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Acculturative difficulties and coping strategies among Vietnamese immigrants: a case study of two high-socio status immigrant families in the U.S.

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ABSTRACT

Vietnamese immigrants in the United States encounter a variety of acculturation issues that affect them as individuals, families, and as members of their communities. It is evidenced in the literature that low-socio status immigrants suffered from those acculturation challenges. However, there is scant research on how acculturation affects high-socio status immigrants in general and Vietnamese American immigrants in particular. To better understand how high-educated Vietnamese families coped with acculturation in the United States, this research used semi-structured interviews to examine the acculturation issues they encountered and the techniques they utilized to overcome those issues. Four well-educated participants were interviewed one-on-one for 20-30 minutes each by Google Meet in Vietnamese whenever they were available. The interviews were transcribed using unfocused transcription, and the data was analyzed using grounded theory technique. Results showed that high-educated Vietnamese immigrants in the United States face three major acculturation challenges: orientation, the necessity of better economic and self-esteem needs. However, women seemed to be under more acculturative stress owing to their lower levels of English proficiency and work satisfaction, according to the findings. In terms of coping methods, the husbands use integration acculturation tactics to deal with their issues. Separation methods were adopted by the women at various periods in their life, despite the fact that they are eager to become fully integrated members of American culture. They are unable to do so due to a lack of urgency and lack of access to cultural integration.

Keywords: *acculturation, high-socio Vietnamese immigrants, coping strategies, integration, separation*

1. Introduction

According to Chun et al. (2003), acculturation and mental health among immigrant populations is a significant research topic in the United States and overseas. In general, acculturation is an adaptation to a new environment that occurs when two distinct cultures come into interaction (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936). In other words, according to Phinney et al. (2001), it can be described as the process through which people's behaviors and attitudes are altered as a consequence of having a contact with a new culture. Previous research has examined how acculturation affects both individual health and wellbeing (Pawliuk et al., 1996) and family interactions in immigrant households (Ho, 2010; Hwang & Wood, 2009; Miranda, Estrada, & Firpo-Jimenez, 2000; Portes & Hao, 2002). The present study contributes to the literature by investigating the acculturative difficulties which two high-educated Vietnamese families have faced during living in the U.S. as well as the strategies they used to cope with those difficulties, and how actual acculturation gaps may influence family relationships (husband and wife) in these two families.

1.1 The history of Vietnamese immigration to the U.S

According to Kula et al. (2021), there are three main waves of Vietnamese immigration to the U.S, namely the first wave from 1975 to 1978, the second wave between 1979 and 1982, and the third wave between the mid-1980s and the 1990s.

1.1.1 First wave

On April 30th, 1975, the Northern Vietnamese army captured Saigon, ending the Vietnam War. The US withdrew its soldiers and South Vietnam surrendered. The United States initiated evacuations of American and Vietnamese troops a week before the fall of Saigon (Takaki, 2012). There were originally 10,000 to 15,000 Vietnamese evacuated from Vietnam before April 30th. The majority of these people, according to Ruben G Rumbaut (2000), were military men and their families from the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. No other option existed for them than to leave their own countries and seek safety and security in the United States or face certain death under the new rule. Eighty-six thousand more Vietnamese were flown out of the country by American helicopters in the last days of April. A large number of people, including men, women, and children, sought refuge at the American Embassy, airports, and different barges.

These people were typically well-educated, had lived in cities, and had some financial stability previous to their arrival in the United States, but they had to give up whatever fortune they had accumulated while fleeing Vietnam (Rutledge, 1992). Nearly two-thirds of the respondents were able to speak English fluently or well, but just a small percentage had a college degree or high school diploma (Takaki, 2012). First-wave Vietnamese were acquainted with Western culture and ideas because of French occupation and American participation in South Vietnam. Christians, particularly

Catholics, comprised around half of the refugee population, and half were women (Takaki, 2012). By 2000, 40% of Vietnamese (440,000) lived in California alone (Ling & Austin, 2015). These massive “secondary migrations” created ethnic enclaves with a high Vietnamese immigrant population. “Little Saigons” sprang up throughout the Western states (Dorais, 2010).

