1997). This particular kind of acculturation, known as cultural acculturation, occurs at the group level. Intercultural contact between the settled or dominant group and the non-dominant group generate changes in either or both groups. However, research on this topic in the past four decades indicates that the changes occur at the individual level as well, known as psychological acculturation (Bornstein & Cote, 2006). Psychological acculturation refers to changes in an individual who is a participant in a culture contact situation, being influenced both directly by the external culture, and by the changing culture of which the individual is a member (Bornstein & Cote, 2006). Psychological acculturation is distinct from cultural acculturation in that not every individual enters into, participates in, or changes in the same way; there are vast individual differences in psychological acculturation, even among individuals who live in the same acculturative arena.

One major negative outcome from the acculturation process is cultural dissonance, which produce acculturative stress. Cultural dissonance refers to a situation in which parents and youth possess dissonant cultural views of appropriate ideas and behavior (Rumbaut & Portes, 2001); and acculturative stress is when most immigrants create or experience conflict within their group or with other groups in their efforts to minimize cultural differences with unfamiliar others (Berry, 1997).

In order to cope with acculturative stress, Berry (1997) introduces four acculturative coping strategies or outcomes: *Assimilation, Separation, Integration, and Marginalization*. From the point of view of the non-dominant group, when individuals do not wish to maintain their cultural identity and seek daily interactions with the dominant culture and others, they are using the assimilation strategy. In effect, they would be embodying the assumptions of Tinto's retention theories, as presented in the previous chapter. In contrast, when individuals place a value on holding on to their original culture and at the same time wish to avoid interacting with the dominant culture and others, they are using the separation alternative (and here, the term denotes something different from the "separation" alluded to in Tinto's theory, where the term described the individual's disconnection from home culture and family). When people have an interest in maintaining their original culture during daily interactions with other groups, they use the integration strategy. Lastly, the marginalization strategy is used when there is little possibility of or interest in cultural maintenance and little interest in having relationships with others (Berry, 1997). According to Berry (1997), integration can only be freely chosen and successfully pursued by non-dominant groups when the dominant society has an open and inclusive orientation toward cultural diversity. Based on the socio-historical and political context of the U.S., integration and assimilation are limited in scope or nearly impossible when apply to immigrant groups in the United States. The implication is that separation and marginalization of immigrant youth are inevitable.

Immigrant groups in America face daily racial discrimination based on the treatment and culture established by the dominant group. Audre Lorde (1996) explains the dominant culture this way:

> Somewhere, on the edge of consciousness, there is what I call a *mythical norm*, which each one of us within our hearts knows "that is not me." In America, this

> norm is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure. It is with this mythical norm that the trappings of power reside within society. Those of us who stand outside that power often identify one way in which we are different, and we assume that to be the primary cause of all oppression, forgetting other distortions around difference, some of which we ourselves may be practicing.

Beverly Tatum (1997) defines "otherness," in this case with immigrant youth, as individuals who do not fit the description of the mythical norm. Edward Said (1998) define "otherness" as who he is not or by "being its opposite (European Whites)." He summarizes his struggle to navigate between worlds in these words:

> Besides, with an unexceptionally Arab family name like Said connected to an improbably British first name (my mother very much admired the Prince of Wales in 1935, the year of my birth), I was an uncomfortably anomalous student all through my early years: a Palestinian going to school in Egypt, with an English first name, an American passport and no certain identity at all. (Said, pp. 1-2)

The greatest challenge for immigrant youth is to navigate through both the dominant world and their parents'. The immigrant education experience is better understood when one critically examines the worlds of the immigrant students' families, their own world, and their school environment. To accomplish this goal, it is useful to use the idea of cultural dissonance to see the interactions between these worlds, drawing on literature concerning various immigrant groups.

Cultural Dissonance

The idea of c*ultural dissonance,* noted above, deserves a fuller examination, as it is likely to be a central phenomenon in the Cambodian American immigrant students' college experience, and as such it provides an in-depth explanation of the educational experiences of Cambodian immigrant and other immigrant youth in America. It captures the immigrant family dynamic whereby youth do not conform to parental guidance, which leads to a potential role reversal

between parents and youth as youth claim better knowledge about the host culture and society. It can express itself in parent-youth conflicts due to pressure from familial obligations and high parental expectations, and the social/psychological outcomes of adolescent identity formation (Rumbaut & Portes, 2001). Cultural dissonance appears in interactions between the youth and their family members, in their own identity formation within a wider social world, and in their interaction with a specific school environment. I pursue these ideas below in more detail, drawing on research from various immigrant and refugee groups, as there is little to no scholarship specifically focused on these ideas in the Cambodian American case.

Dissonance in the Interactions Within the Family

The ability to adapt to the dominant culture and English being a second-language create many dilemmas for immigrant students (Chan, 2004). For example, Chan acknowledges "children learn English more easily so they can communicate with members of the host society much sooner than can their parents. That leads to role reversals as children become de facto spokespersons for their families when dealing with English-speaking outsiders" (p. 210). This shift of familial power relations can cause disagreements within the household, especially if children are considered to defy elders' and parents' wishes. The pressure to respect parents and elders, and to be a translator, are parts of difficulties that 2nd generation immigrant students struggle with, and its effects of "role-reversal causes estrangement among family members, in part because parents continue to control children strictly yet rely on them as intermediates with society in general" (p. 211). This intergenerational experience as a translator and mediator between two different cultures are factors that affect immigrant students, in particular, as they are force to grow and become mature at an earlier age by looking after family ordeals.

In a qualitative study of 82 undergraduate Filipinas in a large West coast university. A student's voice articulates the power of familial obligations: "I would drop everything when it's for family, I would drop everything regardless of finals, regardless of anything else going on in my life. I would set that aside just for my family" (Maramba, 2008, p. 342). She concludes that Asian immigrant parents from these backgrounds have little understanding of or ability to negotiate the educational system or other systems for their children. As a result, it is extremely difficult for Asian immigrant youth to advance academically (Maramba, 2008).

In contrast, the presence of supportive parents gives immigrant students the opportunity to achieve academically. A large-scale study by Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco, and Todorova (2008), portrays images and articulate the stories of high-achieving immigrant youth. In one story, Joyce, a Chinese immigrant youth, shares her sentiment about her parents, "My parents work all day long…they don't have time to study. That's why they can't help me. But they support me with all their might. They encourage me to try my best, to get into a good college, get a good job after graduation." As seen from the Filipina student and the story of Joyce, both factors of understanding cultural differences and having supportive parents or lack thereof have a direct affect on the academic achievement of immigrant students. Furthermore, some immigrant students must deal with high parental expectations, especially amongst Asian immigrant families.

A study by Vivian Louie (2001) that examines how social class influences Chinese immigrant parents' expectations, strategies, and investment in their children's education, underscores the role of high parental expectations. Melinda, a Chinese student participant, says:

> Generally speaking, the standards between my mother's expectations and other Asian parents' expectations is much higher than those of many Caucasian friends I have or Hispanic friends or non-Asian friends. For example, I went home, and I got a 99 on a test and my mother's reaction is like, "Why not 100? (p. 190).

Although parents mean well and their children may excel academically, there may be resentments by the youth towards their parents. This kind of high parental expectation places major stress on youth, which may lead to sharp friction between them and their parents. This generalization is supported by Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco, and Todorova (2008) final analysis - The greatest challenge for immigrant youth in dealing with intergenerational conflict is to find unique ways to negotiate the tensions between old and new traditions. Ultimately, parents, possessing little knowledge of their children's school activities, complain about the lack of teacher's authority; where as, the youth complain about their parents not understanding them while facing daily dilemmas in trying to reconcile the two worlds. This is revealed in how immigrant youth try to comprehend their reality.

Navigating Immigrant Youth Culture

The dissonant cultural views between immigrant adolescents' parents and the dominant culture leave immigrant youth to negotiate the tensions between both worlds. For Asian immigrants, it can be explained by examining the developmental history of Asian American youth culture. Literatures focusing specifically on the development of Asian American youth culture are few. However, there is a study by Zhou and Lee (2004), who argues that the development of Asian American youth culture could be rooted in racial exclusion of young people from the dominant culture. After surveying the current literature, the authors point to the glaring omission of Asian American youth from the stream of discourse on racial topic. The authors argue that the omission is not accidental but a reflection of the long history of racism against Asian Americans in the United States (e.g., Anti-Chinese law of 1882, Immigration Act of 1924). Racial exclusion and racial stereotyping are two strong forces that shape cultural

production of Asian American students.

Asian American youth are impacted by many stereotypes such as being the perpetual foreigner or being socially inept. As noted in Chapter 1, the most prominent, long-lasting and influential stereotype is the Model Minority Myth (Museus & Kiang, 2009), which asserts that Asian Americans all excel in education, never cause trouble, are financially well off, and do not suffer discrimination. In order to break the stereotypes, adaptation of many forms of artistic expression may possibly be responses to the Model Minority Myth. Some examples include: producing movies that reflect a range of Asian American dynamics, for example, *Better Luck Tomorrow*; engaging and changing the stride of hip hop through dance, as in, *Massive Monkeys* on *America's Best Dance Crew*, and using imported cars as cultural expression.

In further observations of Asian American youth culture, they are particularly invisible in the media. Images of youth of color with exception of Native Americans permeate the media while Asian American youth are missing, thus making awareness of Asian American youth's issues inconspicuous to society. Finally, today's technology allows Asian American youth to migrate electronically to their nations of origin to develop new forms of expression, whether or not they are foreign or US born. As Asian American youth continue to develop their cultural expressions and identity, their cultural views appear to be more and more distant from their parents.

Similar to Asian immigrant adolescents, the US government reception of Haitian immigrants has been met with hostility. Rumbaut & Portes (2001) state,

> During the 1970s and 1980s, no other immigrant group suffered more US government prejudice and discrimination than Haitians. The US Coast Guard has attempted to intercept boats of Haitians before they left Haitian waters, undocumented Haitians who made it to US shores have been disproportionately incarcerated, and no other national group has had such a high disapproval rating for political asylum requests" (Rumbaut & Portes, 2001, p. 237).

The authors further note that Haitian immigrant youth face many negative stereotypes and discrimination from their peers. For example, the authors state, “African American students mocked newly arrived Haitian boys for playing soccer instead of football and basketball, a greater sin to many African American students than not wearing deodorant or dressing funny.”

The extraordinarily negative context of reception confronted by the US government, along with being the cultural mediator at home, sets in motion the intense dynamic of Haitian youths’ intercultural struggle. As a result, Haitian immigrant youth attain the lowest level of academic achievement. The average grade point average for Haitian boys is reported to be 1.95 and slightly higher for Haitian girls at 2.46. There is much to be learned about the world of immigrant youth, as their world is an understudied area in research. However, insights into their family dynamics and their own world lay a solid groundwork to explore their experience in the schools.

Dissonance in Interactions Within the School

A large-scale study of the educational experiences of immigrant students and families in the San Francisco and Boston area finds that children who “grew up in two-parent families tend to be at an advantage academically” (Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco, and Todorova, 2008, p. 36). Academic progress would be difficult for children of migrant families who are most likely be separated from their fathers – 96 percent for Central American families, 80 percent for Dominican, Haitian, and Mexican families (Rumbaut & Portes, 2001). Furthermore, their research shows “a close relationship between parental education and school readiness, performance on achievement tests, grades, dropout rates, school behavior problems, and school engagement” (p. 37). Students with parents of higher educational level perform better academically. For most immigrant students who are cultural mediators for their parents, this

places them in a disadvantage academically as shown in the previous section. In another significant finding, immigrant students who "were enrolled in schools with culture of high expectations perform academically better than immigrant enrolled in dysfunctional, low expectations, or low-quality schools" (p. 40). Furthermore, immigrant students who were "most likely to adapt successfully to school seem to forge meaningful, positive relationships at school" (p. 43). The last two findings reveal the true reality of the immigrant education experience. Two ethnographic studies are presented to investigate their experience in more details. One was conducted in a school with a culture of high expectation and one with a low.

In an ethnographic study by Stacey J. Lee (2005), she depicted a clear picture of Hmong students' assimilation experience, encounter of racism, and their struggle to navigate between two worlds (their parents and the dominant culture). University Heights High School prides itself to be an academically elite school with national recognition. For instance, at the south entrance of the school hangs a large banner that proudly announces that UHS is a "National School of Excellence." Lee defined "whiteness" as the standards of White middle-class cultural norms. Due to these standards, unconsciously students were categorized as either "insiders" or "others." Insiders were students who met standards of White middle class cultural norms, were known as "good" students. These were students who score high on standardized tests, play an instrument in the jazz band, excel in sports, or engage in witty conversations with teachers. The "others" were students who do not meet standards of White middle class cultural norms, which were the Hmong students.

Lee found that Hmong students could be classified into 4 distinct categories: traditional Hmong women, Americanized Hmong women, traditional Hmong men, and Americanized Hmong men. The author discovered unique characteristics and values of each group. Typically,

traditional Hmong women were considered “good” according to the Hmong community, most successful academically, having better relationships with teachers, and were honor-roll students who participated in college-bound activities. Furthermore, they desired more gender equality but quick to observe parental authority and choose “selective acculturation” with guidance from parents. In contrast, Americanized Hmong women showed visible signs of “Americanization” like makeup and hair color while balancing traditional behaviors and some forms of acculturation. In addition, they tended to resist authority of parents and teachers, involve in “modern” relationships with boys, have issues of sexuality, and display conflicts over marriage (both for and against). As for the traditional Hmong men, they were characterized as one who assumed responsibilities for family and home life, wearing non-descript clothing, values marriage and education, and having issues with the English language. As for the Americanized Hmong men, they were known to have issues with parental and school authorities and typically seen as gang members. These distinct categories reveal the struggle of the Hmong students attempt to navigate between two worlds, in the meanwhile, make sense of their own.

The Americanized Hmong students fall into the marginalization acculturative strategy category, as they clearly do not fit into the mold of the dominant culture. Furthermore, the research shows a strain relationship between them and their teachers. As for the traditional Hmong students, they appear to adopt the separation strategy. One of the main reasons for the unique intra-ethnic categories goes back to the acculturation process of Southeast Asian immigrants in dealing with racial issues (Evans et al, 2010; Zhou & Lee, 2004). The issues of race have traditionally been about Blacks and Whites. Asian Americans have been racially triangulated vis-à-vis Blacks and Whites, or located in the field of racial positions with reference to these two points (Evans et al, 2010; Kim, 1999; Reyes, 2007). In other words, Asians either

adopt values and standards stereotypical of Blacks or become honorary Whites. In the case of Hmong students, traditional Hmong men and women tend to lean more towards the White category by obeying and accepting the dominant Eurocentric culture. As a result, they tend to be high achievers. In contrast, Americanized Hmong students tend to adopt the Black culture, which unfortunately have an adverse affect on their academic progress. Although Lee's research focuses on the Hmong youth population, Angela Valenzuela's study reveals similar findings among Mexican immigrant youth.

In Angela Valenzuela's ethnographic study on Mexican American high school students at Seguín High School, Valenzuela contended that for these students, "…schooling is a subtractive process… it divests these youth of important cultural resources, leaving them progressively vulnerable to academic failure". One significant point to note why schooling at Seguín High School becomes subtractive for these students is because Seguín's teachers can harbor some misconceptions about them such as they "…tend to over interpret urban youths' attire and off-putting behavior as evidence of rebelliousness that signifies that these students 'don't care' about school…" (p. 22). Furthermore, Valenzuela states, "having drawn that conclusion, teachers then often make no further effort to forge effective reciprocal relationships with this group" (p. 22). As results of this dilemma, the students at Seguín are further disconnected with their education, and further unable to relate to their teachers. Due to the conflict or misconception between two opposing viewpoints, the Mexican immigrant students become marginalized or separated; thus, suffering similar fate as the Hmong students.

As clearly demonstrated from these examples of the Hmong and Mexican immigrant students, the three worlds - the immigrant students' peer group, their families, and the schools

they attend – are culturally distinct and, at times, dissonant from one another, which is true for second-generation Cambodian youth.

Conceptual Framework

In this research, I propose a broad theoretical framework, beginning with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model, to identify key domains and socio-cultural factors that may influence the Cambodian immigrant education experience. These factors reside in the "context of reception" within a host country culture; the immigrant family and all that it brings in cultural and socio-historical experience; and the school, as an institution and embedded set of interactions among students and adults. All three sets of factors can directly influence the lives of immigrant students. Furthermore, embedded in the macro-systemic viewpoint, racial discrimination, an indirect force, plays a crucial role in their experience.

These direct and indirect forces shape their world in a process of *acculturation,* as immigrants gradually alter their beliefs, values, and behaviors in the context of an asymmetrical relationship with the dominant host culture. The conflict between the dominant and non-dominant cultures implied by such a relationship leaves immigrant students the struggle to navigate through multiple worlds – their own, their families, and their school. A byproduct of acculturation – cultural dissonance – provides an important cultural tool to investigate the immigrant youth education experience in a deeper way. As clearly depicted in Lee's and Valenzuela's studies, immigrant students struggle to reconcile all three worlds. Therefore, the process and outcomes of this reconciliation within their educational experiences need to be a point of emphasis in the field of research, as there is much work to be done.

