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trajectories

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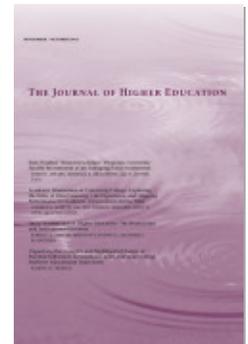
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Unpacking the Complex and Multifaceted Nature of Parental Influences on Southeast Asian American College Students' Educational Trajectories

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Unpacking the Complex and Multi-faceted Nature of Parental Influences on Southeast Asian American College Students' Educational Trajectories

This article reports on a study that examined the ways in which parents influence the educational trajectories of Southeast Asian American (SEAA) undergraduates at four-year institutions. Individual, face-to-face interviews with 34 SEAs were conducted and analyzed. Findings illustrate the complex and multifaceted ways that parental influences shape SEAA educational trajectories.

The model minority myth, the misconception that Asian Americans are a monolithic group that achieves unparalleled and universal academic success (Museus, 2009, 2011; Museus & Kiang, 2009; Suzuki, 2002), has been the focus of scholarly discourse in education for approximately half a century. Scholars have noted that the model minority stereotype emerged during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, amidst growing opposition to societal racial prejudice and discrimination toward people of color (Lee, 1996; Osajima, 1987; Suzuki, 2002). These researchers have argued that the myth was created to discount the validity of the Civil Rights Movement by reinforcing notions of meritocracy and beliefs that society allows those who work hard to achieve the American

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dream and blaming the “failures” of other groups of color (e.g., Blacks and Latinos) on these groups’ values rather than on systemic racial and socioeconomic inequities that exist throughout society (Osajima, 1987).

Researchers have noted that Southeast Asian Americans (SEAA)s¹ “occupy a unique position in this discourse on Asian American success” (Ngo & Lee, 2007, p. 416). On one hand, SEAA)s are viewed as over-achieving model minorities. On the other hand, they are often stereotyped as deviant minorities who disproportionately drop out of school, are involved in gangs, and are welfare sponges (Ngo, 2006; Ngo & Lee, 2007). It has been argued that these polarized stereotypes, then, interact to shape the experiences of SEAA)s. For example, it has been noted that these divergent stereotypes can fuel contradictory assumptions that SEAA)s are simultaneously problem-free model minorities who do not need support or that they are deviants who do not deserve such help (Um, 2003). Evidence overwhelmingly indicates that neither the model minority nor deviant minority stereotypes sufficiently explain the complex experiences of SEAA)s in college (Museus, 2009; Museus & Kiang, 2009; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Suzuki, 2002).

Moving beyond these oversimplified and misleading stereotypes to generate more authentic and accurate understandings of SEAA college students’ experiences is especially important because these students exhibit relatively low rates of degree attainment compared to the national population. Indeed, existing evidence indicates that Vietnamese (26%), Hmong (14%), Cambodian (13%), and Laotian (12%) Americans, over age 25, all hold baccalaureate degrees at rates lower than the overall national average (28%) (Museus, 2013). These low rates of attainment have negative ramifications for both individual SEAA students and society in general (Baum & Payea, 2005; Swail, 2004). For example, the negative consequences that accrue for SEAA)s who do not attain a college degree include lower lifetime earnings and higher poverty rates. Negative consequences that accrue to the larger society include lower tax revenues, higher rates of incarceration, and lower rates of civic participation (Baum & Payea, 2005; Swail, 2004). Given the low rates of degree attainment among SEAA)s and the negative consequences that are associated with these rates, generating more authentic understandings of the experiences of SEAA)s and how to foster success among this population should be an important concern for postsecondary education researchers, policy makers, and practitioners.

To inform efforts to increase success among SEAA undergraduates, the current study is aimed at shedding light on how parental influences shape the educational trajectories of SEAA students enrolled at four-year colleges and universities. Generating more intricate and accurate

understandings of parental influences on students' educational trajectories can aid college educators in crafting institutional policies and practices that more effectively engage SEAA parents in ways that are conducive to the success of their students. In the following sections, I provide the context for the current inquiry. In the next section, I discuss the historical context of SEAA communities and students because such circumstances are critical to understanding SEAA undergraduates' trajectories. Then, I discuss the structural and cultural factors that interact to impact SEAA students' educational experiences and outcomes. In doing so, I illuminate how these structural and cultural factors interact in complex ways to shape the trajectories of SEAA students. Next, I discuss existing empirical research on the impact of parents specifically on SEAA students' educational outcomes. The remainder of the current article is focused on a qualitative investigation of the ways in which 34 SEAA four-year college students perceive that their parents have influenced their educational trajectories.