1.1.2 Second wave

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the second wave of Vietnamese migrants arrived in the U.S. As a result of the Communist Party's unification of Vietnam, many Vietnamese, particularly those of Chinese descent, fled to Thailand's temporary encampments, from where they were granted asylum in the United States (Rubén G Rumbaut, 1989). Moreover, the Sino-Vietnam War broke out in the early 1980s, causing economic difficulties in Vietnam (Dosch & Vuving, 2008). These people were largely farmers with little education who escaped persecution or economic ruin (Ruben G Rumbaut, 2000).

Traumatized by fleeing Vietnam, many refugees suffered psychologically and socially as a result of their negative experiences, including separation from family, loss of identity, lack of education, and a culture shock as they struggled with assimilating into both Vietnamese and American society (Silverman, 1980). At the time of their arrival, according to Rutledge (1992), many immigrants were under-educated and under-skilled, with minimal English skills and no training in industrial employment in the United States. As a result, it was far more difficult to overcome these obstacles than it was for the first wave.

1.1.3 Third wave

Compared to the first and second waves, the third wave came in fewer numbers between the mid-1980s and the 1990s (Ruben G Rumbaut, 2000). Amerasian Homecoming Act, Orderly Departure Program, and Humanitarian Operations are just a few of the many laws and initiatives implemented to help bring back the war's victims to the United States. Reunification of Vietnamese children, as well as those from Korea, Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand, to their American fathers was the goal of the Amerasian Homecoming Act of 1982 (Chuong & Van, 1994). Refugees were provided educational and career opportunities via the Orderly Departure Program. As part of the sponsorship scheme, the Orderly Departure Program and the Humanitarian Operation helped families reunite and relocate, namely job opportunities, health care, accommodation and adjustment to American life. The third wave immigrants have minimal education and employment abilities to compete in American sectors (Ruben G Rumbaut, 2000).

The participants in this present study do not belong to the three immigrations mentioned above. They moved to the U.S as regular immigrants through higher education, namely the husbands from each family moved to the U.S first to study their Ph.D. degree and then their wives and children moved there afterward.

1.2 Acculturation model

The present study used Berry's acculturation model as a theoretical framework. According to Berry (1986), there are three stages in the process of acculturation. The first step in this process is establishing contact with the established culture, whether via commerce, slavery, or migration. Second, the person faces conflict owing to variations in food preferences, dress style, and language when they come into direct touch. Third, in order to lessen the tension, the person adapts to mainstream society. Berry described dispute resolution as an acculturation strategy. These strategies include assimilation, integration, marginalization and isolation. Four acculturation strategies were developed to address two common problems that people face on a daily basis. While the first problem is whether or not to retain or abandon their own cultural traditions, the second one is whether to embrace or reject the cultural values of the host culture.

The first strategy, known as assimilation, is when people give up their own cultural values and adopt the values of the new culture they are living in. The second one is integration. People using this method are willing to embrace both their own cultural values and those of the host culture. In the third acculturation technique, called marginalization, people reject the values and identities of both cultures. Separation is the last strategy. If someone embraces their own values and rejects those of their hosts, they are in a state of "separation".

1.3 Acculturative stress

When ethnic minorities adjust to a new culture, they may encounter mental health problems called acculturative stress. As a result of this type of stress, they may have unfavorable responses to the tensions between the two cultures (Thomas & Baek Choi, 2006). According to a study conducted by Berry et al. (1987), the relationship between acculturation and stress is affected by many social and demographic variables including education level, gender, age, language ability, cognitive styles, and past intercultural encounters. In addition, according to Berry et al. (1987), acculturative stress is affected by the host society's pluralism, assimilation, or exclusion; the character of the acculturating group (for example, a sojourner or an immigrant); and the style of acculturation.

Findings from by Berry et al. (1987) showed that individuals who could integrate into the new culture or their own ethnic culture had much lower stress levels than those who were isolated from the new culture or their own. More specifically, Berry et al. (1987) discovered that isolation and marginalization (based on discrimination, prejudice and so on) and high stress levels are linked in the Korean population. According to other international experts, migrants' mental health is negatively impacted by marginalization and prejudice (Mak & Nesdale, 2001; Ward & Kennedy, 1994).