Joining these theoretical ideas with the central terms and concepts in the research questions I am investigating, I can offer an initial conceptual framework for the research that is

here proposed. Specifically, such a framework maps the cultural dynamics of immigrant families (in which acculturative stress and dissonance are experienced) and the student's own struggle to have a meaningful college experience (in which family dynamics interact with school cultures, pressures, and structures, in dissonant ways), and their desire and ability to persist in their postsecondary studies until they attain a Bachelor's degree.

Chapter 3

Study Design and Methods

Qualitative research is most appropriate for this study, and specifically, interpretive case studies in the "basic" tradition (Merriam, 2009). Qualitative research emphasizes an inductive approach, which refers to the process of deriving general meaning and insights by working "backwards" from particulars, rather than "forwards" in a deductive fashion from already established theoretical formulations (Merriam, 2009). The primary concern of qualitative research is to find meaning in context. In other words, qualitative researchers are passionately interested in how different people make sense of their lives.

In this research, I am interested in examining how second-generation Cambodian American make sense of their educational experience and how they navigate the tensions that reside in the interaction between a home culture experienced in the family and local Cambodian community and the dominant host country culture experienced in school and college. A comparative case study of six second-generation Cambodian American college students is used as the primary means for constructing rich holistic meanings, as Merriam (2009) states, "the case study results in a rich and holistic account of a phenomenon. It offers insights and illuminates meanings that expand its readers' experiences" (p. 51). The gender make-up of the student sample was not important to this study since my primary focus was not on gender differences. Due to the small number of Cambodian American college students, I recruited any students who were interested in participating in this study. Another source of data, the students' parent(s), provided further insights into the students' family dynamic. Some students grown up with two parents, while others came from a single parent household. Nevertheless, I attempted to meet

with at least one parent, other significant relative, or guardian in an informal setting with the student being present. One of the limitations of case studies is their limited generalizability due to the context-specific nature of the research (Merriam, 2009).

Lastly, one of the strengths of qualitative research is its capacity to place the subjects of research, in this case Cambodian-American families, within their unique historical and cultural contexts to better understand their lives. Historical and cultural contexts comprise a set of influential forces during a given time period that shape a person or society. Some forms of qualitative research are guided by an epistemological stance known as postmodernism, which represents an intellectual position that knowledge can only be known from a certain position (Bogden & Biklen, 2007). Postmodernist research takes into consideration the power structure of society and values the viewpoints of marginalized communities. In this case, I developed a study design that would prioritize and honor the perspectives of the six second-generation Cambodian American students and at least one of their parents or guardians, who occupy a potentially marginalized position vis-à-vis the educational institutions in which they participated and the larger society they were preparing for, as working adults.

Research Settings and Participants

Six participants included one male second-generation Cambodian American student and five female second-generation Cambodian American students (18-29 years of age) from the Northwest part of the United States. Based upon Cambodian families' time of arrival into the US, most second-generation Cambodian immigrants who had entered or graduated from college were between 18 and 29 years of age. Furthermore, based on proximity to me, all six second-generation Cambodian American students were recruited from the Northwest region, along with one or more family members (or guardians), who offered additional insight into the family

dynamics and their implications for educational trajectories, from the vantage point of an older adult more embedded in home country culture. Those without a parent or guardian (or whose parents or guardians were not willing to be interviewed) were retained in the sample, as their perspective was valuable as they revealed significant insights into the world of absentee family. Nevertheless, the goal was to have at least 12 participants (six students and at least one of their parents; though where possible, I tried to interview both parents). The other participants (parents or guardians) allowed me to capture the familial perspective directly. Furthermore, it allowed me to triangulate the data, which provided me a greater insight into second-generation Cambodian American students' college experiences.

All six second-generation Cambodian American students were current college students enrolled in a either community college or a university. Focusing on those who were currently in college, rather than recent graduates, provided a more accurate picture of what they were experiencing in college, as it was happening, rather than those who had already graduated from college, whose memory may distort or even forget past experiences. The main idea was to capture their college experience as accurately as possible. Due to the national statistical data on the low high school graduation rate of Cambodian American students (reflecting low college enrollment to begin with), I included within my recruitment effort both the community colleges and universities. Because community colleges typically are two-year institutions catering to commuter students, while universities as four-year institutions typically serve residential students, students' college experiences varied greatly between both types of institutions. Furthermore, the students themselves were fairly different, given the selectivity of four-year schools. Although socio-economic status was likely to be important, it was not a focal point for this study, and consequently I included students across a range of economic circumstances. The

twelve participants provided sufficient data for comparison to answer the research questions, which allowed for a fairly in-depth investigation.

Names of potential participants and email contact information were derived from personal networking. Given my membership in the Cambodian-American community in the Seattle area, I was well positioned to access relevant networks. Once I received an initial list of potential participants through referrals from my networks, a letter of invitation via email was sent to potential participants. Also, participants were encouraged to forward the email to other potential participants. The result was a set of potential interviewees who would fit the selection criteria and who would participate in Cambodian immigrant networks likely to contain many individuals experiencing the phenomenon under study here.

Data Sources and Data Collection

My design featured three data sources: repeated semi-structured interviews with the six student participants, an informal follow-up interview with a parent or guardian, and field observations of the student on campus, engaging in their normal activities as a student. The three sources were designed to make various forms of triangulation possible.

Semi-structured Interviews with Student Participants

The central source of my data derived from two semi-structured interviews of each participant. This type of interview allowed the participants to define the world in their unique way; where as, structured interviews may look to elicit specific answers from participants. The purpose of this research was to provide participants the opportunity to speak about their educational experience the way they remembered it. Merriam (2009) summarizes the purpose of semi-structured interviews succinctly, “The largest part of the interview is guided by a list of

questions or issues to be explored, and neither the exact wording nor the order of the questions is determined ahead of time. This format allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic" (p. 90). Each semi-structured interview was digitally recorded and it took approximately 45 minutes to complete at the participants respective location. Furthermore, each one was guided by an interview protocol, in which the questions were based on the research problem, framing ideas, and research questions. The initial round of interviewing was focused on asking critical questions from the interview protocol that would shed light on their family dynamics and college experience, and the interaction between the two. After the first round of interview, the second round of interview took place approximately within two weeks of the first. Immediately after each interview, it was transcribed for thorough review to prepare for the second interview. The purpose of the second interview was to ask follow-up questions and allowed participants to expand on their thoughts from the first interview.

Informal Interviews With Parents or Guardians

After the students' interviews, I arranged a time to meet and speak with their parent(s) in an informal setting for about one hour. This was done at the students' home or a comfortable place of the parents' choosing. Due to the cultural sensitivity of the matter, the interview was casual and conversational. I asked open-ended questions about the students' college experience and hope the parents would do most of the talking. I did not tape record our conversation. However, I would write down notes afterwards after each conversation while they were fresh in my memory. Below were some of the questions I asked:

- What do you know about his/her school experiences when he/she was in elementary school? Middle school? High school? College?
- If any, what was your interaction like with your son/daughter's teachers and other school personnel?
- How do you feel about the influence of the American culture, if any, upon your son/daughter?
- In what ways have the Cambodian culture remained the same or changed while living in America?

This informal interview was strictly voluntary. The parent(s) were under no obligations or pressure to meet. And, the students were under no pressure to try to make the meeting happen. I understood some parents would not want to meet and talk with a researcher for various reasons. For instance, respect and reputation remained highly valued in the Cambodian community. This was known as "saving face." There may have been family issues or concerns that parents did not want to share with anyone else other than close family members. As a result, I respected their decision choosing not to meet.

Field Observations of Students' Engagement with College

Lastly, field observations of the students on their respective college campuses allowed me to gain insights into their world as "observational data represent a firsthand encounter with the phenomenon of interest rather than a secondhand account of the world obtained in an interview" (Merriam, 2009, p. 117). I spent one whole day with each student in his/her respective college campus to observe his/her behavior and activities. The day depended on each student's schedule and availability. Ideally, the chosen day was a typical day that captured their normal

day-to-day activities. The research questions and theoretical framework guided my observation. For example, some of the elements observed were: (a) physical setting – What was the physical environment like? What kinds of behavior was the setting designed for? (b) the participants – What were the relevant characteristics of the students? How did the student interact with others? (c) activities and interactions – What types of activities were the students involved in?

In addition, I took note of how my role, whether as an observer or an active participant, might be affecting the scene I was observing. In general my role as a researcher was that of an "observer as participant," in which my role as a participant was secondary to my role as information gatherer. The purpose of this positional choice was having "access to many people and a wide range of information" (p. 124), which was vital to understanding my targeted population or culture. Merriam (2009) summarizes it this way "The researchers observe and interact closely enough with members to establish an insider's identity without participating in those activities constituting the core of group membership" (p. 124-125). Below displayed a matrix of my research questions and specific data that correlated with one another:

Table 3.1. Research Questions By Data Sources

	Semi-structured Student Interviews	**Informal Parent Interviews**	**Campus Observation**
R1 – To what extent and in what ways do the students' family culture, history, aspirations, and interfamily dynamic influence their postsecondary experience?	X	X	
R2 – To what extent does the college culture influence students' postsecondary experience?			X
R3 – How do second-generation Cambodian American students make			

sense of these two sets of influences on their trajectory through college – their home culture as experienced in the family, and the college culture as experienced on campus?	X	X	X

Data Analysis Approach

Once all interviews were transcribed, the documents was categorized into four conceptual areas according to on the four acculturative strategies identified in Chapter 2 – integration, separation, marginalization, and assimilation. With these in mind, I read through the document thoroughly many times, and sought to identify instances of each strategy at work. Afterward, I "open coded" the transcripts and other data records to identify commonly used terms or "repeat the exact word(s) of the participant, your words, or a concept from the literature" (Merriam, 2009, p. 178). In this case, I concentrated on concepts from the literature. In addition to allowing the acculturative strategies literature to guide the coding process, I was trying to stay open to data that struck me as interesting, potentially relevant, and important to tensions between the students' worlds – family, youth peer group, and college cultures. Once the terms were identified, I used the literature review from the family dynamics (family obligations and high parental expectations) discussion to guide the analysis to identify emerging themes or similarities and differences.

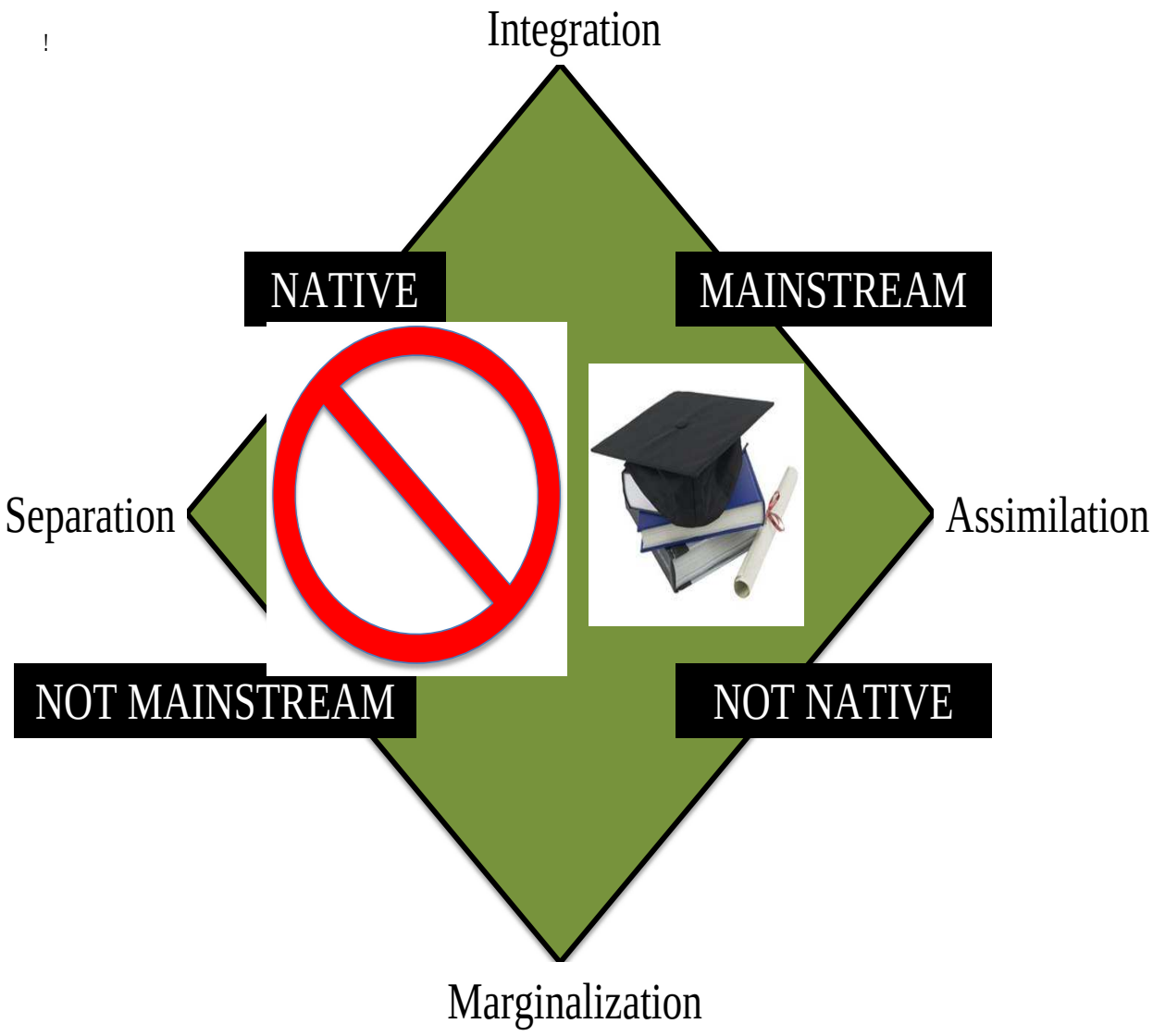
Two particular qualitative analysis techniques were especially helpful and relevant to my overall analytical purpose: Semiotic Clustering and Semiotic Square analysis. Semiotic Cluster Analysis looks at common themes and critically examines denotative and connotative meanings of those themes (Feldman, 1995). The other analytical technique, Semiotic Square analysis, allowed me to explore tensions or opposite forces within a major theme or construct (Feldman, 1995). This technique was especially important given the centrality of cultural dissonance and

acculturative stress that my participants were experiencing, and my desire to understand how they encountered and resolved (if at all) these tensions. These techniques were used to investigate the influence of family dynamics and college environment on each participant. The emerging tensions arose between the individual's native culture (Cambodian culture) and mainstream culture (American culture). Participants' shared definition of the Cambodian culture was presumably revolved around the general knowledge of one's history, participation/involvement in the Cambodian community, and their perception of acceptance by the Cambodian community. As for the mainstream culture, their shared definition of the American culture presumably echoed their ability to choose and their feeling of acceptance by the mainstream society.

Again, based on the conceptual framework, the four acculturative strategies were used inside the semiotic square analysis to capture and understand the tensions between the students' native culture and mainstream culture, as they were manifest in separation, marginalization, integration, and assimilation. As an analytic pattern, separation referred to participants' rejection of the mainstream culture while accepting their native culture. Marginalization occurred when participants rejected both the mainstream and their native culture. In contrast, integration indicated an acceptance of both cultures. Lastly, assimilation was when participants rejected their native culture while accepting the mainstream culture. These strategies were not static, but rather fluid, depending on the participants' stage in life. The students' family may have been drawn to keep and hold traditional Cambodian values (Native) while their college climate may had resembled American cultural ideals (Mainstream). The tension between both worlds created interesting acculturative strategy decisions for the students. Below Figure 3.1 presents a

framework that visually displays a Semiotic Square, as a basic device for analyzing cross-case patterns in my data.