Historical Context of Southeast Asian American Educational Trajectories

Any effort to understand parental influences on SEAA college students' educational trajectories should include a consideration of historical context, as knowledge of past circumstances provide a foundation for understanding SEAA families' current perspectives toward education and SEAA students' experiences in the education pipeline. In this section, I highlight a few key historical realities that can inform more holistic understandings of the impact of parental influences on SEAA students' trajectories. First, unlike other Asian American ethnic groups that began immigrating in large numbers since the mid-1800s (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, and Korean Americans), most SEAs came to the United States in two waves after the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 (Takaki, 1989). The first wave of Southeast Asian refugees arrived between 1975 and 1982 and mainly consisted of Vietnamese professionals, with relatively high levels of socioeconomic status and educational attainment, and their family members. The second wave of Southeast Asian refugees arrived following 1982. This second wave has origins in more modest socioeconomic and educational backgrounds and consists of Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, and Vietnamese refugees. It can be argued that the socioeconomic and educational backgrounds of the first wave of Vietnamese professionals, at least in part, explain why Vietnamese Americans exhibit noticeably higher levels of educational

attainment in comparison to their Cambodian, Hmong, and Laotian counterparts.

Second, the vast majority of Southeast Asian refugees did not migrate to the United States as voluntary immigrants but traveled to the States as refugees who fled their countries of origin to escape political persecution by the communist Vietnamese government that gained control after the war (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996). Consequently, many Southeast Asian refugees faced life-threatening circumstances and traumatic experiences, including disease, starvation, rape, homicide, genocide, forced separation from family members, and inhumane living conditions in the refugee camps that they inhabited before coming to the United States (Abueg & Chun, 1996; Boehnlein & Kinzie, 1997; Kinzie, 1989). While these distressing experiences have been associated with both psychological and emotional challenges (Hsu, Davies, & Jansen, 2004), researchers have also associated them with the development of survival skills that SEAA refugees can use to overcome obstacles that they face in navigating the complex postsecondary education systems in the United States (Kiang, 2002, 2009).

Third, it is worth emphasizing that not all SEAs enrolling in higher education today are refugees. In fact, given that a substantial proportion of Southeast Asian refugees began migrating to the United States over 30 years ago, many current SEAA college students were born or grew up in the States. Therefore, the SEAA college student population is characterized by generational diversity and includes students who entered the United States as adult refugees (i.e., 1st generation refugees), migrated to the United States during or prior to their early teens as refugees (i.e., 1.5 generation refugees), or are children of refugees (i.e., 2nd generation refugees). It is also important to note that the SEAA population is characterized by diverse homelands, cultural backgrounds and traditions, and languages.

Finally, these aforementioned historical realities, such as relatively modest premigration backgrounds and entrance into the United States as refugees, are related to the fact that SEAA communities suffer significant socioeconomic and educational disparities. For example, census data show that Vietnamese (\$26,352), Laotian (\$22,111), Cambodian (\$20,737), and Hmong (\$19,053) Americans report annual earnings well below the national average (\$28,452) (Museus, 2013). In addition, because SEAs are likely to be raised in under-resourced communities (Kiang, 2002), they navigate relatively under-resourced education systems (Lee, 2009; Teranishi, 2010). Given these realities, it is not surprising that, as discussed above, SEAs suffer from substantial racial

and ethnic disparities in educational attainment (Hune, 2002; Jayakumar & Museus, 2012; Museus, 2009, 2011, 2013; Museus & Kiang, 2009).

Cultural and Structural Influences on Southeast Asian American Educational Trajectories

Equally important as understanding the aforementioned historical realities that shape the lives of SEAA students is the literature that unpacks the cultural and structural influences on SEAA students' experiences and outcomes. The literature focused on SEAA students' journeys through K–12 and higher education is nested within a larger body of scholarship that discusses the ways in which cultural and structural forces impact the educational trajectories of students of color (Ngo & Lee, 2007). For example, with regard to cultural factors, researchers focusing on the interaction between the cultures of students' homes and their educational institutions have argued that students of color can encounter cultural incongruence, conflict, and dissonance between their home cultures and the cultures of their respective educational institutions, which can ultimately hinder their success (Museus, 2008a; Museus, Mueller, & Aquino, 2013; Museus & Quaye, 2009). In addition, the concept of cultural capital suggests that educational systems are based on and favor the cultural values, norms, and knowledge of the White middle class and, consequently, can function to limit racial minority and low-income students' access to resources. Alternatively, scholars have asserted that educational environments, curricula, programs, and practices that reflect, engage, and validate the cultural backgrounds of students of color have the ability to foster more meaningful connections between these students and their educational institutions and ultimately more positive educational outcomes (Kiang, 2002, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Museus, 2008b; Museus, Lam, Huang, Kem, & Tan, 2012; Museus et al., 2013; Museus & Quaye, 2009; Rendón, 1994; Tierney, 1999).

Scholars have also focused attention on how community, family, and parental cultural values can hinder or promote students' educational success (Min, 2003; Zhou & Kim, 2006). For example, some have argued that residential segregation and poverty have given rise to cultures that promote self-defeating behaviors such as welfare dependency, drug addiction, and school failure (Wilson, 1996). These researchers argue that children growing up in such cultures can develop an opposition to mainstream norms and values, and this resistance to mainstream culture can ultimately hinder their success and social mobility (Fordham, 1996;

Kohl, 1994). On the other hand, the cultural mechanisms perspective suggests that cultural values that emphasize the importance of education, family, and making sacrifices for family explain superior academic achievement among some ethnic groups (Min, 2003; Ngo & Lee, 2007). One danger inherent in this cultural mechanisms perspective of success is that, while attributing some ethnic groups' high levels of success to their cultures, this perspective also can lead to blaming other ethnic groups and their cultures for their low levels of success (Zhou & Kim, 2006).