In addition, according to the findings of Sodowsky and Lai's research (1997), migrants with low degrees of acculturation had greater levels of acculturative stress. Migration at

a younger age and longer stay in the United States were shown to be associated with greater acculturation as well as lower levels of acculturative stress. It was also shown that having a smaller family extended related to having more intercultural competency issues, and that having more cultural competence concerns was more prevalent among younger participants.

Besides, acculturative stress was consistently associated with higher educational attainment (Berry et al., 1987). Acculturation in the United States and Canada is facilitated by a white Anglo-centric approach to schooling. It is also important to note that immigrants with greater educational achievement are better able to deal with challenges and changes. Other elements, such as education and language, contributed to an individual's acculturative stress. For example, Kim (1984) observed that younger immigrants who could not speak their mother tongue well were more likely to experience acculturative stress. Acculturation stress may be reduced by prior interaction with the host nation, fluency in several languages, and prior exposure to an urban, multicultural environment (Berry & Kostovcik, 1983). For Vietnamese migrants, Berry and Bondel's (2009) results were almost identical.

Based on a review of prior studies, this present study's aim is to discover: 1- What are acculturation issues faced by high-educated Vietnamese immigrants in the United States?; and 2- How do Vietnamese immigrants deal with those challenges? And Why do they choose to do so?

2. Method

2.1 Participants

Two Vietnamese families in the US were selected for this study. Each family has 3 members, including parents and a daughter. The husbands of each family have Ph.D. degrees in the U.S; one is teaching Mathematics at a U.S university, the other is working in a U.S Chemical company. Both wives are housewives at the moment, although they both have a master degree in Vietnam; they both have a daughter, one is eleven years old and the other is five years old). The ages of the two couples are from 36 to 37 and they have been living in the U.S between seven and nine years. Since I focus to investigate the acculturative difficulties and coping strategies among adult Vietnamese immigrants, only the parents from the two families mentioned above were selected to participate in this research.

The migrations of the two families into the U.S are quite identical, namely via the Ph.D. scholarship of the husbands. Six months after the husbands' arrival to the U.S, their wives and daughter came to reunite with them. The only difference between the two families is while the daughter in the first family was born in Vietnam, the other girl in the second family was born in the U.S.

2.2 Instruments

In this study, I used semi-structured interviews to investigate the acculturative challenges that those two families met and what coping strategies did they use to deal with those difficulties. The use of a semi-structured interview provides a chance for participants to talk freely and honestly about their own experiences and sentiments, which is appropriate for the study's purpose (Steinar, 2007).

The questions for the interview are constructed after I did an extensive review of the following studies: Mena et al. (1987), Cross (1995), Berry (1997), and Kuo (2014). According to Berry (1997), the process of adopting new cultural norms may cause a person to experience acculturative stress. Various aspects of a person's personality, internal resources, social support, and even certain forms of stress play a role in this multivariable interaction process (Mena et al., 1987). Mena et al. (1987) suggested that to cope with stress, immigrants often seek for psychological and/or socio-cultural resources such as friends and family.

As a result, acculturation issues and coping mechanisms were separated into two sections of the interview questions. The first is to discover whether or not Vietnamese immigrants have acculturation difficulties and psychological stress as a result of overcoming intercultural adaption challenges, and if so, what those issues are. The second is to focus on how those immigrants cope with the problems they face and why they decide to do so.

2.3 Procedures

A semi-structured interview (20-30 minutes) was conducted with four participants individually. People who participated were interviewed in Vietnamese through Google Meet whenever they felt available for it. All interviews were recorded, translated and transcribed by the researcher.

2.4 Data analysis

I used unfocused transcription to transcribe the interviews. According to Gibson and Brown (2009), when the data is transcribed without taking into consideration its context but the meaning of the recording only, it is referred to unfocused transcription. This type of transcription was chosen since the purpose of this current study is to investigate what was said rather than how it was said.