Figure 3.1. Semiotic Square as an Analytic Frame



Furthermore, based on the Semiotic Square framework, a matrix of data analysis and research questions was presented to provide possible outcomes:

Table 3.2. Matrix of Research Questions by Possible Outcomes Suggested by the Semiotic Square

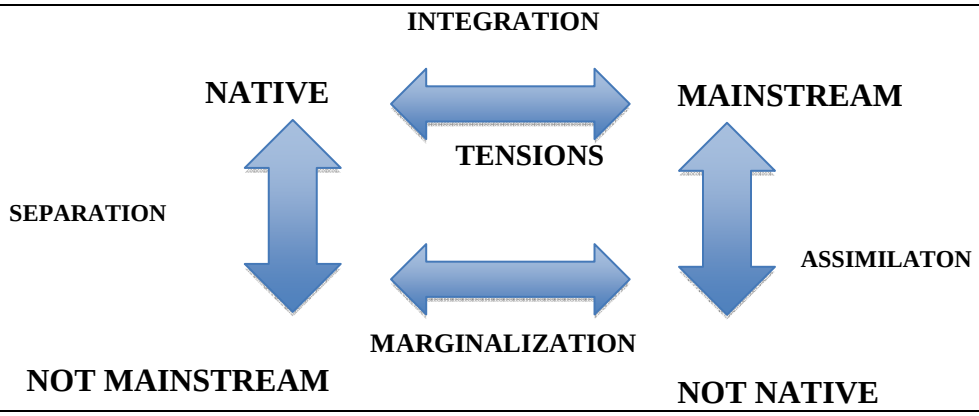
	
R1 – To what extent and in what ways do the students' family culture, history, aspirations, and interfamily dynamic influence their postsecondary experience?	Potential Acculturative Strategy Outcomes: • Assimilation • Marginalization • Integration • Separation
R2 – To what extent does the college culture influence students' postsecondary experience?	Potential Acculturative Strategy Outcomes: • Assimilation • Marginalization • Integration • Separation
R3 – How do second-generation Cambodian American students make sense of these two sets of influences on their trajectory through college – their home culture as experienced in the family, and the college culture as experienced on campus?	Potential Acculturative Strategy Outcomes: • Assimilation • Marginalization • Integration • Separation

Table 3

Data Quality and Limitations

I reflect below upon key limitations of my design – sample selection, the timeframe, the interviewing strategy, and the observational strategy. Due to the nature of the sample, students' participation in this study was solely voluntary. As a result, the make-up of the students was unknown beforehand. This led to possible multiple outcomes. For instance, an all female sample would have given different results than an all male sample. Tensions between the female participants' home life and college experience may quite be more intense than the male participants or vice versa. As for the timeframe limitation, one year of data collection and analysis did not allow me enough time to explore the Cambodian American college retention phenomenon in depth. This was strictly due to financial constraints. Nevertheless, I anticipated one year would yield sufficient data. As for the interview strategy, two semi-structured interviews did not allow me enough time to build great rapport with the participants. As a result, they may have been hesitant to disclose in-depth answers. In addition, as a novice qualitative researcher, I may not have the skills to recognize or follow-up with probing questions during the interview, which may have caused me to miss opportunities for richer data. This can be said for the observational strategy as well. I may not have noticed or recognized important events or nuances that may yield valuable data. For both the interview and observational strategies, one of the greatest limitations may be due to my positionality as a 1.5 generation Cambodian American.

My own personal biases and filtering of information, as a Cambodian American persister myself, may also have shaped what I learned in this study. In undertaking the analysis of this data, I adopted an approach that explicitly recognizes my status as an "insider", that is a member of the ethnic/national community whose members I was studying. With full awareness of this

fact and taking full advantage of the insider knowledge I might have brought, I undertook a qualitative analysis process that borrowed heavily from semiotic analysis techniques (Feldman, 1995). Some of the potential issues related to being an insider researcher are personal biases, authenticity, and role confusion (Corbin & Buckle, 2009). Some questions arose as I entered the field site: How will second-generation Cambodian immigrant males and/or females perceive me as a University of Washington graduate student? How will I guard against my own personal biases? What will be my assumptions about Cambodian immigrant communities? How will I balance the dual nature of insider/outsider role? How will my own personal experiences affect research outcomes in terms of data collection and analysis?

As I reflect upon my educational trajectory, my personal experiences may also have affected research outcomes, in addition to my positioning within the local Cambodian American community. As mentioned in the beginning of this study, my family escaped from the "Killing Field." And, after living in the refugee camp for two years, we got sponsored to Rochester, Minnesota. Three years later, we moved to Tacoma, Washington because of extreme weather. Because we lived in the projects of Tacoma and the tragic experience my family went through, I experienced a loss of identity and a sense of hopelessness. I grew up in poverty with endless family conflicts, in which I fell into a deep depression at a young age. In addition the personal sense of hopelessness and depression I described in the preface, I have also had family responsibilities. I received little support from my family to excel in school. As a matter of fact, I became the mediator or translator for my mother about the American education, health, and welfare systems since she cannot speak English rather only Cambodian. In addition, my mother displays symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of the "Killing Field." I was the youngest in my family and the only one who attended and graduated from college. As a result,

there have always been high expectations from my family to succeed in school. The participants in this study may or may not have similar experience as me. Therefore, I had to guard and monitor my own assumptions of them to avoid seeing their experiences through the lens of my own personal story. While my personal experiences have probably had a sensitizing effect, enabling me to see things that other researchers may not, I still have had to watch carefully not to project my own resolution of the tensions described here into the data collection and analysis process.

Corbin and Buckle (2009) point out that the dual role may result in role confusion when the researcher responds to the participants or analyzes the data from a perspective other than that of researcher. Both authors observe that role confusion may occur in any research study but note a higher risk when the researcher is familiar with the research setting or participants through a role other than that of researcher. It is also possible that the researcher's perceptions might be clouded by his or her personal experiences and that as a member of the group he or she may have difficulty separating it from that as a member of the group. This might result in an interview that is shaped and guided by the core aspects of the researcher's experience and not the participant's.

As a human research "instrument", I brought particular experiences and lenses to this research and the analysis process that were worth recognizing further. I am a 1.5-generation Cambodian immigrant (both my parents and I were born in Cambodia and came to the US before the age of twelve) who has persevered through the formal educational system in this country, and am now in graduate school. Prior to graduate school, I worked in the community for nine years as a program staff and board member at SafeFutures Youth Center, a non-profit organization that empowers Southeast Asian and East African young people and their families whom are gang-involved or at-risk of gang involvement to be positive contributors to society. As a researcher,

my primary goal had been to add knowledge, not to pass judgment on a setting or group of people. Recognizing my own position was one of the ways to guard against personal biases. To further reduce personal biases, each participant was invited to review the findings for accuracy. Lastly, my colleagues would assist in critiquing the data and findings for triangulation purposes.

Chapter 4

Findings: The Meaning of Persistence, in the Context of Family and College

To explore the research questions posed in this study, I carried out analyses in two phases. The first, primarily descriptive phase is devoted to constructing a basic portrait of each of the six focal students, to reveal their family background, educational history, pattern of engagement with college, and other relevant aspects of their lives. The second, more analytical main section is devoted to cross-case analyses, using semiotic clusters and semiotic squares, that demonstrate the way these students encounter and resolve the fundamental tensions between home culture and the culture of their schooling and the larger host country society.

Within-Case Analysis: Portraits of Persistence

In the following section, I will share the stories of the six Cambodian American students. Each participant's story sheds light on his/her educational experience and provides a glimpse of his/her family interactions. Furthermore, all of the participants' stories paint a picture of a *persister* in higher education. The names below are pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality of the participants.

Susan

Susan was the youngest of five children. Both of her parents were among the survivors of the "The Killing Field". The family got sponsored to the U.S. to begin a new life. The acculturation process was difficult for both of her parents as their highest education level was

high school. Furthermore, by the time they arrived into the U.S., her siblings were already teenagers. Two of them had to work to support the family. With no prior family connections in and little knowledge of the U.S., her parents relied heavily upon Susan to navigate them through the U.S. system. In addition, they spoke little to no English, in which Susan had to translate for them regularly since the age of eight as she voiced, "I remember busing with my mom and dad to their doctor appointments and I would always translate and because I was born here um…and my parents for some reason trusted me to like translate for them."

She grew up in the projects of a large Northwestern city. Unfortunately, due to the dynamic of her neighborhood, her brother got involved in one of the local street gangs. To make matters worse, her mother passed away during high school. Her mother always "pushed her and expected her" to do well in school. She realized that the only way out of her situation was to succeed in education. Susan articulated it this way:

> I look at my brother in particular who…he's gotten in to a lot of trouble and was affiliated with some sort of gang growing up and I like somehow learned from him and realized that even though we grow up in like such a…what I felt like a ghetto neighborhood, education is the only way out.

Although Susan's parents didn't have the ability to help her with her schoolwork, their encouragement, especially her mother's, had gotten her through many years of school. And, her mother's voice continued to motivate her to reach her academic goals as she reminded herself:

> My mom passed away when I was in high school (cries) and…that's why I have to remind myself why I want this because she always…I'm just trying to…you know when they came here, their dream was to live a better life, like a lot of families and family friends that I have.

Susan knew at a young age she wanted to pursue healthcare based on her experience acting as a 'bridge' between her parents' health and their healthcare providers. She remained ambitious in her academic pursuit as she passionately said, "I'm not going to stop with my

bachelor's. I want to do more because I want to have more impact on like healthcare policies." Susan possessed many special qualities. In addition to being ambitious, she remained respectful towards others, especially adults. She accredited this characteristic to being 'raised in the Khmer culture' (Khmer is the largest ethnic group in Cambodian and often synonymous with Cambodian). Although the Cambodian culture exerted great influences in her life, especially in the area of school, she considered herself to be Khmer American as she explained, "I grew up speaking Khmer first and English I don't know how. I think I learned that when I started pre-school but just coming to speak English at school and coming home and speaking all Khmer." Susan's possession of the understanding of both languages had helped her tremendously to navigate through both worlds – school and home.

Susan went to a very diverse elementary school. She remembered playing sports during this time with her friends. She felt the school emphasized sports more than learning. As a result, she felt unprepared entering middle school. During this time in her life, she knew the academic and social landscape had been different from her elementary school experience. She described it this way,

> I felt like my own elementary school did not prepare me for middle school and um…just there were so many white kids. It was different. It was very different and it was challenging because I felt alone and there were many times where I just didn't feel smart enough.

Middle school was a transition year for her to figure out how to make friends of different races. Furthermore, although her parents didn't have the ability to assist her with schoolwork, she was constantly pressured by them to study hard in order to maintain good grades. This sentiment was captured in her words, "They were always…they always pushed education but during that period of time growing up I feel like they didn't…weren't able to contribute to my learning." In addition to making friends and trying to maintain high grades, she had to balance

school life with home life, as she often had to take care of her parents. Some of her family responsibilities can be better understood this way:

> I feel like I spent a lot of the time as a young kid not playing outside but more sort of just translating their Khmer into English at their doctor appointments that I would take them to cause my parents were kind of, they've always been kind of old, elderly parents so they always had a lot of illnesses and I just know that I was kind of like rushed to grow up a little bit because I had to spend more of my time making sure they were taking the right pills, you know, their medications and translating.

By the time she entered high school, she became skilled at balancing both worlds. She developed the ability and confidence to make friends from different races, especially those from the dominant culture. She expressed it this way:

> I started becoming more confident in myself and I knew that the majority of the school was still white but I was able to, I don't know, it just changed and I don't know how that happened but I was able to reach out and not let the whole being scared to talk to white people get in the way of building friendships and feeling like I deserve to be in that school just as much as anyone else did.

Unbeknownst to her by the time she entered college, she had become a cultural mediator. Her idea of being an American was, "Having a ton of privilege, a ton of opportunities, a voice, having a voice that matters…being American means having um…opportunities and whether or not you choose to reach for those, you know it's up to the individual." In addition to being an American, she remained "strongly influenced by the Khmer culture" and her idea of being Cambodian was "like understanding and respecting all the (Khmer) traditions". Being a cultural mediator helped Susan prepare for college. These were her thoughts during college, "I think it's really kept me grounded because um…I may…and also I'm able to have this other like pair of lenses that I think some, many of my peers don't have." Although she possessed both lenses, there had been times she struggled to reconcile the two worlds. For example, she explained it this way:

> I've always struggled with that, just the conflict of the two, going to school and being told to speak up and then coming home and being told to keep my mouth shut. Like just the culture difference…knowing that I'm from two different types of cultures, it's always been a big conflict but I think now I've become, through college I feel like I've learned to balance those two and to understand that more and I'm continuing to learn.

Susan attended a large prestigious university in the Northwest. She lived with her older sister in order to save money while in school. Her pursuit of the healthcare field was coming to fruition as she entered her last year of nursing school. During her first three years, she was very involved with the Cambodian student organization on campus. Furthermore, in addition to attending school, she was helping her older siblings by taking care of their kids. Due to the pressure of rigorous courses and family issues related to her brother, she had to take a leave of absence for one quarter to attend to family matters. Once it was resolved, she continued her academic pursuit.

Susan's typical college day was getting up in the morning to take her niece to school. Immediately after, she would drive to one of the park-and-rides near her house to catch the bus to campus. The bus ride would take approximately 45 minutes to an hour. Once she arrived on campus, she would go straight to her classes. Her classroom was situated in a fairly large lecture hall that accommodated approximately 200 students. Most of the students in her nursing program were predominately Whites. The class was a core requirement for the nursing program. She quietly sat in the back row taking meticulous notes while listening intently to a lecture of a White professor from the power-point slides. Interactions in the classroom were minimal. After the two-hour lecture was over, she quietly left the classroom. Her next destination was to find a quiet place to study and prepare for her exam in the next class. After a long period of time studying, she was well prepared for her exam. After her exam, she would get on the bus to go back home. Her mentality was, "I just want to finish, so that's why I just go to my classes until they're done

and then take the bus back and also because the busses don't run as late." During the weekend, she would work. Then, after the weekends, she would begin her typical school day all over again as she continued to persist.

Nicole

Like many Cambodian Americans, Nicole's family sought refuge in the U.S. after the "Killing Field." She was a middle child of one younger and one older brother. Her mother worked at a medical center in the midwifery office while her dad's occupation was a furnished carpenter for interior environments in downtown. Furthermore, her mother's highest education level was an associate degree while her father never finished high school. Ever since they arrived in the U.S., they had to work extremely hard to take care of the family. As they focused on navigating through the U.S. systems and providing for the family, her older brother became very rebellious growing up in the new world as he frequently had run-ins with legal authorities. On the other hand, her younger brother was more of an athlete. Neither of her brothers enjoyed school.

At times there was much conflict in the home about differential gender treatment. Her parents seldom pressured her brothers to perform academically. For instance, as she imitated her parents, they would be saying, in effects, to the boys:

> Do whatever you want to do, we're not gonna do anything, we're not gonna tell you what to do, we're not gonna tell you what not to do, we're gonna let you do whatever you want to do, we'll support you regardless so I see that as unfair cause they still have this vision for me.

Expectations were thus different for Nicole as she expressed, "They've always wanted me to go to the top, graduate with a Masters, PhD, all that good stuff." Furthermore, she showed her frustration about the matter:

> They had this idea of what they wanted me to be, the typical Asian-American daughter. They had that idea and they, you know, they see how girls are portrayed out there and how they're supposed to be so they tried to, I'd say, mold me from like since elementary school. School! School! School! School!

Due to high parental expectations, Nicole had to focus on academic excellence in school from a young age. Although she experienced a double standard at home, she enjoyed growing up in a very diverse neighborhood and in a very diverse school. She had always been the "good" student envisioned by her parents as she received straight A's throughout her elementary and middle school years. In addition to her academic performance, she played organized sports and participated in student government. In the meanwhile, in the home, she wasn't given many responsibilities as "they wanted me to just keep my focus on school and anything outside of that was kind of seen as bad." Her main responsibility was getting her homework done. Then, after that, she would do typical chores such as cleaning her room and washing the dishes. She further said, "My grandma was younger so she was living with us and she basically took care of everything. Then my parents came home and they took care of everything."

The "good" girl image took a different turn during high school. The combination of high parental expectations and making new friends had caused Nicole to perform in a less stellar way in high school. She acknowledged this as she said, "I kind of got sidetracked into hanging out…and I would rather hang out instead of focusing on what I needed to which was school. You could see that my grades had dropped a little. I went from like this straight 4.0 student to like, you know like 3…3.2." During this season in her life, her shift in focus with less attention to academic excellence caused great conflicts between her and her parents. Her parents tried to be stricter and administer consequences for poor academic performance, but for Nicole, "It like pushed me away even more." This season of cultural dissonance lasted through most of her high school years. This season didn't end because of her parents' attempt to control or be stricter. It

wasn't until she thought about college and reflected on life in general that she realized the importance of education. She summed it up this way, "I didn't want to do school even though my parents were punishing me so it just took me realizing that I wanted to go to college to kind of…convince myself, motivate myself to do it." Furthermore, from her reflection, "If it wasn't for my parents for them being Khmer and not having that education, I probably wouldn't be as motivated to go to college." With this newfound motivation, Nicole focused on school again. Having gone through a tough season with her parents, it allowed her to understand the value of living in both cultures. For instance, she articulated it this way:

> I mean I feel like each part makes me…it sums up who I am so like I'm part of the Cambodian culture like I have to have that. If I didn't have that I can't say I'm complete and then the American culture growing up here, going to a school in America in my hometown and all that stuff…and so if I already have these two cultures like I wouldn't be on campus.