In contrast to the aforementioned cultural perspectives, scholars have also argued that structural factors (e.g., racism and classism) affect the opportunities, experiences, and outcomes of people of color (Nasir & Hand, 2006; Olneck, 2003; Stinson, 2006; Sue & Okazaki, 1990). One example of a structural explanation of success is Sue and Okazaki's (1990) concept of relative functionalism, which suggests that if SEAs and other Asian Americans encounter racial barriers to success in noneducational areas (e.g., arts, sports, entertainment, etc.), then they are more likely to view education as the *only* means to upward social mobility. Another structural explanation of success argues that socioeconomic inequality and the unequal distribution of resources leads to disparities in school funding, differential access to quality teaching, disparities in access to college preparatory curricula, and tracking practices that result in unequal success in K–12 education, preparation for college, and access to higher education (Darling-Hammond, 2003). Finally, other structural explanations underscore the role of social capital—the social networks and corresponding resources to which individuals have access—in both K–12 and higher education and the notion that wealthier families have access to networks and resources that help their children navigate complex education systems to succeed, whereas less affluent families have less access to such capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

Neither cultural nor structural influences exist or operate in a vacuum. Rather, they interact in complex ways (see, for example, Lareau, 2011; Ogbu, 1987; Venezuela, 1999; Zhou & Kim, 2006). Zhou and Kim (2006), for example, underscore this interaction as they explain how the Chinese and Korean immigrant communities that they studied have mainly originated from countries in which education is the primary means of social mobility, access to high-quality education is competitive, and families invest in supplementary education. Thus, before migration, the majority within these communities were socialized in cultures that emphasized education and competition; after migration and settlement, they enacted these cultural values and utilized existing

material resources to develop sophisticated structures of supplementary education within their communities. As mentioned above, while SEAA communities in the United States are relatively under-resourced compared to the total national population, they come from premigration communities with varied cultural orientations and structural resources. Specifically, the first wave of Vietnamese refugees came from communities with more resources than the second wave of SEAA arrivals, while the Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, and Vietnamese refugees in the second wave came from relatively under-resourced backgrounds. Thus, it is possible that past and current cultural and structural conditions may interact in complex ways to affect the opportunities of students across different SEAA communities in disparate ways.

In sum, it is important to understand how both cultural and structural forces influence the experiences and outcomes of SEAs as well as how these two sets of factors can interact to mutually shape these students' educational trajectories. However, the in-depth examination of structural factors and how they interact with cultural influences to shape SEAA trajectories is beyond the scope of this study. Rather, the current investigation is focused on shedding light on one element of this more complex system of influences. Specifically, the remainder of this article is focused on utilizing a cultural mechanisms perspective to develop a deeper understanding of parental influences on SEAA college students' trajectories.

Parental Influences on Southeast Asian American Success

Both popular press and scholarly literature have underscored the important role of parents in shaping SEAA and other Asian American children's educational trajectories (Caplan, Choy, & Whitmore, 1991; Freeman, 1995; Hutchinson & McNall, 1994; Koltyk, 1997; Lee, 1997; Penning, 1992; Robbins, 2004; Rutledge, 1992; Whitmore, Trautmann, & Caplan, 1989; Zhou & Bankston, 1998). In doing so, this discourse provides support for the cultural mechanisms perspective by underscoring the role of parents' cultural values and cultural orientations toward parenting in determining educational success. For example, in Chua's (2011a) *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, she suggests that Chinese parents are superior because of their traditional, overly strict, and uncompromising parenting styles that pressure children to excel academically. Chua (2011b) argues that it is this tiger parenting that leads to the development of academically successful Chinese children. The popular press has reinforced the notion that such extreme tiger parenting might be re-

sponsible for the production of overachieving model minority children (e.g., Chua, 2011b; Kolbert, 2011; Masland, 2011). Of course, it is important to acknowledge that this Tiger Mother stereotype is inherently problematic because it constitutes yet another overgeneralization about Asian Americans that can directly fuel misconceptions that all Asian American parents excessively pressure their children to excel as well as indirectly validate and reinforce the model minority myth (Chang, 2011; Poon, 2011).

Scholarly research also provides support for the cultural mechanisms perspective, but as I discuss below, this literature offers a more complex picture of parental influences on SEAA and other Asian American students' educational trajectories. Nevertheless, this research suggests that Vietnamese American parents instill strong cultural values of educational achievement in their children and provides evidence that these values are one critical factor in explaining the success of some Vietnamese students (Caplan et al., 1991; Freeman, 1995; Penning, 1992; Robbins, 2004; Rutledge, 1992; Whitmore et al., 1989; Zhou & Bankston, 1998). Similarly, it has been argued that Hmong family and parental beliefs that education is the key to social mobility and status attainment is one central factor in facilitating the academic achievement of Hmong students (Hutchinson & McNall, 1994; Koltyk, 1997; Lee, 1997). In fact, education scholars have noted that Vietnamese and Hmong parents create similar family structures that pressure students to succeed in education (Ngo & Lee, 2007). However, to what extent and how such parental values emphasizing educational achievement are related to the educational experiences and outcomes of Cambodian and Laotian students is not yet well understood.