I used grounded theory method to analyze collected data from the transcription. According to Corbin and Strauss (1990), grounded theory analysis is used to understand social phenomena and creating inductive theories based on evidence that has been repeatedly generalized. No preexisting theoretical concepts are required, and the obtained data may serve as a confirmation of such concepts. As an alternative, it aims to develop ideas and concepts that are in line with the reality of a still-unexplored area. With no predefined theoretical assumptions or ideas, the interview in this present study was designed largely from a practical viewpoint in order to comprehend and examine the ordinary lives of

Vietnamese immigrants including intercultural exchanges. Using a technique known as "open coding", the collected data then is broken down into its component parts in order to discover new themes and subcategories (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

In the phase of open coding, the researcher read verbatim the transcripts and probable themes were identified from the responses of the participants. Then, by comparing and contrasting these themes, the investigation discovered a structure among them, which subsequently evolved into a theoretical model. As a result, the model was constantly checked against the data, and various changes were made. The researcher formed an interpretation of the difficulties and coping mechanisms faced by Vietnamese immigrants in the United States from the links between the themes and categories.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Participants description

There are four participants in total and their demographic information is presented in the following table.

TABLE 1. Participants’ demographic information

No.	Birthplace	Gender	Age	Marital Status	Religion	Stay length (years)	Educational level	Occupation
A	Ho Chi Minh city	Male	37	Married to Vietnamese	None	8	Ph.D. (in the U.S)	New product development engineer – Trelleborg US Coated system, Inc
B	Ho Chi Minh city	Female	37	Married to Vietnamese	None	7.5	Master (in Vietnam)	Housewife
C	Ho Chi Minh city	Male	37	Married to Vietnamese	None	9	Ph.D. (in the U.S)	Assistant Professor in Mathematics at Florida A&M University
D	Ho Chi Minh city	Female	36	Married to Vietnamese	None	8.5	Master (in Vietnam)	Housewife

**Note: participant A and participant B are husband and wife; participant C and participant D are husband and wife*

3.2. Acculturative difficulties

3.2.1. Orientation

In the beginning, all of the four participants shared similar difficulties, namely the fact that they had to adjust to the new environment, including new geographic regions, transportation laws, opening times of shops, foods, etc. when they arrived in the United States. For example, participant C, who first arrived in the United States as a Ph.D. candidate, described his experiences and sentiments upon arrival:

“For newcomers, this was a difficult time. I spent a long time trying to locate the closest amenities to where I resided. I experienced multiple instances when I went grocery shopping only to return home empty-handed since the shops were closed at that hour. Sometimes, I got lost when walking to my University. Transportation was a challenge for me at that time since I had no car and there was no bus station around my residence.”

Participant D, the wife of participant C, described her difficulties when she first arrived in the United States:

“It was necessary to apply for a residency card as soon as you arrived. That's the process. Due to the fact that I had little knowledge of the English language, I had to depend on my husband and his acquaintances for assistance. However, I felt powerless at times since everything around me appeared so unusual and unfamiliar to the point that it was beyond my control.”

As we can see from the responses of those participants, when immigrants arrived in a foreign country, they were sometimes forced to deal with practical difficulties due to linguistic barriers. Some examples include transit laws, retail and restaurant opening and closing times, and so on. Newcomers may also have difficulties in obtaining legal documents and legal status. According to Berry et al. (2006), language is the most critical aspect in promoting or obstructing the process of adaptation.

However, these orientation difficulties didn't significantly damage their mental health as participant A shared: “...Things was getting better after 3 months when we got used to with the environment and the accent as well as the language use of local American.” This might be because of their open-mindedness, adaptability, and positivity, participants in this study experienced low levels of psychological stress while adapting to the American environment. This can be attributed to the fact that they are voluntary immigrants who are looking for a chance in the United States. This result is in line with what Y. Y. Kim (2000) suggested as only those with an adventurous nature would be willing to take such risks, since they are the most open, resilient, and optimistic to new experiences. Additionally, the participants in this study who had a strong command of the English language and culture reported much lower levels of stress during the preliminary stages, which is similar to previous studies of Berry et al. (2006) and (Liu, 2015).

3.2.2. The necessity of better economic

For the participants, the most fundamental economic improvement was the source of their anxiety. Participant A recalled the time he studied his Ph.D. when his family main income came from his scholarship:

“It was a tough time back then, I was stressed with my studies since I've always tried to keep my GPA above 3 out of 4 in order to continue receiving the scholarship. In the last two semesters, things even went badly since the monthly stipend from the scholarship was reduced by half. My wife had to work in the nail salon in order to make up the living cost”.