Nicole's unique skills to navigate through cultures helped prepare her for college. In addition, her relationship with her parents had improved dramatically. She felt extremely supported by them. Her academic goal was to become a social worker as she said:

> My mom works at a midwifery office where they have a social worker on site at their office so she understands the importance of having a social worker, what impact they make on people's lives, so she's good with it. My dad just wants me to do whatever makes me happy, whatever I'm passionate about. So he's content. They're both content with what I want to do just cause I'm so passionate about it.

Like Susan, Nicole attended a large prestigious university in the northwest region. During her first year, she lived on campus. After that, she moved back home to live with her parents due to financial reasons. The pattern of her daily life on campus was remarkably similar to Susan's. On a typical school day, she would wake up at six o'clock in the morning to get ready for school.

Then, she would commute to campus on a bus for about an hour and a half. Once she arrived on campus, she would go straight to class. Her classes were usually from 8:30am to 1:20pm. Her class was situated in a fairly large lecture hall with about 120 students in attendance. She typically sat in the middle back row as she listened to a power-point lecture of a white professor for an hour. On most of the days she would attend back to back classes until 1:20pm while on one of the days she only had one early morning class. Nevertheless, most of the days, she would only come to campus to attend her classes. Then immediately, she would leave to go back home to prepare for work or finish schoolwork and spend time with her parents. She captured her typical evening this way:

> I just don't like commuting, riding the bus at night by myself and then…um…going home and then meeting up with my parents and then just hanging out with them, dinner with them. I usually end up watching T.V. with my dad or like…talking or messing around with my dad, hanging out with him. My mom is usually in her room or something and sometimes we'll all go out and hang out together… but yeah for the most part in the evening time it's the three of us…yeah.

Typically during the weekends, she would work two full days. Then, she would begin her typical school days all over again as a *Persister*.

Mary

Mary's family came to the U.S. with great hope of beginning a new life in a new land after living through the "Killing Field." They settled in a diverse area of a large city in the Northwest. She was the younger of the two children. Her sister was 10 years older. In addition, her older sister had dropped out of high school during a season of rebelling against her parents. But, eventually she went back to school to finish. This had played an important role in Mary's life to pursue education, as she didn't want to be like her older sister. As for Mary's parents, they

sewed as an occupation for many years. Then, eventually, found work in a large company that provided more stability and benefits. Their life revolved around working. “I’ve seen what they’ve been through and they’re always working,” said Mary. Over the years, both of her parents managed to speak English well enough to navigate through the U.S. systems. Mary lived a simple life. She grew up doing typical duties around the house such as doing laundry, washing dishes, and cooking rice. Although her parents could speak English, they weren’t able to help Mary with her schoolwork. She learned how to figure things out on her own. Her parents supported her financially just as long as she remained focused on school. She described her parents’ academic expectations as, “I guess what my parents instilled in me is that education is important, my sister as well, getting her diploma and as of right now, that’s my goal.”

Aside from Mary’s academic achievement, she enjoyed watching movies and hanging out with her friends. She described herself as quiet, smart, and friendly. She was an extremely polite young lady. However, underneath the politeness and fun loving persona, she usually kept personal issues to herself. Throughout her childhood and adolescent years, her upbringing was marked by loneliness. Her parents’ life of work had left her home alone regularly after school. In addition, due to the age gap between her and her sibling, her older sister was seldom around and played a role as more of a second mother. When her parents were home, they usually kept to themselves as well. Mary described their relationships this way:

> I guess we’re close of course but just not emotionally close I guess cause we don’t like to talk about things like that. I mean just saying “I love you” is kind of pretty…I don’t do that. My mom does that but I don’t do that. I don’t know. It’s just…since I’ve never…I don’t know.

Mary learned how to cope with loneliness through silence as she expressed her thoughts “I guess I don’t really like to talk about myself, not even to my friends, any personal stories. I just kind of keep it to myself.” Furthermore, she also learned over the years to separate home life from

school life. She shared her insights as, “I just kind of separate them. When I get home it’s home…and then school is more a little bit more free to do what I want.” Her statement aligned with her thoughts about the definition of an American. She phrased it this way, “To be an American, I guess just mindset. The whole, individuality, more freedom and opportunities, just living in America.” In contrast, to be Cambodian was to “not being open, keeping to ourselves, sticking to our little community, what we know.” Although she successfully graduated from high school and onward to college, she continued to Persist through her loneliness.

Mary, too, was a student the same university in the Northwest attended by Susan and Nicole. She was the first in her immediate family to enter college. Her typical day began at 6am. Like Nicole, she would commute an hour and a half with a friend on a bus to campus in order to catch her first class at 8am. She would then proceed to her next class. Her classroom experiences followed a familiar pattern. The class was situated in a fairly large lecture hall that can accommodate about 150 students. She sat in the front row listening attentively and taking notes meticulously to a White male professor. The class was fairly diverse with a number of Asian Americans in the course. Nonetheless, the majority of the class was White. Mary seemed to be engaged with the power-point presentation. After class, she would meet up with an Asian American friend for lunch at a popular place on campus where most Asian Americans liked to congregate. After lunch, she would go with her friend to study for an exam for her next class at a large undergraduate library. Both of them studied intently as they shared each other’s thoughts and answers to particular problems. After their study time, it was off to her last class of the day. It was a long day for Mary. Typically, she would be tired and paid little attention to the course. But, she paid particular attention that day for the exam. After the class, she would commute back home on the bus. She usually spent her evenings finishing homework or catch up on the latest

Khmer or Chinese movies. The weekends were typically family time, studying, or hanging out with friends if the opportunity arose. After that, the weekdays continued as normal where "home it's home…and then school is more a little bit more free to do what I want."

Lee

Like many Cambodian Americans, Lee's parents escaped the "Killing Field" to the U.S. in the early 1980s. They came to the U.S. with little prior knowledge of their new home. Furthermore, due to abolishment of education during the Pol Pot regime, "they didn't have access to education cause they grew up during the Khmer Rouge genocide so they had no access to that." However, both of Lee's parents finished high school prior to the regime. When they came to the U.S., they didn't have the opportunity to continue their education beyond high school as "they didn't really have a chance to go beyond that cause they had to worry about taking care of their parents who are you know…just coming from Cambodia and they don't speak English at all so they had a number of other burdens." Lee had a younger sister who was born in the States as well and was a high school sophomore. Furthermore, he had 10 younger cousins and 10 older ones whom looked up to him as a role model. Prior to Lee, there had only been one of his older cousins who graduated from high school as he said:

> The rest… they dropped out…so I don't know what happened in my family tree but they definitely didn't want me to follow their footsteps…even though they're doing well now it's just the fact that they dropped out and some had kids at very young ages. They just didn't want that for me and my other young…young cousins so just know that pressure is on me I felt compelled to succeed and excel and like…you know in academics.

As Lee expressed his feelings, he felt a sense of responsibility to perform well academically. He had always been a hardworking, friendly, and respectful individual. He took on the challenge to be the first in his family to attend and eventually graduate from college.

Although he had a great work ethics at times he could feel the pressure and weight upon his shoulders for such a task. He expressed it this way:

> I mean it can be overwhelming at times cause again they're expecting a lot out of me since I'm the first one to go to college and first one to graduate with my bachelor's degree so it places a lot of pressure on me and they expect me to do big things and go to grad school and what-not.

However, although Lee's parents and relatives were not able to support him financially or with his schoolwork, they had always supported him emotionally during his school years. This had helped him with the pressure of high academic performance, as he articulated "I didn't really have any big responsibilities it was just again education cause my parents wanted to make sure they took care of us."

Lee grew up in the South-end of a large city in the northwest, which was known for its' diversity. He had always enjoyed school. He met and forged great friendships during his elementary school years, and had remained close to them to this day. Ever since his family moved to the South-end, all of the schools he had attended were extremely diverse. One of his memorable seasons came during his high school years as there were more Cambodians in his high school than his elementary and middle schools combined. This made him more comfortable and made school more enjoyable as he expressed, "the school had a lot of more Cambodians…like my people (laughs) so I definitely um… clicked with them immediately just cause "oh you're Cambodian? Oh same here." In addition to the positive environment, all of his good friends had "good heads on their shoulders" and "they always help me out whenever I need help like just for that motivation for school." His counselors were also supportive of him as he expressed, "I had great counselors who always let me know about opportunities coming up, what schools to apply for, how to apply for…how to take the SATs, again just a good environment." As a result, he excelled in his academic work.

During this time as well, Lee developed a passion for the Cambodian culture. Although his focus was on school, he tried to participate in Cambodian cultural rituals as much as he could. He stated this way, “Cambodians like my family we’re very prideful. We um…practice our traditional, not me, but I try to. But I just…you know, sometimes I don’t have the time to go to the temples but my parents practice praying. They practice traditional and rituals of Cambodia.” During his free time, he would practice traditional Khmer dances with other Cambodian students. He often performed Cambodian cultural dances during the annual Cambodian New Year celebration. Although he enjoyed the richness of the Cambodian culture, he identified himself as Cambodian-American. He believed being an American as, “I just think of opportunity. I think of “you have um…you verify that you are of legal…that you are legal of this country” so that’s the first thing that comes to mind when I think “oh you’re American, you have citizenship” so that’s one thing…that when you have citizenship, you have access to education so that’s what also comes to mind when I think of being an American.” As a citizen of the U.S., he took full advantage of the education made available to him. As a result, he developed a keen ability to reconcile both worlds – Cambodian traditions and American ideals, in which he stated:

> I perfectly identify with Cambodian-American. I appreciate the Cambodian culture and I appreciate the American culture and I kind of come together and mold the Cambodian-American culture for me so I don’t see me gravitating more towards the Cambodian or American.

Lee’s ability to navigate through and be comfortable with both worlds prepared him for his time in college. After he graduated from high school, he attended a large prestigious university in the northwest. As he approached his senior year, he had decided to pursue public administration as a career path, in which he had been preparing for graduate school. His typical day in college began with commuting one hour to campus by bus every morning. He would

immediately meander across the large campus to his first class, History of Dance. His class was situated in a small classroom that seats about 30 students. He sat in the front row attentively taking notes of the lecture conducted by a White professor. Most of the students were white and mostly were females. The second half of the class ended with a film about the history of ballet dancing. After class, it was time for him to get lunch at the nearby Subway shop. Then, after lunch until the early evening, he used that time to relax, study, and catch up with emails at the university's ethnic cultural center. Since the annual Cambodian New Year celebration was fast approaching, he dedicated his evenings to teaching Cambodian cultural dances to the younger students. Not only was he a role model to his younger sibling and cousins, he was also a role model to the younger Cambodian students on campus. From his high school years until sophomore year in college, he had always been one of the Cambodian traditional dancers. Then, he took the next step in his commitment with the Cambodian club by being a member and one of the officers in a public relations role. His commitment to promote and represent the Cambodian culture was on display when he shared a story:

> When I come to UW I kind of…I try to represent for my…my people cause…well just by wearing Cambodian sweaters and Cambodian t-shirts that I bought from Cambodia. I wear those just to kind of educate the public that you know…Cambodians, we are here, we are present so please don't overlook our culture cause sometimes…it's just really ignorant when people are like "oh Cambodian, what is that?"

Lee knew a lot of people and had many friends around campus. He truly enjoyed being a student and had a strong connection with the university. After teaching traditional Cambodian cultural dances for a couple of hours, he left for home. If he weren't holding dance classes, then he would spend his evenings and weekends studying or working. Although the pathway to college was different for Lee than the other participants, like the others, his life revealed great insights into the characteristics of a *Persister*.

Sandy

Sandy's family emigrated to the U.S. after the "Killing Field" during the 1980s like many other Cambodians. They also had to deal with the loss of many family members during that tragic era. Shortly after her parents' arrival to the States, Sandy was born. She was the middle child of four children, all of whom except her were boys. Her parents had to work many long and odd hours at various minimum wage jobs to support the family. Although her parents spoke little English and had little prior knowledge of their new home, her dad finally managed to find and settled into a job as an auto mechanic and had been working in that field ever since. Her mother, she finally moved up the economic ladder by working in the local casino dealing cards. Her father resorted to alcohol to cope with past traumas, which created many issues within the family. Her mother was the typical quiet submissive wife who worked and took care of the house. As Sandy recalled her childhood, she described it as "my parents, we didn't have any connection or bond" and "dad is all about the beating and the hitting you." Her father's abusive behavior also drove two of her brothers toward a gang lifestyle.

Sandy grew up in a low-income gang infested community. She described her upbringing in this way: "I grew up in which was the violence, the drinking, you know all that chaos, the gambling, all that we grew up through in the projects. I just want a peaceful and quiet." During her elementary and middle school years, she grew up obeying her parents' commandments according to the traditional view of how a typical young Cambodian lady was supposed to behave without any questionings. If she were to question or speak back to her parents' requests, then it would be considered disrespectful towards them and a sign of dishonoring them. She expressed her frustration this way:

> In our culture, with the male domination, a female is without…you know, not allowed to state voices or opinions or even have any idea of anything. They're just supposed to do, you know, what they're known to do and that's it. So with that being said, I had a hard time connecting them with my parents, letting them know who I am, what I am, you know, as a person.

As a result, during her childhood and early adolescent years, she remembered having had many family responsibilities. Some of her responsibilities included: "Interpret for the family, schedule important appointments, doctors, paperwork, documents, anything vital and personal within the household, bills, and looking through the mails." Her justification was "you know because mom and dad can't read, so they don't know what they're doing besides just giving us the money to do that part so yeah." She recalled her elementary and middle school years were marked by abuse and family responsibilities. By the time she reached high school, the pressure of family obligations and having to deal with constant family issues was too much for Sandy. In addition to her family problems, the lure of breaking out of the traditional Cambodian female role to spending time with her friends led her to drop out of school. She reminisced, "High school years, all I had was freshman experience, that's when I dropped out. I was already experimenting with street life stuff from there so…it was unfortunate you know." She recalled her teenage years as "my rebellious years." These years caused great strife between her and her parents. She resorted to drinking and doing drugs to cope with her problems and to help her sleep at night. She managed to gain her independence from her family by working at a local financial institution for five years. She lived an independent lifestyle during her teenage years until her early twenties. She came to the realization of the value of life when her mother was diagnosed with breast cancer as she shared, "Watching her fight for her life *[cries]*, that's when I realized the value of life." Furthermore, after spending more time with her mother, she reflected upon life and felt regretful for many things as she shared:

> It occurred to me that here she is, she escaped the war to have a better life for herself and for us and then here I am you know, kind of just throwing it away and going the wrong routes. Even though I'm trynna voice an opinion of how things should be I was going about it all the wrong ways so I neglected the value of life.

This was the turning point for Sandy. She moved back home to take care of her mother. She described it as "perfect timing" as she lost her job. She made sure to drive her mother to all of her doctor's appointment and she became her primary translator. They spent many hours together and got to know one another all over again. Sandy made the decision to go back to school to finish high school by taking the general educational development (GED) exams at a local community college. After having been gone from school for so long, she was extremely nervous, especially in the area of math. She recalled having a teacher who was very patient with her during the exam process. The teacher's patience and willingness to help Sandy became instrumental in her GED completion. She was ecstatic to finally finish high school and it became a motivational factor for her to continue with school. As a result, she enrolled in the local community college. Her desire to be a radiologist was "the reason why…that inspired me is because of my mom." With the help of many positive adults in her life, she successfully finished her first year of college.

Sandy's typical day in community college was driving to school in the morning to attend her first class, in this case, math. Unlike the classroom situation that the other students experienced, the classroom was extremely diverse and small with approximately twenty students in attendance. The teacher was an old White male. She sat attentively in the front row taking notes. Although she tried to stay focused in math class, she still had a difficult time following the teacher. Since it was a small class, students were able to interact with the teacher by asking to clarify some math questions. Sandy was among the ones asking questions.

After math class, her typical routine was to go to the student lounge to study and work on homework. She knew many students around campus, which made her feel at home. After studying, she warmed the food that she brought from home for lunch. Life had turned for the better. She truly enjoyed coming to school with an excitement to learn. She was very sociable as she continued to talk to many friends on campus. After lunch, she would spend many hours in the student service area to receive math tutoring. The place was filled with students of differing math abilities. The math service was a "Godsend". After many hours of studying, she had to go back home to take care of her mom. Her life revolved around school and caring for her mother. For the first time in her life, she was content.

Veronica

Veronica grew up in a diverse neighborhood in a large city of the northwest region. Her parents were young children during the "Killing Field". Both of them did not remember much of the atrocity. Both got sponsored to the U.S. at a young age. Veronica grew up with little recollection of her father, only that, "I guess my dad was in a gang in California so after I was like two weeks old, my dad went to jail and then he didn't get out until I was like eight or nine years old." Her mother eventually remarried and never finished school. As a matter of fact, she dropped out after middle school. Veronica grew up in a household consisting of her mother, stepfather, grandmother, and younger sister. Since both her mother and stepfather worked long hours, in which both typically worked graveyard shifts, Veronica's grandmother essentially took care of her and her younger sister. She didn't have a great relationship with her mother. There seemed to be much resentment as she shared, "She's like an alcoholic and she gambles all of the time" and "My mom still like…does all these…just goes out and be wild and isn't a parent at

all." Her mother's behavior forced her to grow up at young age. She further shared her childhood as:

> I felt pressured to grow up fast because I mean, I started cooking and cleaning when I was eight, really young and like since I had to do that, they kind of stopped raising me or like teaching me or like helping out with the house and so it's like I had to just care for everyone and…especially my younger sister, I had to take care of her. So I think that was hard especially since I had to go to school and I was struggling in school.