Moreover, existing scholarship indicates that SEAA cultural values of responsibility and sacrifice for the family partially explain the success of SEAA students. Indeed, extant research indicates that Vietnamese and Cambodian American values of obligations to succeed in education for the sake of the family are critical to understanding those students' success in education (Centrie, 2000; Chhuon & Hudley, 2008; Kibria, 1993; Penning, 1992; Reiboldt & Goldstein, 2000; Rutledge, 1992; Zhou & Bankston, 1998). In addition, there is evidence that Vietnamese American students are periodically reminded of the sacrifices that their parents have made and their responsibility to pay their parents and older siblings back by taking advantage of educational opportunities in the United States (Conchas, 2006). Whether and how such responsibility and sacrifice for family influence Hmong and Laotian students' experiences, however, is less clear.

With few exceptions (Chhuon & Hudley, 2008; Kiang, 2002, 2009), the vast majority of scholarship on the impact of cultural mechanisms on SEAA educational success has been conducted in the K–12 sphere, and most of this research is on Southeast Asian refugee (i.e., first-generation) populations. Thus, more scholarship on SEAA students in college is needed to better understand whether and how cultural values continue to influence those students' success. Moreover, more research on second-generation SEAA students who have grown up in the United States is needed to shed light on how cultural values shape the outcomes of these students. This is especially important because this population comprises an increasing proportion of SEAs in college, and the small body of literature that does exist on second-generation SEAA students suggests that this segment experiences increased struggles due to factors such as intergenerational conflict and a loss of traditional cultural values that emphasize education (Faderman, 1998; Thao, 1999; Walker-Moffat, 1995; Zhou & Bankston, 1998).

Complexities in Studying Parental Influences on SEAA Success

While the cultural mechanisms perspective suggests that parental influence might be viewed as positive and conducive to SEAA academic achievement (Min, 2003), the impact of SEAA parents on their students' educational trajectories is complex. First, scholarly research offers some evidence that SEAA and other Asian American parents can apply excessive pressure that can become overwhelming and can pose challenges for Asian American students in their pursuit of and transition into higher education (e.g., Kibria, 1993; Museus, 2011). However, there is scant evidence to suggest that such excess pressure is common among Asian American families. Moreover, where such excess pressure does exist, there is limited understanding of *how* such pressure might pose barriers for SEAA and other Asian American students in college.

Second, there is some indication that both traditional gender role expectations and marginalization within educational systems might pose challenges for some SEAA female students—Cambodian, Hmong, and Vietnamese women in particular. Specifically, researchers have noted that higher parental and community expectations for SEAA male students to be more academically successful than their female counterparts, combined with pressure for their SEAA women to marry and have a family at an early age, could adversely influence the SEAA female students' academic achievement (Conchas, 2006; Donnelly, 1994). Moreover, it has been argued that social, economic, and political marginalization within education institutions might interact with the aforemen-

tioned gender role expectations to lead SEAA women to engage in early marriage as a means of escaping from exclusionary educational environments (Ngo, 2002). However, education scholars have also noted that SEAA female students are going to college at increasing rates, suggesting gender role changes are taking place (Lee, 1997; Zhou & Bankston, 1998). However, the extent to which the experiences of second-generation SEAs who are currently in college are influenced by gender role expectations is uncertain.

Third, while responsibility to family can facilitate SEAA students' educational success, as mentioned above, researchers have also noted that parental expectations that SEAA students fulfill family obligations can pose challenges as well (Chhuon & Hudley, 2008). For example, Chhuon and Hudley (2008) qualitatively examined 10 Cambodian American students' adjustment to college and found that traditional values that emphasize family obligation motivated those students to succeed in school but also posed barriers due to the time that students are pressured to spend helping their family members. However, this is the only published study that begins to shed light on the complexities of family obligations experienced by SEAA students in higher education. Thus, whether these contradictory functions of family obligations shape the experiences of Hmong, Laotian, and Vietnamese undergraduates is not well understood.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the current study was to understand how parental influences shape the success of SEAA students at four-year institutions. One primary research question guided the inquiry: How do parents influence the educational trajectories of four-year SEAA college students? Three additional sub-questions guided the examination: (1) How, if at all, do parents positively impact the success of SEAs at four-year institutions? (2) How, if at all, do parents negatively influence the success of SEAs at four-year institutions? and (3) How do four-year SEAA students make sense of these relationships?

The current investigation is the first systematic analysis of the influence of parents on SEAA students' educational trajectories. As such, it contributes to the aforementioned existing literature in multiple ways. First, it is the first inquiry to systematically examine the ways that cultural mechanisms (i.e., various cultural values) shape the educational trajectories of students in college across the four SEAA ethnic communities. Second, this study is the first study that focuses on systematically unpacking the complex nature of parental influences on the trajectories

of SEAA undergraduates specifically—and students of color in higher education in general. Third, it is one of the first comprehensive examinations of second-generation SEAs in college.