Participant C also shared similar difficulty with participant A since he had to study hard in order to maintain the scholarship. Also, he recalled:

“It was really stressful during the time I studied my Ph.D. because, you know, my university is not the big university in the U.S, so in order to find a job in the U.S after graduation, I need to be the best student in my academic year.”

Likewise, their wives admitted that financial concern is one of their common sources of anxiety. Participant B recalled *“There was no way we could afford to rent a large home or apartment, so we rented a room for three people.... The contrast between the style of life I had experienced in Vietnam and the current condition was too sharp.”*, while participant D said *“When I wasn't working, I tended to isolate myself in my room, refusing to leave the house, even to go grocery shopping. I found life to be tedious and uninteresting ... That's what you'd expect a loser to feel.”*

From those responses, it seems that the wives got higher financial stress than the husbands. This can be explained by the fact that in Vietnam, these wives were not able to find a good job in the U.S with their Vietnamese qualifications (both of them have a master degree in Vietnam and a lucrative job as well). They were forced to accept low-paying jobs like those taken on by immigrants with lower socioeconomic status. In other words, their psychological stress was caused by a loss of their social-economic status.

According to Berry et al. (1987), immigrants' mental health is determined by the amount of acculturation stress they experience. The result in this study however does not verify Berry's theory as finding from this study suggests that socioeconomic status has a more significant impact on the mental health of Vietnamese immigrants than acculturation issues. This result is supported by Shen and Takeuchi's research on Chinese Americans (Shen & Takeuchi, 2001).

3.2.3. Self-esteem needs

Time goes on, and as the newcomers get to know the area, they've learned the practical skills they need to make a livelihood here, one at a time. Rather than focusing just on the issue of merely surviving, they've shifted their focus to gaining respect amongst their peers, as well as elevating their social status and reputation. In this phase, they are driven by Maslow's hierarchy of "esteem needs" (McLeod, 2007).

Among the four participants, the two husbands seem to have higher self-esteem since one has a lucrative job as a chemical engineer in Trelleborg US Coated system, Inc. and the other is an Assistant Professor at Florida A&M University. They're both respected by their colleagues and manager thanks to their excellent performance at workplace. On the other hand, their wives seem to have low self-esteem due to unsatisfying employment. One of the two wives, participant D, mentioned: *“I'm planning to improve my English skills and then I will apply for a vocational program in the U.S to find a better job rather than working in a nail salon or being a waitress in a restaurant.”*

In this study, participants' confidence is boosted when they rely on their ethnic social networks and come to value themselves in the eyes of their co-ethnics, especially the wives. This result is consistent with the study conducted by Lee (2002), which showed that ethnic identity is positively connected with self-esteem and adversely correlated with psychological stress (Lee, 2001).

3.3. Coping strategies

3.3.1. Motivation from family members

Both families reported that their primary source of inspiration comes from their family, namely their parents and their daughter. For example, participant A said *“Everything I did is for the future of my daughter. For me, relocating to another country is to provide a better education for my daughter, which I had been unable to find in Vietnam”*, while participant C confessed that *“My parents' expectations of me are the most important to me, in my opinion. I want them to be pleased with me and proud of my accomplishments.”*

This might be attributed to the fact that the Vietnamese family places more importance on the family than on the individual. The consequences of one's actions affect not just the person, but also the rest of one's family and even one's ancestors (Shon & Ja, 1982). The Vietnamese immigrants in the United States are still influenced by these aspects of a collectivist society, and this gives them a source of strength that is helpful to their mental health. This result is supported by Liu (2015), who found out that Chinese immigrants shared similar motivation from their family to deal with acculturative stress. In other words, the support of family members, especially during the early stages of adaptation, is crucial to maintaining emotional and mental health (Kim, 2000; Scott & Scott, 2013).