In elementary school, Veronica struggled with math, reading, and writing. Mainly, it was anxiety from taking exams that affected her confidence in academics. Aside from fear of test taking, however, she was an extremely bright and resilient individual. Although her childhood and early adolescent years consisted of taking care of her younger sister, household chores, and many other family responsibilities, she was determined to graduate from high school and attend college. Not only did she excel in high school, she participated in school sports and many other extracurricular activities. Her motivation to excel academically came from not wanting to be like her parents as she put it:

> They both…only went to middle school and so I guess that was kind of like…encouragement to me cause I was like "I'm not going...I'm going to go to high school! Like, you know, I'm not gonna just…I can't even imagine just going to school until you're in middle school and like dropping out.

In spite of life's challenges, Veronica had developed a close relationship with her aunt and uncle. She often spoke highly of them. For instance, she said, "I always called my parents my aunt and uncle." They became Veronica and her younger sister's surrogate parents. She reminisced about the turning point in her life and shared her gratitude towards them this way:

> We really didn't have any money at the time, so it was hard for me to um… make food for her or something. So, we would only eat breakfast at school when it was like for breakfast and for lunch. And then we would come back home we would like starve and we would like try to do things so we would not think about my mom, but she just like…left us and then um…her sister, which was my aunt, she

> like took us in during middle school and we stayed with her and we started being her full-time kids. And so, that's how it helped us change and start a new life.

With a new family and support structure, Veronica successfully graduated from high school. Everything was looking brighter for her. She became the first in her family to attend college, which was a monumental moment; a large prestigious university in the northwest. Her ultimate desire was to be a grade school teacher. She always has had the passion and joy to work with children as she expressed her passion, "I don't really know how to explain how I feel when I'm around kids but I'm just different I guess (laugh)." Although she remain focused on academic pursuits, she continued to volunteer her time helping younger students to succeed in life. In addition, she always has had the passion to dance. During high school, she performed Cambodian cultural dances during the annual Cambodian New Year celebration. She continued to be involved with Cambodian dances throughout her college years as a dancer and dance instructor. The relationship she had built with the Cambodian Club on campus during her high school years was the deciding factor in choosing to attend this particular college.

Veronica lived a few blocks from campus. Her typical day consisted of walking to campus to attend her morning classes. Her first class focused on early childhood education. There were approximately 50 students in attendance. The students were busy with group project activities as they listened attentively for instructions from the White professor. The class was fairly diverse with the majority consisted of White female students. She sat in the very back room fully engaged with the materials and her classmates. After the two and a half hours of classwork, it was off to the next class. After her morning classes, she typically walked back to her apartment to relax, study, and eat lunch. During the afternoons, she would catch the bus to her volunteer site in helping immigrant students to adjust to life in the U.S. or she would head to work. Since the annual Cambodian New Year celebration was fast approaching, she had spent

some of her evenings teaching traditional Cambodian cultural dances. Many of her friends were part of the Cambodian Club and were responsible for putting on the celebration. She enjoyed volunteering her time and meeting new people as "those activities allow me to make college fun!" If she was not volunteering or studying, then she would be working during the weekends. Although she greatly enjoyed her college experience, trying to balance academic, work, and social life had been difficult at times as she expressed, "The only conflict I have right now is probably working while going to school and still trying to have a social life. I don't see my family as much as I use to because I am working on the weekdays and weekends." Veronica continued to be a *Persister* in spite of all the challenges she had to face.

Cross-Case Analysis: Semiotic Square Analysis

In this section, I investigated the data further by using Semiotic Squares to answer each research question. As a review, Semiotic Squares looked at tensions between opposite forces, concepts, or ideas. The tension I examined was students and their parents' native culture (Cambodian culture), on the on hand, and the mainstream culture (American culture), on the other. The tension produced four acculturative outcomes or strategies: Integration, Assimilation, Separation, and Marginalization. These acculturative strategies allowed me to explain the ways these students experienced and resolved the tension between both worlds. First, I will compare and contrast similarities and differences in the participants' family dynamics, noting conditions that were likely to shape their pursuit of and persistence in postsecondary education. Then, I will discuss in how they adopted various acculturative strategies based on their circumstances – or in some instances, as a counter response to their circumstances.

Family Dynamics: Obligations, Expectations, and Other Conditions

I compared and contrasted the participants' levels of family obligations and high parental expectations. These sets of family dynamics helped shape their acculturative strategies, which ultimately influenced their postsecondary experience. After analyzing each story through an acculturation lens, I found that three students (Susan, Sandy, and Veronica) experienced many family responsibilities at home while the other three (Nicole, Mary, and Lee) experienced fewer obligations, as noted in Table 4-1 below.

Table 4-1. Family and Acculturative Strategies In Precollege Years

Participant	Family Obligation	High Parental Expectations	Acculturative Strategies (In Precollege Years)	
			Circumstances pushing towards…	***Participants' Choice On entering College***
Susan	X	X	Marginalization	Integration
Nicole		X	Marginalization Assimilation	Integration
Mary		X	Marginalization Assimilation	Integration
Lee		X	Marginalization Separation	Integration
Sandy	X		Marginalization	Integration
Veronica	X		Marginalization Assimilation	Integration

A scan of the differing family conditions facing the six participants shows how some faced more intense pressures in their home lives during the pre-college years, related to both their obligations to their families and the expectation that they pursue education. In all case, and especially for Susan, Sandy, and Veronica, their family dynamics reflected their shared trauma of the Cambodian genocide and a lack of capacity to deal with their new host country surroundings. For Susan, her parents were much older when she was born. As they spoke very little English with little knowledge of how to navigate the U.S. system, she had to be a cultural mediator between her parents and the mainstream world. Sandy was born into the same situation with many family responsibilities including: cooking, cleaning, and translating for her parents, among other duties. As for Veronica, she was placed in a similar situation mainly due to her mother's neglect and absence from the home. Interestingly, at one point in her life, she and her parents lived in a household as if it was a single parent home. Although Susan and Sandy grew up with both parents, Susan lost her mother in high school, and Sandy took care of her ill mother as she battled cancer. Veronica, on the other hand, grew up with her mother; however, at times, she felt like an orphan. Due to their situations, the burden of fulfilling family obligations fell on these three, which placed insurmountable pressure on them.

Nicole, Mary, and Lee reveal a different pattern. In spite of their family background in escaping the "Killing Field," their parents wanted them to focus mainly on their schoolwork. Although their parents worked in low-wage jobs, they didn't want their children to be in their shoes, and in this sense, their difficult family circumstances translated more into pressure to succeed educationally rather than into meeting basic family needs. Due to their hardship in trying to acculturate in the new land, they kept on promoting education as a way out of their situation in the future. Interestingly, all three grew up in two-parent household, as shown in Table 4-2 below,

and both parents in each home worked long hours to support their children's academic pursuits, in way that combined their presence, priorities, efforts, and some economic resources towards that end. This pattern echoes that which has appeared in other research on immigrant families: in a longitudinal mixed method study of immigrant families from the Boston and San Francisco Bay area, Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco, & Torodova (2008) found that immigrant children who grew up in two-parent families tend to be at an advantage academically (p. 36).

Table 4-2. Family Background

Participant	Both Parents or Single Parent	Parents Level of Education
Susan	Single Parent	High School
Nicole	Both Parents	Mother – AA degree, Father – High School dropout
Mary	Both Parents	High School
Lee	Both Parents	High School
Sandy	Both Parents; but mother diagnosed with cancer	Middle School
Veronica	Single Parent; but have surrogate parents	Middle School

In addition, also suggested by the Table, parents' education level played a vital role in their children's academic success. This was critical to understand as students' academic success correlates with parents' level of education. In the same study, Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco, &

Torodova (2008) found that parents with higher educational levels, when compared to parents who have lower levels of education, tend to provide more literacy opportunities, communicate with more sophisticated vocabularies, offer more access to computers, assist (productively) with homework assignments, provide private SAT instruction, offer knowledge about applying to and getting into college, as well as provide other academic supports (p. 37). These conditions were all absent in the six participants' home, as these families, like most escaping from the Cambodian genocide, were relatively poorly educated and unable to provide the full range of advantages the researchers noted. That said, a pattern of modest differences appears among my six study participants that is also associated with the intensity of family obligation to meet basic needs. Among Susan, Sandy, and Veronica – those most pressured by family obligations – only Susan's parents had reached high school, while the parents of the other two had dropped out of middle school. In the case of Nicole, Mary, and Lee, on the other hand, one or more parent had at least a high school education, and Nicole's mother had attained her AA degree (though her father had dropped out of high school). While these differences are modest, they may well have offered an incremental level of support or understanding about the importance of education, if not a more concrete sense of how to push or support their offspring's educational trajectory.

Perhaps related to the highest level of education attained by one or more parent, high parental expectation was another factor that influenced students' postsecondary experiences. Four of the students (the same ones who had at least one parent with a high school education) experienced high levels of parental expectations, while the other two experienced lower levels. Susan's, Nicole's, Mary's, and Lee's parents desired for their children to enter and graduate from college, while Sandy's and Veronica's parents had less ambition for them. Even though their parents couldn't help them with their homework, the first four received a clear message that their

parents wanted them to succeed academically. For Susan, she found the motivation to excel in her school from her belated mother. “I want to make her proud,” said Susan. She realized her mother’s high expectation to perform academically was for her own good. Unselfishly, she wanted to graduate from college not only for herself, but mainly, for her mother. As for Nicole, she came to the realization that her parents didn’t have the opportunity to pursue a bachelor’s degree. Instead of trying to play the role of the “good” Cambodian girl, she took the pressure from her parents as a motivation to becoming the first in her family to finish a four-year degree. Similarly, Mary and Lee wanted to be the first as well to graduate with a bachelor’s degree and beyond. Mary didn’t want to drop out of school like her older sister. Nor did she want to work endless hours like her parents. She wanted to make sure she finished school to avoid her family’s fate. As for Lee, high parental expectation didn’t detract him from school. As a matter of fact, the pressure motivated him to be the first in his immediate family and relatives to attend and graduate from college.

The other two participants, Sandy and Veronica, experienced a different dilemma at home from the other four. Interestingly, both these participants’ parents never finished middle school. Compounding this fact, both participants’ biological fathers were involved in one of the local street gangs. As a result, academic expectations were different for Sandy and Veronica. Although Sandy mentioned the violence in the home during her childhood and adolescent years, she seldom mentioned her father during her GED and college years in any of the interviews and observations. She was fond of her mother and wanted to finish school for her. She was extremely motivated to finish school as a radiologist not knowing how long her mother would survive cancer. As for Veronica, her father lived far away in a different state. She made the effort to see him once a year. As she had been working on building a relationship with her father, she was

thankful for her new "parents," her aunt and uncle, who remained as her source of encouragement. Although she forgave her biological mother, she seldom spoke of her. Her motivation didn't come from the pressure of high parental expectation rather it came from the lack of one as she vowed to finish college because "I don't want to be like her."

In sum, these students dealt with high parental expectations or lack thereof in different ways. It began as issues related to cultural dissonance, with the messages of the new host country culture at odds with the culture these students experienced at home and with their particular traumatic history. Over time, they discovered their own way to reconcile both worlds – not by leaving the home culture behind (though that is a possible option) – but by seeking a more integrative solution that respected and honored the home culture embodied by their parents, while reaching out to the mainstream culture and what it could offer them. While the literature typically has framed family dynamics within Asian American families in a negative light, my findings paint a more positive picture by showing resiliency within each student's story, in that, through various trials in their lives, these students found a way to forge unique sets of skills to navigate both worlds. Their resolution reveals a particular – and sometimes surprising – pattern of their movement towards an "integrative" acculturative strategy.

Acculturative Strategies in the Pre-College Years

After analyzing the six participants' stories, these students developed unique sets of skills, exhibiting distinct acculturative strategies that enabled them to reconcile both worlds – home and school. By the time they entered college, all of them had adopted the integration strategy – that is, they had accepted both cultures as integral parts of their identity, and found ways to hold on to their own native culture while participating in a dominant mainstream culture. However, it didn't begin this way. Based on their family's history, situation, and challenges, they

could have easily adopted the marginalization strategy – that is, rejected both their own home culture (e.g., as manifested in a dysfunctional home environment), while also rejecting the mainstream American culture (e.g., as an unwelcoming, even hostile social environment). Clearly, the pressure at home with the combination of family obligations and high parental expectations or lack thereof, could have been reasons to push each student away from their home or native culture. Furthermore, most inner city schools were ill equipped to work with the refugee student population. The combination of the lack of academic support at home and in the school could had been major factors to encourage each student to drop out of school; thus, leaving them marginalized in society.

The study participants had plenty of examples of marginalization around them. This was true for Susan's brother, and it could have been true for her as well. But instead, she remained focused and studious throughout her academic career while carrying her family's load. But almost as easily, the participants might have been drawn to an assimilation strategy, whereby they turned their backs on the home culture in favor of the mainstream American culture they were encountering in school and elsewhere. Nicole, for example, played the role of the "good" Cambodian girl well as she received straight A's throughout her elementary and middle school years. But then, in high school, she adopted the assimilation strategy as she rebelled against the "good" Cambodian girl image. Although her grades dropped significantly, she was experiencing one of America's virtues - independence. Eventually she learned how to reconcile both worlds. As a result, Nicole and her parents became best friends during her college years. As for Mary, she experienced little emotional contact with her parents as they worked long hours. Her loneliness at home drove her away more and more from her native culture. It wasn't by choice that she received little contact with her parents. Rather, it was by circumstances that she drifted

toward the assimilation strategy. Over time, she developed an appreciation for both worlds even though she separated the two into “home is home” and “school is school”. For instance, she remained focused and studious on her academic pursuit while enjoying Khmer and Chinese movies at home.

A separation strategy, in which the participant willingly oriented his or her life to the home culture while rejecting the mainstream culture, was also a possibility, especially where the home culture was a source of positive associations. Lee enjoyed his family and was proud of being Cambodian. Only one of his twenty cousins finished high school and many of them were gang-involved. Lee could have easily followed their footsteps. Even though many of his cousins adopted the marginalization strategy, whether by choice or circumstances, he was determined to be the first in his family to attend and graduate from college. Yet he had many Cambodian friends in the community and often participated in the annual Cambodian New Year celebration and other traditional Cambodian rituals. He easily could have been comfortable socializing with other Cambodians in the community and remained in his ethnic enclave as a sign of the separation strategy. However, his school was extremely diverse, in which he had many friends and mentors outside of his ethnic enclave. Schooling gave him the fertile ground to develop an integration strategy as he learned how to navigate both worlds.

Their embrace of an integration strategy was thus not a foregone conclusion, and it was sometimes the end result of a period of time in which the participants “tried out” different acculturative strategies. Sandy, for example, adopted the marginalization strategy in response to the difficult circumstances she experienced in many aspects of her life as an adolescent. Two of her brothers including her father were gang-involved. There was always constant strife at home due to alcohol abuse. It typically led to physical, emotional, and verbal abuses. As a result, the

combination of family issues and not feeling connected at school led her to drop out of high school. She eventually sought independence from her family by running away from home and by working at a local financial institution. Her marginalization strategy led her to a lifestyle of drugs and parties for a number of years. Most of her peers during that time were gang involved. However, she came to her senses when her mother was diagnosed with cancer. Although this event was traumatic, it brought her closer to home and eventually back in school. It took Sandy ten years to turn from a marginalized strategy onto an integrated one.

Finally, Veronica, by circumstances, could have adopted the marginalization strategy by following her parents' footstep. While her father was in prison, her mother neglected her motherly responsibilities. Veronica took on the role as mother to her younger sister. Due to family issues and circumstances, she experienced a weak connection with her parents. As a result, she focused her attention on doing well in school and on taking care of her younger sister. In addition, she became very involved with various extracurricular activities in school. Because of her family issues, it would seem appropriate to adopt the assimilation strategy. In other words, it would be comfortable for Veronica to acculturate into the mainstream society by rejecting her native culture. Instead, through dancing, she discovered her native roots. She greatly enjoyed dancing and remained passionate about it. She performed traditional Cambodian cultural dances often during the annual Cambodian New Year celebration. Through dancing, she was able to develop an integrated strategy during her high school years.

All in all, by the time all of the participants entered college, they had become gifted cultural mediators. All faced the fundamental cultural dissonance that is inescapable for second-generation Cambodian immigrants, and all were situated within home culture that was marked by acute stresses and a traumatic history. But by different routes and prompted by somewhat

differing circumstances, they all found an acculturative strategy that allowed them to comfortably meld their home cultures with the mainstream culture. As such they had each developed a set of coping skills and cultural mediation strategies that would set the stage for their postsecondary education.