Conceptual Framework

The cultural mechanisms perspective was utilized as the conceptual framework for the current investigation (Min, 2003; Ngo & Lee, 2007). As mentioned, the cultural mechanisms perspective underscores how cultural values—such as the emphasis on academic achievement, importance of family, and sacrifices for family—shape SEAA students' success. Therefore, it constitutes a useful tool for examining how both SEAA parents and their students' cultural values can positively or negatively influence their educational trajectories. While this perspective has been used to explain the experiences of SEAA students (Ngo & Lee, 2007), this is the first study to utilize this perspective as a conceptual framework for systematically and empirically studying parental influences on the educational trajectories of SEAs in college.

Methods

Qualitative research methods were ideal for this inquiry for two primary reasons. First, qualitative methods were chosen for this study because they allow for the exploration of a topic or concept through the use of detailed information (Creswell, 1998). Second, qualitative methods were selected because they are the best approaches for answering “how,” “what,” and “why” questions. Therefore, qualitative methods were deemed appropriate for the current study and were utilized to answer the aforementioned research questions through the generation of detailed information that sheds light on the nature of parental influences.

Participant Selection

Two types of purposeful sampling techniques were employed to acquire participants for this investigation: sampling for maximum variation and snowball sampling (Patton, 2002). With regard to maximum variation, a sample that represented a wide array of ethnic backgrounds (Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, and Vietnamese American), years in college (second through fifth), academic majors (social sciences, hard sciences, and applied fields), institutional types (e.g., commuter and residential), and geographic regions (e.g., West Coast, Midwest, and East Coast) was sought. Sampling for maximum variation ensured that the findings that emerged are transferable to several subgroups that exist

within the SEAA college student population. Second, with regard to snowball sampling, participants were asked to recommend peers who could speak meaningfully about their experiences as SEAA college students. These snowball techniques were used to continue to include additional participants to our sample until we achieved data saturation—that is, until a point at which no new information was emerging (Patton, 2002).

In order to acquire our sample, the assistance of faculty and staff who work closely with SEAA college students—including individuals working in Asian American Studies Programs, Educational Opportunity Programs, TRIO Programs, and Multicultural Resource Centers—at five four-year colleges and universities was solicited. Those faculty and staff were asked to distribute an email solicitation for participation in this study via listservs housed within these offices. As mentioned, the additional technique of asking participants, at the culmination of their interviews, to recommend potential participants was utilized.

The final sample consisted of 34 SEAA undergraduate students at five public four-year colleges and universities across the United States. Geographically, 19 participants were located on the West Coast, 3 were attending institutions in the Midwest, and 12 were located on the East Coast. With regard to institutional type, the sample included 19 participants who were enrolled at a large (over 29,000 students) urban public research university on the West Coast, 2 who were enrolled at a large (over 50,000 students) urban public research university in the Midwest, 1 participant who was enrolled at a small (over 7,000 students) private four-year college in the Midwest, 4 students who were enrolled at a midsized (over 15,000 students) urban public research university on the East Coast, and 8 students who were enrolled at a rural midsized (over 14,000 students) four-year institution on the East Coast. In terms of selectivity, the five participating campuses varied substantially. According to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), the public research university on the West Coast admits approximately 38% of its applicants, the urban public research university in the Midwest admits 47% of its applicants, the private four-year college in the Midwest admits 97% of its applicants, the urban public research university on the East Coast admits 68% of its applicants, and the rural midsized four-year institution on the East Coast admits approximately 40% of its applicants.

This sample included 9 Cambodian, 5 Hmong, 3 Laotian, 13 Vietnamese, and 4 multiethnic (2 Cambodian/Chinese, 1 Cambodian/Vietnamese/Thai, 1 Vietnamese/Thai) students. The sample included substantially more female (26) than male (8) students. And, with regard to

generational status in the U.S., 26 participants were second generation and 8 students were 1.5 generation. Of the 34 participants, 14 indicated that the highest level of education completed by either parent was “less than high school,” 8 reported at least one parent who earned a high school diploma, 7 reported having a parent that earned an associate’s degree, 4 had at least one parent who earned a bachelor’s degree, only 1 participant indicated that he had a parent who earned a master’s degree, and none of the participants had a parent that held a professional or doctoral degree.

Among the participants, 3 identified as freshman, 7 were sophomores, 13 were juniors, 10 were seniors in college, and 1 did not indicate a class standing. The participants were all full-time students and spanned a wide range of majors,² such as biology and chemistry (9), economics (4), engineering (2), English (1), ethnic studies (3), health science (1), human development (2), international studies (1), linguistics (1), management (2), political science (2), prosthetics (1), psychology (6), and undecided (3). The 31 participants who reported their grade-point average (GPA) exhibited a mean GPA of 2.94 and a median of 3.0 in college. Three of the 34 participants did not report their GPA.

Data Collection

Data were collected using two primary methods. First, participants were asked to complete a brief questionnaire, which included questions about demographics, their status in college (e.g., their institution, academic major, year in higher education, etc.), and information regarding their involvement in various organizations in college. Second, each student participated in a face-to-face, individual, semi-structured interview, lasting approximately 1–1.5 hours. Specifically, students were asked to read and sign an informed consent form and were asked a series of interview questions from a preconstructed protocol. The interview protocol included questions, such as the following: (1) What has contributed to your success in college? and (2) What continues to be challenging for you as a student here? After participants responded to the questions in the preconstructed protocol, they were asked probes to acquire more detail and clarification, as needed. After each interview was conducted, they were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed by a professional transcriber or research assistant.