3.3.2. Language skill improvement

All participants in this study commonly referred to the importance of being able to fluently communicate in English. Learning English might make the lives and careers of immigrants considerably simpler. The ability to communicate in English allows people to make positive changes in their lives. On the necessity of learning Spanish, participant C stated his thoughts:

“In order to be the professor at university, I need to get qualified not only in my professional area – Mathematics, but also in English. Therefore, I have spent a great amount of time learning and doing the English test to get qualified. It was a tough time but it's worth doing that.”

As soon as they learned to speak English, participants B and D saw that things were going in the correct direction, as explained by participant B:

“I decided to sign up for a year-long intensive English course. I was able to regain my self-confidence through learning English. It seemed like the world suddenly became broader and brighter when I began to learn the language. I felt as though a new world of possibilities had opened up in front of me.”

Individual acculturation is mostly determined by one's ability to learn the language of the host country, as evidenced by these Vietnamese immigrants in the United States (Cuellar, Arnold, & Maldonado, 1995; Kim, 2000). According to Kim (2000) and Klopff (1998), one of the most fundamental aspects of cross-cultural adaptation is language used to communicate between different cultures.

3.3.3. *Working hard and getting employment*

After finding a job and accumulating some savings, all the participants saw a dramatic shift in their lives. There are various issues that may be remedied if a person is financially secure, as this is explained by participant A *“Finding a job in the U.S after my graduation was a big milestone in our lives. It allows us to continue staying in America and unburdened our financial problems.”* His wife, participant B added *“After my husband found a job, we moved to a bigger house, things were getting better. Since I didn’t have to work in a nail salon anymore, I had more time taking care of myself and my family.”* Similar results were found from participants C and D when the husband (participant C) found a job as an assistant professor at a university. Participant C also added *“Finding a job was a good start for our family, but I had to work really hard in order to be recognized, for example, if my colleagues publish one paper a year, I must try to publish at least two papers”*

From the participants’ responses, it can be said that employment or professional success is the most conclusive evidence of a person's ability and potential. When they achieved economic success, they felt more confident in themselves, believing that they were deserving of recognition.

In addition, as high-status immigrants, the wives often face difficulties securing jobs that is comparable to what they did in Vietnam due to factors such as language problems, lack of degree recognition, etc. Since they were forced to accept low-paying, menial professions, they are motivated to outperform their less-educated colleagues in terms of income and social position.

4. Conclusion

Generally speaking, there are three main acculturative difficulties among high-educated Vietnamese immigrants in the United States including orientation, the necessity of better economic and self-esteem needs. However, results showed that women participants seem to have higher acculturative stress compared to their husbands due to their lack of English proficiency and job satisfaction.

In terms of coping strategies, the husbands use integration acculturation strategies to cope with their problems such as studying English, interacting with local people and desiring to learn more about American culture. On the other hand, the wives employed separation strategies at some points in their lives although they are willing to integrate into American society. Their lack of urgency and access to cultural integration is the reason for this.

Appendix – semi-structured interview questions

A. Basic information

Full name:

Contacts (email):

Age:

Gender:

Birthplace:

Marital status:

Religion:
.....years

Length of stay in the U.S.:

B. Level of school completed and occupation

1. How much education have you accomplished?

.....

2. What do you do for a living? Where do you work?

.....

C. Interview questions

C1-Acculturative difficulties

1. What difficulties did you encounter when you first came to the U.S.?
2. How do you feel about being a foreigner in the United States?
3. How would you describe your time in the United States? Why?
4. Is there a time during your stay here in the United States when you're really miserable? Why/Why not?
5. Is there an issue with your identity? Do you identify as either Vietnamese or American?
6. How do you feel about your life in the United States? Why?
7. What is your opinion about American people?
8. Describe the first time you became aware of the discrimination of American citizens if there is any. How often do you find yourself in this situation?
9. Do you believe that you have the same prospects for advancement in the United States as the American people? Why, or why not?
10. What difficulties are you encountering in the United States?

C2-Coping strategies

11. What did you do to overcome the difficulties you encountered when you first came to the U.S?
12. When you're feeling down, what do you often do to lift your spirits?
13. How much assistance did you get from others of the same ethnicity?
14. When you're having a difficult day, do you normally simply change your behavior or go chat to your coworkers, friends, or family members about how you feel?
15. What do you typically do to address the issues that arise from intercultural interactions? Learning English and participating in local festivals, for instance?

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