Post-secondary Context: College Campus Climate and Conditions

All of the students attended one of two higher education institutions. Five of the students were enrolled at a large prestigious university while the other one attended a community college. There were notable similarities and differences when comparing and contrasting both schools. In terms of similarities, both of the schools had cultural centers and student services available to meet students' needs. All of the students with the exception of Mary utilized these centers and student services. Furthermore, both schools were racially and culturally diverse, including other Cambodian and Southeast Asians students, as well as students from other racial and cultural backgrounds. The university consisted of 35% minority students while the community college boast a 70% minority student population. The diversity of the student population, however, was not matched by a corresponding diversity among the faculty. For example, in observing classes these participants attended, I only saw White male professors. Although the schools were diverse, the professors were not. This may explain why the participants never spoke of any connections or relationships forged between them and their professors. As a result, participants' connection to the university didn't come from teachers. All of their connections to campus came from cultural ethnic clubs for those attended the university while connection to the community college came from the tutoring center and peer-to-peer interactions.

Table 4.3. Comparison of College Climate and Conditions

Feature of Campus	University	Community College
Campus size	Larger	Smaller
Classroom size	Larger	Smaller
Student diversity	Same	Same
Access to professors	Less access	Greater access
White professors	Same presence	Same presence
Presence of cultural centers	Present	Present
Access to student resources	Same	Same
Frequency and range of social events	More events	Fewer events

As for the differences, the university was much larger than the community college. There were approximately 40,000 undergraduate students in the university; whereas, the community college consisted of approximately 5000 students. As a result, the classroom size observed in the university ranged from 50 to 200 students. As for the community college, the classroom size was about 20 to 30 students. This may explain why access to professors in the university was difficult for the participants. In the community college, Sandy was able to interact with her math professor in class by asking various math questions. The larger campus made it less intimate for

the participants than the community college climate. For the participants attending the university, Susan, Nicole, and Mary only came to campus to attend their classes and then would typically leave right after. As for Lee and Veronica, they were very involved with the Cambodian Club, which explained why they tend to stay on campus. Sandy, in contrast, she spent many hours throughout the week at the tutoring center. She felt that the school and teachers were eager and willing to help her with her schoolwork.

In general, the participants who attended the university seemed to be more connected to the campus through the cultural/ethnic and social clubs than through with the university staff or faculty. While in the community college, Sandy felt more connected to the campus through the staff than social clubs.

Negotiation Between Two Worlds: Evolving Acculturative Strategies

All of the subjects had to make sense of the two worlds in which they lived, one in the home culture with the particular family dynamics they were experiencing, and the other on the college campus in the particular contexts they found themselves. In effect, their negotiations between these two worlds reflected a priority order – not necessarily the same – between family, work, and school and manifested itself in a particular kind of connection or desire for connection with the college campus. As summarized in Table 4.4, the outcome of the negotiation was an acculturative strategy.

Table 4.4. Navigating the Two Worlds of Home and College

Participant	Negotiating priorities between two worlds	Connections to College Campus	Acculturative Strategies (postsecondary years)	
			Circumstances pushed towards…	***Desired Strategy***
Susan (at University)	Family School Work	Desired to connect but had too many responsibilities and work obligations	Forced her to choose Separation	Integration
Nicole (at University)	Family School Work	Desired to connect but worked a lot, had strong family bond, access to various programs	Forced her to choose separation (finance problems, had to move home with parents)	Integration
Mary (at University)	School Family (no work)	Desired to connect but needed initial connection	Her strategy was separation; no one reached out to her	Integration
Lee (at University)	School Family Work	Well connected	Active engagement in Cambodian Club	Integration
Sandy (at Community College)	Family School (no work)	Well connected	Active engagement in Tutoring Center	Integration
Veronica (at University)	School Family Work	Well connected	Active engagement in Cambodian Club	Integration

As cultural mediators, these students learned how to prioritize major areas in their life – in particular, the priorities among family, school, and work – and the priority order in

conjunction with other conditions on campus, affected the acculturative strategies going through postsecondary years. Although all of them desired to be integrated into the college campus, only three were fully engaged and involved with social activities on campus. The other three had pressing needs to attend to, often related to their families, and this exerted a counter-pressure on their chosen acculturative strategy. For the first two years, Susan was an active member of the Cambodian Club on campus. She loved the mission of the club to preserve and promote the Cambodian culture on campus and in the greater community. She enjoyed serving the community through various outreach events. As she got accepted into the nursing program and family issues arose during her junior and senior year, she had to stay focused on her studies and help out her family. In addition to schoolwork and family responsibilities, she had to work to pay for college since she received little financial support from the school and home. Notably, her family was considered low-income according to the government. Susan desired to be fully integrated on campus. However, the rigor of the nursing program, family responsibilities, and work forced Susan to adopt a separation strategy. To give a glimpse of her situation, she shared:

> Basically last year during my first year of nursing school my brother umm…had to…he was having some problems with his ex-wife and to the point where the state was trynna take all 3 of their kids and um…my sister and I worked hard with the case worker like going to court meetings and just meetings with the caseworker to try to gain custody of the kids so that took a large portion of my time winter quarter which um…affected my schooling.

Nicole also desired to be fully engaged on campus. She lived on campus during her first year in college. She was very involved with a program that geared toward empowering young women of color. She expressed her delight in the program as,

> It's a great program. At first I was hesitant in being in it but I know I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for that program so um…and I met A LOT of people through it…like some of my closets friends are STP students.

Unfortunately, during her second year, she had to move back home to reduce her monthly expenses and had to work many hours to pay for college. As a result, she was forced into adopting a separation strategy. Though she still had access to various programs on campus, but due to the long commute and work, she seldom utilized the services.

Mary was excited about her first year in college. She was young, bright, and shy. As a cultural mediator, she wanted to be more involved on campus. Since it was her first year, she was still figuring out how to navigate the large university campus. Like the other participants, she was the first in her family to attend college. Therefore, she had little prior knowledge about college expectations (knowledge that could have been passed down from immediate family members or relatives). She remained reserved and often kept matters to herself. However, she did have a few friends she connected with on campus. Other than that, she continued her focus on excelling academically. In spite of her long commute and academic focus, she wished to be more involved on campus. She needed the initial connection. She would be more involved if someone on campus reached out to her, as she shared,

> It's more of a time issue and the whole first step thing…it's so hard for me to take that first step but after that first step I mean it should be fine. I'm trynna find the time to do it and join a club or something.

For someone like Mary, the initial contact could mean the difference between adopting an integration strategy versus a separation one.

As Mary's case suggests, connections with institutional supports could have an influence over the acculturative strategy each student assumed and sustained. Lee, Susan, and Sandy were fully integrated into the college campus both academically and socially. Although Lee commuted and worked many hours throughout the week, he felt a strong connection with the college campus. He continued to keep his academic goal a main priority. During the little free time he

had during the week, he enjoyed serving alongside his friends in the Cambodian Club. He was first involved with the club as a traditional Khmer dancer. Later, he became fully involved as a member and public relations officer. He made many friends on campus during the course of his undergraduate years. He described his experience as, "We all study together. We all work together. So just to know that we have that certain thing in common it propels you to do more and to do better. And to do it with your friends it kind of…it helps even more." Furthermore, he knew how to access emotional support through the Cambodian Club if he ran into any personal issues as he articulated:

> I feel like it's a better connection when you can talk to like…personal issues with someone who you resonate with greatly like a Cambodian like another Cambodian person cause they understand the hardships of Cambodian families, um…they may have experienced similar upbringings so just the fact that we can fall back on someone who's personally experienced what we've experienced, it definitely makes things a lot more comfortable and a lot more at ease when you're kind of debriefing on the whole situation that you are facing.

Lee's ability to navigate between two worlds prepared him to graduate from college.

Similarly, in spite of a ten-year hiatus from school, Sandy was enjoying her time in college. Although she continued to have many family responsibilities, she felt comfortable on campus. As a matter of fact, she forged many friendships on campus. She described her new friends as positive compared to her old ones, which played a vital role in helping her to achieve her academic goals. For instance, she explained,

> Surrounding yourself with positive people. That is a major factor. You know how they say, you are who your crowd is? It really brings a major impact from all the social crowds I've been going through.

In addition to feeling socially connected on campus, she felt her academic needs were met as well. She spent countless hours receiving help at the tutoring center. Also, due to the small classroom size in community college, she felt supported by her teachers. Even though she found

a new passion for school, she remained involved with her mother's life. She continued to make time to take her mother to all of her doctor's appointments and continued to be her primary English translator. She also made sure to cook and clean around the home in order to alleviate any burden from her mother. Both were becoming closer friends as they continued to spend quality time together. She was once marginalized, but over time, she learned how to adopt the integration strategy.

Lastly, Veronica was well adept in navigating through both worlds. She lived in walking distance from the campus. In addition, she continued to be thankful and received on-going support from her new family. She shared her new family situation as,

> Once we were with my aunt and uncle, cause my uncle is white and he…he tried like, I guess he kind of spoiled us. I guess he's more spoiled then a… Cambodian like, you know, family. Yeah, so he always like spoiled us and so I didn't have as much responsibility as I did in high school but…I still help out around the house and stuff.

The new support structure allowed her to focus on work, school, and volunteer opportunities. In addition to working many hours throughout her week, she remained involved academically and socially on campus. Her main career focus remained to become an elementary school teacher, a goal towards, which she was strongly progressing. With the little free time that she had, she enjoyed and continued to be involved with the Cambodian Club as one of their dance instructors. She expressed her commitment this way:

> Well the Cambodian Club is like the deciding factor of me coming to the U and I like…I knew they always put on a new year show and so…I always wanted to be a part of it and…I think the new year show is what brings the community together especially like…at the…um…around this area and I wanted to be a part of that.

Veronica loved serving others. Although at times it was difficult for her to balance her work, school, volunteer, and family life, her unique skills set in navigating both worlds had prepared her for such tasks.

All of the six second-generation Cambodian American students possessed a set of unique skills to be cultural mediators. In spite of unique challenges within their family dynamics and their college culture, they continued to persist through college towards their Bachelor's degree. But, in so doing, they sometimes found themselves forced to make adjustments in their acculturative strategies, in ways that could take account of a dynamic balancing act involving their commitments to family, the demands of their schooling, and whatever obligations they had for working. The cultural negotiation process in which they were involved thus did not always enable them to sustain an integrated stance, even though they had developed the cultural mediation skills and even the commitment to accept and meld both cultures together in their lives.

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Implications

This dissertation study has looked closely at six second-generation Cambodian immigrant students who are currently attending college, and who have persisted in college despite substantial adversities in their lives prior to and during their college years. The challenges they have faced stem initially from the conditions of their families coming to the United States, uprooted by the trauma of genocide and making their way to this country with little or no English, little knowledge of how American society works, and relatively little education or relevant (or recognized) job skills. They have had to make their way in their new surroundings ill-equipped and with scars of their traumatic history. It has not been easy for them or their children.

Born into this situation or coming with them as very young children, the study participants have found themselves straddling two worlds—the first defined by their families' circumstances, native culture, and shared traumatic history, and the second defined by mainstream culture and institutions, chiefly the schools they have attended, and also by a larger context of discrimination, poverty, and racism. In this situation, the study participants have grown up facing significant "cultural dissonance" and stress. A central challenge to their lives has been to navigate and, where possible, resolve the dissonance in ways that serve their longer-range needs and goals.

The study has revealed a pattern of culturally-embedded resilience, guided by evolving and adaptive acculturative strategies, with the net effect that these individuals are making their way successfully through postsecondary education and have found a way to connect their home

cultures with the larger host country culture, without sacrificing either. In this chapter, I will review the main patterns in the data, and then explore their larger meanings concerning the postsecondary persistence of students for this particular cultural group (and even from any particular cultural group), as well as some possible alternative interpretations of the findings. Finally, I note unanswered questions and implications for postsecondary institutions.

Summary of Main Findings

The six stories of second-generation Cambodian American students showed how family dynamics and the college culture together are influencing their educational experience and progression towards their undergraduate degree. Their journeys are in many ways unique, revealing substantial differences in the circumstances they faced at home, and the configuration of supports and pressures that reside in their family dynamic. The pressures they experienced at home could have pushed them into different courses. For example, three participants experienced a high degree of family responsibilities, while the other three experienced lower levels. Furthermore, four participants experienced high parental expectations at home while two of them a lack of one. Interestingly, four participants grew up with both parents while two of them were raised in a single-parent household.

As shown in the findings, each journey was unique and complex. They learned how to adapt to their circumstances, and a common acculturative strategy – one that emphasizes integration of the two cultural worlds they are experiencing. In short, they moved into their college education seeking a way to join their home cultures and the mainstream culture they have encountered in their schooling.

Based on their family dynamics, all of them easily could have adopted a *marginalization strategy* – that is one in which they rejected the host culture as well as their home cultures. Similarly, some might have been tempted by a *separation* strategy, in which they resolved to stay primarily connected to their home culture, while rejecting the mainstream culture, in which they did not feel welcome. Or, in a few cases, it would have been just as likely for the participants to have gone the opposite way, rejecting the home culture and all its apparent dysfunctions for a complete immersion in the mainstream culture, through an *assimilation* strategy. However, they chose the *integration* strategy. Their stories revealed their desire to be integrated into both their parents' native culture and the mainstream one. Although each student desired the integration strategy, the cultural-mediation skill sets were learned and developed during their childhood and adolescent years. These skills are students' ability to reconcile the tension between the mainstream culture and their home culture. As shown in each of their portraits, although their pathways were different, by the time they entered college they had developed an ability to flow through both worlds.

As cultural mediators, the six participants used their cultural-mediation skills to navigate the college world and home life. One of the participants attended a local community college while the other five attended a large prestigious university. There were some similarities between the small community college and large university. Both had a diverse student body and cultural centers for students. All of the students were involved at least with the student services/centers on campus while remaining connected to their home life. With further examination, all of the students developed a weekly routine and prioritized their responsibilities accordingly. As for differences, the classroom size was much smaller in the community college than the university. Another difference was the number of social events that occurred on campus to provide students

with social opportunities as the large university contained more than the community college. These factors played out differently for those who attended the university and community college via access to faculty members and connection to campus. Students who attended the university had less access to their professors than the one who attended community college, in which their only connection to the campus was through social clubs. Whereas, the community college students' access and connection to the campus was through her professor and academic tutoring service.

As shown in the findings, this college climate set the stage for the participants to showcase their cultural-mediation skills. For three of the participants, they were well integrated into the college world. They knew how to balance the tensions between both their home and college life. As for the other three, they desired to be connected and involved on campus. Due to various circumstances, they were forced to spend less time on campus. As a result, the student's desire to continue pursuing an integration strategy evolved, and took on more of the character of a separation strategy, albeit a forced separation and possibly a temporary one. At the same time, these students were able to continue their studies and be successful academically.

The main findings revealed the unique challenges each student faced and how they overcame those challenges. Often times, literature on immigrant populations implicitly and explicitly reveals a deficit perspective about students' native culture suggesting that their home circumstances and culture negatively influence their academic achievement. This study challenged such deficit perspectives and revealed a different understanding of college retention among a particular immigrant group.

What These Findings Say about Understanding Retention of a Particular Immigrant Group

This study's findings reveal great insights into the persistence of a particular immigrant group. In particular, the study takes us deeper into, first, the nature of the cultural dissonance and stress young people in immigrant groups experience, and how they resolve them; second, what distinguishes this particular cultural group, and how those differences might play out in their persistence stories; and third, how their persistence in postsecondary education reveals a certain kind of resilience.

Understanding How Young Immigrant Family Members Resolve Cultural Dissonances They Experience

First, the study helps us see how the students find a productive way to navigate the inevitable cultural dissonance and stress they experience. Their resolution, each in its own way, was to develop skills at "cultural mediation" and to use the strengths each culture provided them to support both themselves and their families going forward. The process was not simple, or linear; however, developing an acculturative strategy of integration often involved adopting other strategies first, then discarding them later (e.g., sometime one needs to "try out" different acculturative strategies, whether forced or unforced, until one finds that they don't help to reach one's goals). Integration means drawing on both the host and home cultures to form a new complex identity, in this case, known as Cambodian-American. Integration also encompasses ways young immigrants adapt to the dominant culture; since they cannot fully assimilate into the culture due to long lasting stereotypes historically and currently cause discriminatory practices and beliefs in immigrant youth—in the case of Asian Americans, as "model minority" and "perpetual foreigner". Although such harmful stereotypes and discriminations in the U.S. may

not disappear for a long time, immigrant youth developed great resilience and persistency, which speaks to the power of integration.