Data Analysis

Once the interviews were transcribed, they were organized and coded using the NVivo Qualitative Software Research Package. Open coding

and axial coding were employed during data analysis (Creswell, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). First, open-coding procedures were used to determine the initial thematic categories related to the phenomenon under investigation. Then, axial-coding techniques were used to further develop categories that emerged during the open-coding phase by identifying the properties or dimensions of those categories.

Finally, it should be noted that constant comparative methods were utilized (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Specifically, in constant comparative methods, data collection and analysis are closely interwoven, collection and analysis of data occur simultaneously and alternately, and analysis occurs throughout the data collection process (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This permits the researcher to collect and analyze preliminary data, identify emerging categories, and subsequently collect additional data until those emerging categories are “theoretically saturated” (Creswell, 1998). Theoretical saturation occurs when no new or relevant information emerges from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In the current investigation, initial interviews were conducted and analyzed. Then the interview protocol was refined so that the questions probed into areas of emerging categories, and additional interviews were conducted. This process continued until a point of data saturation was reached.

Researcher Subjectivity and Reflexivity

Whereas some qualitative researchers have made attempts to minimize the impact of researcher subjectivity on qualitative inquiry (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), other researchers have espoused a more constructivist perspective and underscored the importance of researcher reflexivity, which can be defined as the identification and understanding of biases and assumptions that can influence researchers' perspectives, decisions, and interpretations (Charmaz, 2005). I embrace the latter approach in the current inquiry, allowing me to embrace my subjectivity and incorporate it into the discussion. I am a multiracial Asian American man who was, in part, raised in low-socioeconomic and Southeast Asian American communities. I was once an undergraduate at a PWI, and I have spent the last seven years studying the factors that influence the educational experiences and outcomes of racially diverse student populations. Thus, my experiences as an Asian American scholar studying the experiences of diverse populations shape my biases. These biases include the belief that low rates of educational attainment among SEAAAs are problematic. Moreover, I espouse the notion that historical, cultural, and structural factors all influence the educational outcomes of SEAAAs and that parents are one critical factor in determining those outcomes.

Trustworthiness and Quality Assurance

While internal and external validity are critical considerations in quantitative research, trustworthiness and quality assurance are generally determined by the degree of credibility and transferability of findings in qualitative research. Credibility refers to the congruence of the findings with reality, while transferability refers to the extent to which findings can be applied to situations outside of the cases being studied (Merriam, 1998). I utilized several methods prescribed by Lincoln and Guba (1986) to maximize trustworthiness of the findings. First, triangulation (i.e., the convergence of multiple data sources) was employed to analyze interview transcripts, code reports, textural-structural descriptions, and researcher notes to cross-check and verify emergent themes. Second, member-checks were conducted with all 34 participants to ensure that my interpretations were congruent with participants' perceptions. Specifically, those participants were sent summaries of the themes that emerged from this analysis and invited to provide feedback. Participants' feedback was then juxtaposed with the themes to ensure that the SEAA students' perspectives and the findings were congruent. Finally, throughout the analysis phase of the study, discrepant data were sought and examined to help identify alternative hypotheses and question and critically examine our theoretical presuppositions.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, I cannot draw inferences about whether and to what extent the factors discussed in this article affect SEAA students' ultimate success in higher education. Rather, the study illuminates how participants, who were persisting students at four-year institutions, perceived their parents' influence on their educational success up to the point in time at which interviews were conducted. Second, while the preceding discussion highlights the complex cultural and structural influences on SEAA student outcomes, the current study is aimed at developing a deeper understanding of one element of those influences (i.e., cultural mechanisms), thereby prohibiting conclusions about the ways that structures or interactions between culture and structure influence SEAA trajectories. Third, the findings of the inquiry are context-bound, and they should not be generalized beyond the 34 participants persisting at four-year institutions, although many are corroborated by or compatible with other previous research. As mentioned, participants were all persisting students at four-year institutions and therefore do not represent a large portion of the SEAA

population who follow very different educational trajectories—such as those persisting at two-year colleges, those who have dropped out of four- or two-year institutions, or those who have not attended college at all. Moreover, given that gatekeepers provided access to participants, these students were all, in some way, connected to various campus programs and offices, and their perspectives could potentially differ from those who are disengaged from their campus environments. A fourth limitation is the predominantly female nature of the participant sample (76%) and the fact that a more balanced gender sample may have illuminated different interpretations or experiences. A fifth limitation of the current study is the fact that, even though differences across generational statuses, refugee statuses, sexual orientations, or other important aspects of students' identities might play a critical role in shaping how they experience college, analysis of such factors was beyond the scope of this study. The final limitation is researcher bias. The author's own perspectives regarding the SEAA experience shaped the analysis of participants' experiences. And, if conducting the same analysis, other researchers might have interpreted these experiences in different ways.