Understanding What Defines and Distinguishes a Particular Immigrant Group

This study is concerned with a particular Southeast Asian immigrant group, one that has not been studied much and is easily subsumed in broader categories, in ways that obscure the actual dynamics of postsecondary persistence for this group. By not understanding heterogeneity of immigrant groups, scholars and postsecondary leaders deny immigrant groups' unique experiences, which creates a distorted perception of their reality. For example, the six second-generation Cambodian American participants' stories should clarify the false notion of all Asian-Americans depiction as "model minorities" —that is, highly capable and successful members of a minority population in America, and ones who do not need particular help or support. While it is true that all six were in college (in itself a kind of educational "success story"), they were not uniformly successful in academic terms, and they clearly needed a variety of supports, both to arrive in college and to stay there. And it is also very clear, together with all of their family members, they represent a wide range of dispositions, capabilities, and degrees of success or failure.

What is more, the particular cultural history that Cambodian Americans bring and the circumstances of their coming to the United States, as refugees from traumatic genocide, distinguish them from the majority Asian groups in the U.S. (Chinese, Japanese, Philippines, and Koreans), if not most others of the 48 different ethnic groups from some Asian origin. Furthermore, their experience as refugees is quite different, as well, from other Southeast Asian groups (Vietnamese, Thai, and Laos). The trauma from the genocide, "The Killing Field", creates a set of complex issues as Cambodians' attempt to settle into a new land. These issues

were threaded through the family dynamics my study participants recounted, and are the source of some of the anger and frustrations they experienced, as well as the life choices that they and their family members made.

Understanding the Meaning of Resilience in Cambodian American Students' Persistence

Finally, the study reveals that retention of Cambodian American students reflects resilience, especially a kind of culturally-based resilience. Although all of the participants continued to persist towards their bachelor degree, they had to overcome many family issues and obstacles, as seen in their stories. Much of the literature about Southeast Asian Americans would end there, as many scholars continued to paint these students as victims. However, these students' stories revealed their strengths as cultural mediators and resilient individuals. Cicchetti & Rogosch (2002) defined resilience as the understanding of the processes underlying adaptation and mal-adaptation across the life course, while also providing the means of preventing and ameliorating mal-adaptive and pathological outcomes, which in this case, would mean dropping out of college. But beyond the conventional definitions of "resilience", lodged in psychological literatures, the findings of the study paint a picture of a more culturally rooted set of dynamics within individuals and their interactions with their environment that makes them resilient in the face of the particular adversities that Cambodian Americans face.

A recent resilience literature review study by Rink & Tricker (2005) points to positive factors such as a caring adult relationship and connectedness to community that promote academic achievement. With all of the participants, they were either involved in the Cambodian or college community – and in particular, segments of the college community that were sensitive to their cultural roots (as in ethnic centers) – and/or developed relationships with caring adults, which helped them to become resilient and to achieve academically. And here the "caring adults"

include, in most cases, their parents, people who embody what it means to be Cambodian and who wish the best for their children as well as other adults who can support their efforts to achieve their goals. So resilience means, among other things, finding a way to honor and stay connected to cultural roots that simultaneously reflect hardship or adversity and strength and endurance. Seen in this way, the six students' parents' escape from genocide reflected tremendous *persistence* of a different sort.

Unfortunately, these stories cannot be generalized to all second-generation Cambodian American students or to other immigrant groups. Many of the participants' immediate family members and relatives, for example, ended up being marginalized and dropping out of school. Similarly, other immigrant groups experience the same or similar fates. There is much work to be done to help other Cambodian students and other immigrant groups to persist through school and to succeed academically as this study provides some important implications.

Other Ways of Understanding Students' Persistence

The main findings reveal the unique experiences of a select group of second-generation Cambodian American college students and their position as cultural mediators. The persistence of these students can be explained and interpreted in alternative ways such as socio-economic status, intelligence, gender differences, and luck.

A first explanation centers on the economic resources available to these students. By this argument, since most of the students grew up in two-parent homes, they may have experienced higher income than other second-generation Cambodian American students, and that these extra resources, though modest, would have helped them carry on in their educational studies. This explanation reflects evidence that students who grew up in higher income households tend to persist more than those from low-income household (Walpole, 2003). Although socio-economic

resources may help students to persist though school, it is unlikely to be the main factor for these six participants. All of them grew up in low-income neighborhoods. Furthermore, even though both parents of four of the students worked, all of them were employed in low-wage jobs. As for the other student who grew up in a single-parent home, she manages to persist through her primary and secondary schooling into higher education with little economic assistance.

Another explanation for the students' persistence in higher education is strictly a matter of their superior intelligence. By this argument, the reason why the six participants excelled in school, while many of their family members, relatives, or friends did not is that they were more intelligent than other second-generation Cambodian American students. Although without a doubt they are intelligent, this trait alone does not help students to persist in college, and it completely ignores the cultural dynamics and acculturative strategies that are so prominent in these students' stories. There is a strong chance that other intelligent second-generation Cambodian students in the U.S. did not have the opportunity to attend or have dropped out of college. In addition, the notion of intelligence denies these students their individual struggles and hard work. As seen in their stories, they overcame many obstacles and worked extremely hard to persist through school. Furthermore, the notion of intelligence plays into the model minority myth that all Asian Americans are universally smart and successfully economically, which is clearly not true for these students and their families.

Conceivably, gender may also have played a vital role in these students' persistence. Because all but one of these students were women, the argument could be made that this predisposed them to be more studious, more committed to schooling, and more effective at it. And there is plenty of evidence of a growing gender gap among young men and women in many racial and ethnic groups, whereby the former are far more likely to achieve academically than the

young men. One may argue that females are smarter or have better adaptive skills than males, yet my one male subject was clearly as well adapted, if not more so than the women. And it is also clear that among the five women I studied, several of them were at considerable risk of not ever making it to college to begin with, no less persisting in it, as they worked through different acculturative strategies. At the same time, there clearly were pressures on male Cambodian Americans in the families of the six I studied that might have pushed them in other directions, and kept them there. For example, involvement in Asian gangs (as a protective measure) and involvement in drugs (as a way to secure income, if not escape desperate circumstances) were clearly big temptations for male siblings, fathers, and relatives of the students I studied. Here, their trajectories and choices may be reflecting a larger pattern in the United States. For instance, the "War on Drugs" in the 1980s caused the US penal population to increase from 300,000 to over 2 million in less than 30 years (Alexander, 2010); during that time, Cambodians came en masse, and most of the inmates were Black and Brown men. Cambodian American males may have experienced what many Blacks had experienced – racial profiling by police officers, arrests, little to no legal representation in the court, and harsh sentencing (p. 58). As a result, many Cambodian American males may not have had the opportunity to attend college. As seen in the participants' stories, this is true for many of their family members.

One final explanation needs to be considered. Were these six just the lucky (and plucky) few – the exceptions that proved the rule – who were in the right place at the right time, and able to seize the opportunities that came their way? Or, was it providence guided by a Greater Being? While lucky circumstances or divine intervention are probably a part of all 'success stories', no matter what the cultural circumstances, these individuals' stories say more about adversity and response to it, and the specific, culturally-based strategies they developed to meet their

adversities.

While differences in socio-economic resources, intelligence, gender, and good fortune or divine intervention may have played a role in explaining the college persistence of these individuals, there is little clear evidence for these claims in the cases I have studied. The stories and evidence from this study suggest that the strongest explanation lies in the acculturative strategies these individuals have assumed, and their resulting identity as cultural mediators. Through the process of negotiating and navigating through both worlds from an early age, they have mastered and adopted such skill sets before they entered college, while continuing to solidify them during college years. In other words, these students' persistence through college is a display of their identity as cultural mediators.

Unanswered Questions and Directions for Further Research

The findings of this study have challenged and pushed the thinking about college student persistence. In spite of such illumination, there are still many questions to consider as scholars move forward on this topic:

- Exactly how is cultural mediation learned?
- How does gender shape the development of cultural mediation skills?
- What specific socio-cultural factors help them to be cultural mediators?
- How well do these findings capture the experiences of other Cambodian Americans?
- In what ways do the stories of these Cambodian Persisters parallel or diverge from the persistence patterns that can be identified for other ethnic immigrant groups? What explains these differences?
- What other resilience factors promote persistence, and in what ways, if at all, are these factors culturally based?

- In what ways do or can college faculty/staff, policies, and support systems have a helpful effect on the success of Cambodian American students?

In addition to family dynamics, there may be many possible factors to explain how second-generation immigrant students become cultural mediators. For instance, the neighborhood they grew up in and their mentors may have encouraged them to adopt the integration strategy.

As for the second question, since this study focuses on second-generation Cambodian students, the findings may or may not apply to other Cambodian American or other immigrant students. If they do apply to other immigrant students, then it can help institutions of higher education to develop programs and strategies to assist many immigrant students. Furthermore, there may be many other resilience factors that promote persistence. In addition to connectedness to community and positive adults, there may be strong internal motivations and desires to achieve academically. Or, students' desire may transcend education, in that academic achievement may give them a sense of pride and belonging in society, comfort and stability, or control and prestige in one's life. These internal qualities are worth exploring in depth, as students' internal desires may be stronger than their circumstances and challenges, which can be the cause for their persistence in higher education.

Lastly, persistence deals with student measurement while retention measures institutional responsibilities on their college experiences and success. Unfortunately, this study does not provide much evaluation about the roles of institutions on students' college success. In future studies, it is worth examining the quantity and quality of faculty/staff interactions with second-generation Cambodian American students and closely looking at, if any, various support systems that may help them. By doing this, we can see the effects of college institutions on the success of Cambodian American students.

How the Study Informs College Support Systems

Ideally, acculturative issues discussed in this study that relate to family dynamics and the college culture could be addressed or mediated by the school. In other words, schools can play a crucial role in the academic progression of second-generation Cambodian-American students. A resource often overlooked is the role of educators or faculty members. With proper training in diversity and immigration issues, academic counselors and faculty members can build upon existing skills and knowledge to develop and implement highly effective support programs and curriculums for Cambodian American students. First of all, the six case stories make clear that supportive programs on campus can offer the Cambodian Americans a “safe place” or a way to connect with campus life, without having to abandon or sacrifice what makes them Cambodian, as seen in Lee’s and others’ involvement with the Cambodian club and student services.

But there is more that could be done, within the pedagogy of the academy and in the relationships it sets up with students. One example in which curriculum can be developed comes from a conceptual framework defined as Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT). Geneva Gay (2000) defines CRT as an educational tool that examines the cultural backgrounds, past experiences, and learning styles of students to make learning more relevant and meaningful to them. In addition, as a pedagogical approach, CRT can create curriculums that connect both the experiences of home and classroom environments for students. For example, it can help teachers become more familiar with the culture, social, and historical backgrounds of Cambodian-Americans. Additionally, CRT can culturally validate and affirm the cultural and social backgrounds of Cambodian-American students’ experiences and aspirations.

Similarly to Cambodian immigrant parents’ involvement in their children’s education, Angela Valenzuela articulates the concept of caring among Mexican American children in her

definition of *Educación* (Valenzuela, 1999). According to this scholar, Educación denotes the importance of family, and in particular, of instilling ethical values and responsibility which establish the basis for an individual's learning among Mexican American families. These two concepts, culturally responsive teaching and Educación, are crucial for both the healthy social development and positive academic progression of Cambodian American students. It appears that the most important aspect of the school is to find creative and strategic ways to display compassion and care towards immigrant students, in particular, second-generation Cambodian American students. Hopefully, their stories inspire educators and school personnel to be culturally sensitive and compassionate towards Cambodian American families.

Institutional policies and support systems may also have a bigger role to play than has currently been attempted. One of the ways they can serve Cambodian American students is by intentionally recruit and retain immigrant faculty or staff members, ideally from Cambodian descent. For immigrant students, to see faculty or administrators who are in positions of power that resemble them may increase their hope and chance to succeed in college. Another way institutions can support Cambodian American and other immigrant students is to provide consistent and effective cultural trainings for current staff members and administrators. These trainings may give them the necessary skill sets and understanding in how to work more effectively with immigrant students. Lastly, the institution's budget must reflect the priority to serve Cambodian American students and other students like them.

Epilogue

Reflections on the Researcher's Personal Journey

The narrative presented in the preface of this study is my personal story. As I continue to reflect upon my personal journey, I saw a glimpse of race, democracy, and transformative education within the context of one Cambodian immigrant family. Throughout my doctoral studies there have been four books that inspired and influenced my journey and thinking. They are: 1) Michelle Alexander, who wrote *The New Jim Crow*, 2) Jane Martin, author of *Educational Metamorphoses;* 3) Carola Suarez-Orozco, Marcelo M. Suarez-Orozco, & Irina Todorova, with *Learning a New Land*; and 4) Judith Tannenbaum & Spoon Jackson, writers of *By Heart*. Michelle helped me to understand the US penal system and the effects of the War on Drugs on immigrant families upon arrival into the US. Jane opened my eye to the various educational metamorphoses I underwent throughout my entire life. The authors of *Learning a New Land* raised critical questions about my background and experiences. Lastly, Spoon, an older brother figure and an inspirational voice, spoke dearly to my heart. His life transformation and wisdom inspired me to be the master of my fate and the captain of my soul.

Michelle Alexander – *The New Jim Crow*

The War on Drugs in the 1980s had caused the US penal population to increase from 300,000 to over 2 million in less than 30 years (p. 6). Drug offenses alone accounted for two-thirds of the rise in the federal inmate population and more than half of the rise in state prisoners between 1985 and 2000 (p. 59). Most of the inmates were Black and Brown men. In some states, they accounted for 90% of the inmates (p. 199). These numbers resembled those from the 'Killing Field.' Cambodia's concentration camps and Thailand's refugee camps bear similar resemblance to the prison system in the US. The camps were meant to detain, killed, and tortured those who resemble Western influences; whereas, the US prison system was meant to detain,

dehumanized, and place death sentences on those who do not resemble the dominant group. All of these tactics were systems of control (p. 21). Cambodians had been controlled in the regime that killed my father and many of my relatives in a span of four years. The effects of the regime spilled into my family's life in the US, which can explain the endless family conflict I had during my childhood and adolescent years.

I grieved for my family members and countrymen who were executed by the evil regime. I too am distraught by the sheer number of my countrymen locked up in prison. It seemed that Cambodia remains a small and insignificant country in the eye of the world. An atrocity like the 'Killing Field' should have been world news. Where were the human rights activists during that time? I wonder about the same thing with the War on Drugs. How could mass incarceration of Black and Brown men go unnoticed in the US? Where were the civil rights leaders? (p. 211) Michelle believed they focused too much on legal matters and lost touch with the people. The civil rights leaders began as a grass-root movement, which made them extremely effective (p. 214). As they moved themselves further away from the people in the community, mass incarceration of Black and Brown men went unnoticed. She suggested they go back to becoming grassroots again. In addition, some believed that America live in a post-racial era, thus the effects of colorblindness (p. 226). Likewise, with Cambodia, the world focused too much on the Cold War and forgotten about the people affected by them. It was unfortunate Cambodia had become invisible in the eye of the world.

During my time in the US, I had many friends who were gang involved and I was on my way to becoming one. The glorification of the gang lifestyle was evident in the Black community (p. 164). My friends bought into the same stigma as them. Although I grew up with many friends involved in the gang, it wasn't until my teenage year that I realized the reality of the prison

system. Most of my friends and I had an affinity towards the gang culture. When we first arrived to the US, we got bullied by the Black and Mexican gangs. As a result, the Asians formed their own gangs to protect themselves. As the gang culture exploded in the late 1980s and 1990s (most of the gangs came from California), there was a rise in the number of Asian gangs. I grew up with most of the Asian gang leaders. I didn't know how many friends were locked-up as I was too busy with family obligations and schoolwork. It wasn't until the first year when I started school at the University of Washington, I heard stories from my cousin and other friends that one of the Asian gangs shot up a café back home in Tacoma. Those who were involved got caught and were sent to prison. I was shocked as some of them were my friends and I was just hanging out with them before I left for school.

I was fortunate not to be incarcerated under my circumstances. God had definitely watched over my life because I came during the early 1980s in the midst of the War on Drugs. My friends or relatives experienced what many Blacks had experienced – Racial profiling by police officers, arrests, little to no legal representation in the court, and harsh sentencing (p. 58). Furthermore, those who were released remain stigmatized by the label 'felon,' which ostracized them from mainstream society and economy (p. 156). I remembered feeling ashamed of my culture for not being 'American' enough as other children were teasing me. In the Black community, this sense of shame had caused an eerie silence where nobody dared to speak about their issues (p. 161). The Cambodian community seldom spoke about the 'Killing Field' or issues they faced during their adjustment in the US. This may be one of the causes to explain my sense of loneliness and depression, as the Cambodian community remained eerily silent. Due to the trauma of the genocide, few spoke about their experiences. It seemed like a taboo to speak about them. The only time my mother told me about what she had been through was when I had

done something wrong or disobeyed her. Even then, it was vague and only a way to make us feel guilty. The common phrases were: “If only you knew what we had to go through to get you here, you wouldn’t do bad things,” or “You are lucky to grow up in America; back home in Cambodia, you don’t have this kind of opportunity.” And my personal favorite: “I should have left you in the jungle.” Then, they would go on to telling me the story about my birth and how I almost died in the jungle. And shortly after that, my mom or older siblings would begin to sob. I had done so many wrong things that I remembered the entire story by heart.

Jane Martin – *Educational Metamorphoses*

The first metamorphosis every human being encountered was becoming a newborn (p. 39). My mother contributed greatly to the love and care of my first metamorphosis. Although my first metamorphosis was a drastic one, she persevered and nurtured me to safety in a midst of dire circumstances. I can never ignore or forget the heavy responsibility my mother took on carrying me through the jungle from the concentration camp to the refugee camp. My birth was an explicit example of what Jane called *educational metamorphosis*. Education can be seen in many different contexts and stages in life and not just within the four walls of schools. Simply, educational metamorphosis is defined as the process that makes us human. Furthermore, a human being can undergo constant transformation throughout his/her life, which sometimes can radically alter his or her identity (p. 8-13).

My story reminded me of a couple of characters from Jane’s book. The first was Victor, a child from the woods, who was immersed in French civilization (p. 27). As a boy, many believed he wasn’t capable of learning. Under the tutelage of Itard, his mentor, he learned to compare, discern, judge, and to communicate his wants in writing. As I was brought out of the jungle into US civilization, Victor’s story encouraged me to continue to write my story. I believe it will

inspire many and will illuminate the fragility of human beings. Furthermore, it will give hope to others as my story revealed many different educational agencies that transformed my life from a depressed child to a confident doctor and a leader in my community. I could only imagine that language would be a difficult adjustment for my family. Unfortunately, to many people in society, language has been the measure of man (p. 30). Too often, my family had been mistreated or frowned upon for not possessing fluency in the English language as my mother and older siblings came to the US at an older age.

The other character in Jane's book was Malcolm Little who later transformed into Malcolm X, one of the key leaders of the African American community (p. 47). Malcolm X went from a schoolboy to a street hustler and after being educated in prison, he learned how to lead his people through the civil rights era. I often wondered the kind of pain or feeling of marginalization Malcolm must have felt (p. 121) during his acculturation process as he moved from one culture (native culture) to another (mainstream culture). Like Malcolm, it took me a long time to overcome or manage such feelings of loneliness and marginalization. In addition, I can envision myself circulating the gift of education to my people (p. 119). In my reflection, Jane helped me to think about significant moments and other educational metamorphoses in my life – from running the streets with my gang friends to graduating from college, from being a depressed child to a highly educated individual, and spiritual transformation.

I ran the streets since I was five because my older siblings were always at work and I was always left alone at home. My friends lived around the neighborhood and we would always hang outside and explore the block. As I got older, due to endless family conflicts, I knew education was my only ticket out of my situation. During high school, I helped a few of my friends to receive their high school diploma. They had similar family dynamics and issues as well. The

only way they knew how to cope with their issues was to be free and independent with their peers on the streets. Yes, I hung out with them, but I took care of business with my schoolwork and family obligations. I encouraged my friends to do the same.

On the streets, it was all about respect. You can't show any fear to anybody. Once people sense fear in you, then you will be a prime target to being bullied. It was easy for a young person to fold under peer pressure during the rise of the gang culture in the 1980s and 1990s. Whenever, friends questioned me about my dedication to school, I stood my ground and told them this was my ticket out. Or, if guys from different sets (neighborhood groups) sweated (applied pressure) me assuming I was part of an Asian gang, I stood my ground and was ready to fight. Typically, they left me alone. I would rather get beat up and gain respect than to back down and be a punk. Again, show no fear, it was all about respect. Another difference between my friends and I was that they seldom use their brain. It was either they ended up in places where there were fights or they didn't know how to manage their anger. Although I got invited to many parties, I avoided many of those places. I only went to places where there were pretty girls, which was the club or community events. Therefore, I never got into trouble like most of my other friends.

Another significant transformation was overcoming depression as a child. The first time I thought about suicide was when I was seven years old. Seven of us were living in Hilltop Tacoma in a one-bedroom apartment. I remembered being home alone and locking myself in the bedroom. I took a knife to my stomach and wondered if anybody would care if I died. I remembered vividly that I wasn't afraid to pull the trigger so to speak. As I was getting ready to stab myself, immediately another voice spoke to me. If I were to be alive, then where would life take me? Out of curiosity, I put the knife down and went outside to play. I guess life got me this far. These significant moments made sense as I encountered a spiritual transformation.

On September 17, 1995, I heard the gospel for the first time. During that time, I was ready to move out of the house and my family was on the verge of breaking apart. In the cafeteria of our high school, an African American mother sat next to us at our table. She spoke to us about the love of Jesus. As she was speaking, I was drawn to the message. How could anybody love me with such intensity to the point of death? Nobody ever died for me or loved me that much. As a matter of fact, I never felt any type of love. I told God, 'If you were real, then restore my family.' In one year, I began to see an improvement in my family. They were speaking to one another again and this time it wasn't out of anger or yelling at one another. I knew that God was real and that I was a sinner in need of a Savior. The night before I moved out of Tacoma to Seattle for school, I wanted to and got baptized after church as a symbol of His death, burial, and resurrection. Although I continued to experience many hardships after I moved out of Tacoma, my life ceased to be the same.

Carola Suarez-Orozco, Marcelo M. Suarez-Orozco, & Irina Todorova – *Learning a New Land*

My story was similar to many of the students and families the authors studied from the San Francisco and Boston area. My academic success defied many odds and overcame many obstacles. For instance, in one of their findings, children who grew up in two-parent families tend to be at an advantage academically (p. 36). Furthermore, girls were significantly more likely to be high achievers or improvers than boys, in which boys were more than twice as likely as girls to be found among the precipitous decliners and low achievers (p. 36). My mother's education level was another factor that influenced my education. She only finished middle school in Cambodia. Traditionally, women were discouraged to finish school and were taught to take care of the home. The authors' research showed a close relationship between parental education

and school readiness, performance on achievement tests, grades, dropout rates, school behavior problems, and school engagement (p. 37). Furthermore, parents with higher educational levels, when compared to parents who have lower levels of education, tend to provide more literacy opportunities, communicate with more sophisticated vocabularies, offer more access to computers, assist (productively) with homework assignments, provide private SAT instruction, offer knowledge about applying to and getting into college, as well as provide other academic supports (p. 37). I was surprised that I had obtained an undergraduate degree and on-ward to a doctorate degree in spite of the statistical findings mentioned earlier. There were many factors that inspired me to excel academically. My oldest sister played a significant role in my educational development. She loved education and always encouraged us to finish school. Well, most times, she was too forceful as a B on a report card wasn't good enough, in which I must get all A's. It was an understatement to say she was a strong believer in education. She acted like a second mother as she took care of my mother and the rest of us. It would take too long to talk about my oldest sister.

In another one of the authors' findings, immigrant students who were enrolled in schools with culture of high expectations perform academically better than immigrant enrolled in dysfunctional, low expectations, or low-quality schools (p. 40). I've seldom thought about my school culture, which would add rich meaning into my narrative. Although I excelled academically despite my difficult circumstances, the condition of my school may have played a major factor in my success. I attended many schools during elementary. But, in middle school, I attended a predominantly white school. In high school, the school was mixed ethnicity and income. The school had a good reputation in terms of academics. It was one of the most beautiful schools in the state with its' own football stadium and a cafeteria that overlooked the

commencement bay. Needless to say, it had a ton of money. I enrolled myself into all of the high achievement courses, the highest level a student can take in that school. Almost all of my classmates were white from middle to upper-middle class background with a couple of other minorities. I was the only one wearing gang attire from head to toe. I stood out like a sore thumb.

Lastly, another profound finding was in the area of relational engagement. Immigrant students who were most likely to adapt successfully to school seem to forge meaningful, positive relationships at school (p. 43). In middle school, it was Mrs. O'Malley, my seventh grade English teacher. In high school, it was Mrs. Parson, my 10th grade English teacher. And, in community college as a running start student during my Junior and Senior years of high school, it was Mrs. Bosanko, my English 101 and 102 professor. Ironically, all who made a significant impact in my academic career were English teachers, in which English was my worst subject. I would receive all A's on my report card with only one B (from English class). One of the reasons I majored in Pre-med as an undergraduate was to avoid public speaking and writing. Now, as I finished my doctoral studies, all I do is write!

Judith Tannenbaum & Spoon Jackson – *By Heart*

Spoon Jackson was a different person before he entered the prison system in California for murdering a man. His childhood was similar to mine when he spoke about depression and a sense of hopelessness. Before entering prison, he was a lonely child and experienced constant violence. He often received spankings from school officials (p. 34). The deeper he got into his teenage years, the more disillusioned and alone he became (p. 39). There were no hugs in his family that he can remember, no one ever said the words, 'I love you' (p. 36). As a result, the loneliness and violence escalated in his life to the point where he had killed a man; as Spoon explained, "It wasn't long after graduation I was on one of my runs. I got caught up, was shot,

and then killed someone (p. 39). He further described the moment, “It was then, when they locked me up and placed me behind bars, when I realized that my conscious awoken. I saw the disappointment in my parents’ eye when the authorities came to handcuff me in front of them. The look of their sad faces had torn my soul to pieces.” (p. 40) I imagined the men under the evil regime who killed my father and relatives. Like Spoon, they were faced with deep guilt and sorrow. He undoubtedly regretted his action. I learned how to forgive my transgressor even though I was a baby when the genocide took place. Education provided me the life I dreamt of and gave me greater privilege and freedom than before. I hope to take full advantage of my privilege and freedom to help those before they enter the prison system.

Although both Spoon and my childhood may have been similar, our worlds were remarkably different. My family experienced and escaped genocide, in which Spoon’s never had to experience such a tragic event. Furthermore, he never had to learn a new language, but my family and I had to learn the English language. Nevertheless, his story and mine displayed the uniqueness of our humanity, in which human suffering may have connected us together. What transformed his life in prison was meeting Judith, a poetry teacher, who introduced him to the arts and the nuances of poetry. His soul and mind became alive and free through writing and reading. One of the greatest memories he had was playing a character name Pozzo in the play *Waiting for Godot* (p. 100). It was during those moments rehearsing and performing where he felt like a human being. He then realized that we were all connected somehow as humans. Therefore, he learned to treat everyone with kindness and respect as he wished he would have known what he knew now before he was sentenced to prison. As a free man, I have the opportunity to impact so many lives. To help me along my journey, I’m reminded of a portion of a poem he wrote, which remained popular in San Quentin Prison, citing the original lines from

the William Ernest Henley poem *Invictus*: “I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my soul!” (p. 175) With this poem in mind, there was one question that arose from Spoon: as a master of your fate and a captain of your soul, where will you go from here? As a starting point, I was inspired by him to finish writing my narrative and eventually my dissertation. Then, I will see where fate takes me. I thank him for his inspiration. My soul is ready to set sail…

The four authors were instrumental in adding depth and meaning to my personal story. They provided me with great insights and wisdom I had not thought about during the initial development of my narrative. They were chosen to speak into my life because I felt a strong connection with them during the course of my doctoral studies. I believe their wisdom had helped me to better understand and to illuminate one of the most important questions I have learned during the writing of my dissertation: What is humanly at stake?

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Appendix A
Interview Protocol

[*Provide written consent form to interviewee and secure signatures.]*
[Record interviewee pseudonym and date of interview.]

Thank you very much for agreeing to speak with me today. The study that I am working on is an effort to understand how family dynamics of Cambodian young adults influence their college experience.

Please Note: *Tell interviewee to talk about her own experience and not the experience of her family members. Also, clearly tell interviewee not to disclose any names of her family members.*

Protocol: *If she discloses any specific information about family members, then I will interrupt interviewee immediately and move on to one of the other questions below. Furthermore, after transcribing each interview, if there are information that can identify 'third parties', then I will delete them from the data.*

Questions: INTERVIEW 1 – STUDENT PARTICIPANT

Family Dynamics (20-25 mins)

- Tell me a little bit about your elementary school experience?
  Probes: What aspect of school did you like? What aspect of school didn't you like?
- What kinds of involvement, if any, did your parents have with your school?
- Tell me a little bit about your middle school experience. How was it different from or the same as elementary school?
- Tell me a little bit about your high school years.
- What types of support do you receive from your parent (s) or siblings if any?
  Listen for/probe: financial support, emotional support, cultural support
- Generally speaking, how does your family view education? Probe: How important is it to attain educational degrees beyond high school?
- In what ways, if at all, did your father and/or your mother influence your education?
- What was the hardest aspect of life growing up in a single parent home? (If student has only one parent)
- What kinds of responsibilities did you have at home when you were growing up?
- Are you still living with your parents? What responsibilities and roles do you have now in the home? [If living elsewhere, probe responsibilities and roles in that context.]
- What are your roles at home?
- What is your family's view of teachers? (Probe/listen for: respect for teachers, deferential attitude)
- In what ways, if at all, did or do your parents or siblings help you with your homework? In what ways was this helpful?
- How has your relationship with your parents changed during your college years?
- If any, how has your relationship with your other family members changed during your college years? (probe/listen for: change in degree or kind of respect, requests for help, distancing)
- How have your responsibilities changed at home during your college years?
- What have been your parent(s)' involvement with your life during your college years?

College Experience and Culture (20-25 mins)

- Could you describe how you identify yourself ethnically?
- What does it mean to you to be American?
- Based on how you identify yourself, what aspects of American culture influence your college experience?
- What aspects of Cambodian culture influence your college experience?
- What do you think the differences are between the Cambodian culture and American culture?
- What do you think are some similarities between the Cambodian culture and American culture?
- In what ways do you feel like you are part of the Cambodian culture?
- In what ways do you feel like you are part of the American culture?
- In what ways do you feel like you are part of your college campus?
- How do you navigate thru both worlds? (probe/listen for: cultural idea or situations in which the two seem to contradict each other.) I wonder if you can recall a situation where you had to handle a conflict between the American culture and your native culture on your college campus.
- Or, if at all, how do you balance both worlds?
- Does navigating through both worlds affect your schooling? If so, please explain.
- What do you think contributed most to your success in attending college?
- Is there anything I haven't asked that would be important for me to know? Can you think of any other people and/or events that you think it would be helpful for me to talk to/see?

***Note: INTERVIEW 2 – STUDENT PARTICIPANT will mainly be any expansion or clarification of student participant's thoughts from the first interview.**

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL – PARENT

Please note: Interview with the parent will be informal as stated in the earlier section. Below are guiding questions to get the conversation going.

- Tell me a little bit about your son/daughter's school?
- What do you know about his/her school experiences when he/she was in elementary school? Middle school? High school? College?
- If any, what was your interaction like with your son/daughter's teachers and other school personnel?
- If any, what kind of involvement did you have with your son/daughter's school?
- How do you view American schools?
- How do you feel about the influence of the American culture, if any, upon your son/daughter?
- What are your thoughts about the American culture?
- In what ways have the Cambodian culture remained the same or changed while living in America?

Appendix B
Direct Observation Protocol

Observation guide of a college-related event on campus, for example, a college fair. In each of the categories of information noted below about the event, I will be looking for evidence of the central constructs which my study investigates:

--**Messages** about the value of applying to attending college

--**Signals** about goals of education, in K-12 or higher education

--**Resources** (informational, intellectual, social) that will or could assist students in considering college-going, applying to colleges

--**Cultural symbols**, about the centrality of college-going to this school's ethos

--**Engagement** of students or others with the process of sharing, and processing information about college-going

Categories of observable manifestations of the above constructs

- *Event publicity*- how was the event publicized and promoted
- *Participation level:* How many people attend the event?
- *Nature of participants:* What kinds of people attended the event? Students? Parents? School personnel?
- *Use of space, spatial engagement:* How are attendees moving around the space? Students alone? With parents? In peer groups?
- *College-related informational resources:* Availability of college promotional materials, i.e. brochures, applications, etc.
- *Nature and range of information providers*- College personnel (staff or current students), Community High School personnel, or community organization personnel. What roles do high school personnel play?
- *Range and nature of activity settings in the event*-- Are there workshop sessions, i.e. FAFSA or scholarship preparation workshops? What other kinds of opportunities for participants to engage in college-related matters?
- *Tone of the meeting/event:* Boredom, disengagement, engagement, excitement; response to particular activities or
- *Interaction patterns:* Where do students tend to spend the majority of their time? For example, if there are different tables, which tables are receiving the most traffic? What appears to draw people to these tables?
- *Discourse patterns:* What kinds of people are doing most of the talking? Students, parents, college or high school personnel?
- *Representations of higher education:* Images (visual or otherwise) of life in higher education institutions

Data record: Evidence of these manifestations will be captured in a narrative record, with as much specificity as memory allows (actual messages in written text, things said by participants, movement and actions, body language, salient happenings during the event time frame, etc.) In some instances, where extra copies are available, I will collect documents from the event, so as to obtain an exact record of messages available to the participants.