Findings

Five main themes emerged from the analysis, and they are discussed in this section. The first three themes emerged across the 34 interviews and delineate the types of positive parental influences that facilitate success among participants; they include *parental expectations*, *parental values*, and *parental sacrifice and responsibility*. The fourth theme also emerged across the 34 interviews and describes students' *internalization (of parental pressures) and intrinsic motivation* to succeed in higher education. The fifth theme illuminates the *complications in parental influences* on participants' success, which manifest in a small proportion of interviews but are worthy of discussion. The fifth theme included three subthemes: *excessive parental pressures*, *ethnic and gender differences* in parental expectations, and *pressured major choices* (i.e., parental pressures to choose majors that were not a good fit).

Parental Expectations: "It's Just What I Was Supposed To Do"

The first type of positive parental influence on participants' educational trajectories was parental expectations that their children would go to and graduate from college. Participants talked in detail about the fact that their parents developed expectations for them to go to college at an

early age, leaving very few questions regarding whether they would go to college. A female Vietnamese American student named Jackie,³ for example, made the following remarks:

I don't think there was ever a question of not attending college. I think I was raised where it was constantly talked about. From an early age, it was school, school, school. That's all my parents talked about . . . So, it was always a very real thing that was just a matter of me choosing which college and stuff like that . . . But, it was a for sure thing that I was going to go to some college.

Jackie's comments illustrate how many participants' parents did not frame going to college and getting a degree as an option but made it an expectation. Kenneth, a mixed Cambodian/Chinese American, echoed similar comments regarding the expectations of his parents:

It was planned out from the day I went to preschool. Everyone in my family pushed me to go to college. My parents were forced to drop out of school to support their families, never got the chance to go to college. In my immediate family, I am the first one to go to college.

Thus, parents' educational expectations were a critical factor in sending participants on positive educational trajectories from an early age. Kenneth's comments, however, also underscore how the challenges and missed opportunities experienced by parents were also relevant considerations in understanding parental pressures for participants to succeed, which I discuss in detail below.

Parental Values of Education:

"Education is the Key to Getting Anywhere in Life"

The second type of positive parental influence on participants' educational trajectories is parents' emphasis on the value of education as a tool for students to achieve their dreams. Indeed, parents inculcated into their students the belief that education was the key to social mobility, success, and happiness. For example, a Hmong American female student named Anna underscored the ways that her parents taught her about the importance of education:

Basically, the way I'm raised is that education is key to getting anywhere in life. My mom, early on . . . she always had us reading books all the time. I guess she just really engrained it into our brains that school is important. So I guess I knew that right after high school, I would just go to college.

Similarly, a multiethnic Cambodian/Chinese female student named Caroline reflected on the importance of her parents emphasizing the value of education:

They were like, "School is important. You have to go to school. Without that, you are not going to do anything with your life." And they were like, "You know, people can take away as many of your belongings as they want, but they can never take away your pride. They can never take away your knowledge. And, that's something that's very, very important that you need because I can't provide that for you."

Indeed, participants highlighted their parents' emphasis on the value of education as one of the critical factors that led them to pursue and persist through higher education.

***Parental Sacrifice and Responsibility:
"I Understood the Sacrifice My Parents Made"***

The third form of positive parental influence emerging from the data highlights the sacrifices that parents made to provide participants with educational opportunities and the responsibility that students felt to pay back their parents by taking advantage of those opportunities and succeeding in education for the sake of their families. Vinh, a Vietnamese American male, discussed the role of his parents' sacrifices:

I am actually the first in line to go to college. My parents went to school in Vietnam and, because of the tough situations like the Vietnam War and everything, they could not finish their education . . . They had to work at an early age and they know it is tough. They don't want me to live that kind of life—a life where you have no options.

Jackie also discussed how her parents made important sacrifices specifically to provide their children with opportunities:

My parents talked about their own experiences and talk about how they wish they could go to school, but never got the chance, living in Vietnam and having to work and being very poor . . . When I was younger, that was more of the message, like "We're trying to give you better opportunities that we didn't get to have."

In addition, participants discussed how the sacrifices that their parents made had led them to feel a responsibility to succeed, as their parents hoped they would, to pay them back. Patricia, a Cambodian American

female student, demonstrated this point as she discussed how her parents had lost their siblings in their journey from Southeast Asia to the United States so that they could provide their children with a better life. She described the responsibility she felt as a result:

My mom would always talk about Cambodia, and what she went through, and how she lost her brothers and sisters, and my dad lost his sister, and how hard it was for them to come here. I just wanted to pay them back and just do what they wanted me to do by going to college and just doing better.

Students' responsibilities to pay back their parents for such sacrifices appeared to be critical factors in their success as college students.

***Internalization and Intrinsic Motivation:
"In College, I'm Doing It Because I Want To Do It"***

The first three themes highlight the different types of positive parental influences that parents had on participants' educational trajectories. Participants, however, also discussed how they internalized those parental influences and associated this internalization with an intrinsic motivation to succeed. For example, Dani, a Laotian American female participant, made the following remarks:

My parents are still concerned about my education, but . . . they know I'm an adult now, so I know what I'm doing. Before, it was more because I just wanted to make my family proud of me and be successful because that's all they wanted me to do—to get a good education. They helped me succeed throughout middle school and high school, but in college, I'm doing it because I want to do it and I want to succeed on my own.

Tim, a Vietnamese American male participant, emphasized the importance of this internalization with the following comments:

When someone else motivates you, you're doing it for them. But, when you start motivating yourself and say "I want this because it is something I really desire," I think that motivation is much stronger . . . Parents motivation towards you kind of only is there with you when they're there. If my parents are not with me I don't care what my parents think I should do. If my parents think I should go to church and if they weren't there I probably wouldn't go to church. If I motivate myself and I want to go to church, then . . . I always have my motivation with me. It will always keep me going.

Although parental pressures can be viewed as an external influence, students' comments suggest that the extent to which those pressures

have an influence on educational success depends, at least in part, on whether students go through a process of internalizing that motivation by the time they reach college.

Complications in Parental Influences

While parental influences were mostly positive, this was not invariably the case. Indeed, parental pressures were complicated in three ways: (1) excessive parental pressures, (2) lower expectations for women than for men in some communities, and (3) students pressured by parents into majors that were not a good fit for them.

Excessive Parental Pressures. Regarding excessive parental pressures, only two participants discussed cases in which the pressures from parents became excessive and adversely influenced success. Anna, for example, discussed how her mother's expectations were so high that she could not be pleased, which was associated with a diminution of Anna's motivation to succeed:

My mom she never seemed happy enough . . . Every time I did well at something, she never really seemed to care. It didn't make a difference. So, for a while . . . I just didn't have any motivation and I didn't really care about college then. I knew it was important, but you don't have any motivation. So that was a negative influence, I guess.

Patricia felt that parental pressures ultimately led to her brother dropping out of college and, since they learned from that experience, her parents put less pressure on her to succeed:

I guess they learned from earlier with my older brother . . . They learned that it could be stressful and all the pressure would get overwhelming. It didn't really work out with my brother because my dad had high expectations . . . He ended up becoming a dropout. My dad became disappointed, and I guess he learned from that that he didn't want to force any of that on anyone else.

Thus, when Patricia's parents learned that excess pressure might have negative consequences from her brother's experience, they eased the pressure they placed on her.

Ethnic and Gender Differences. With regard to ethnic and gender variation in parental pressures, two Hmong American female participants discussed their communities and parents' low educational expectations for women compared to men. One of these students, Valerie, addressed this in the following remarks:

I think they expected my brothers to go to college, but not so much me. In the Hmong culture, they always expect the son to do more in life and get further. The fact that the girls in the family once you marry into another man's family, you're considered a part of that man's family. So it's almost like they have more hope and confidence in the sons than the daughters. So that's the mentality my parents had for a very long time growing up . . . It was like that with my family for a long time until recently . . . The only ones that are in college are the girls . . . and my parents realized that they made a mistake.

It should be emphasized, however, that only two of the five Hmong American female students discussed these low expectations as a result of their gender. And, as Valerie's comment above illustrates, her parents' views had shifted to become more gender equitable over time as a result, in part, of her and her sisters' progress in the education system.

Pressured Major Choices. Finally, four participants discussed the challenges that they faced as a result of choosing majors due to their parents' influence—realizing they were unhappy in those majors and then having to change their majors and explain that change to their parents. Parental pressure to choose a particular major was based on parents' beliefs about which majors would lead to economically stable careers, which typically meant pressures for students to choose science majors to prepare for medical careers, as well as parents' limited understanding of other major and career options. Henry, for example, discussed the process of realizing he wanted to switch majors, from human biology to ethnic studies:

Before, success meant being rich and having a career. That makes you more prestigious in some kind of way . . . For me, it's a lot different . . . I must like the work . . . and for me, it's about learning. Even now, when I'm studying ethnic studies, I'm learning so much in my classes . . . I wonder why they didn't teach this in high school because it would make more sense and more people would actually want to learn and pay attention to their education because it's relevant to them . . . It's not about the money anymore. It's just a lot of my own journey, my own path.

Henry also spoke about difficulties that he faced in telling his parents about the major change that he decided to pursue:

That was a little bit tough for my parents to understand too . . . They see college as an investment . . . My parents see so much prestige with doctors, engineers, the main typical things that they're familiar with . . . But then

they're not familiar with ethnic studies . . . So that was really overall hard for them . . . They lectured me too. They really wanted me to tell them what's the career that I'm going to end up with, and I couldn't tell them.

Henry's comments underscore the difficulty that he faced discussing his major change with his parents, but they also illustrate how this discussion may have been complicated by a lack of knowledge about careers that ethnic studies graduates can pursue. Such knowledge might have been useful in successfully navigating this discussion.

The importance of being able to explain potential future careers is emphasized by Jackie, who was preparing to have a similar discussion with her parents about switching majors from human biology to human development:

There was definitely a lot of pressure from my parents to do some type of science major . . . I know I'm definitely going to have to talk to them . . . I'm going to try to explain what human development is, but I know it's going to be hard because they don't really know what majors are like here or what it's all about . . . The important thing is what I could do with it in the future . . . I feel like, as long as I'm able to explain some part of that to them, I don't think it'll be a huge deal.

These participants' quotations illustrate how the process of switching majors and justifying such changes to their parents was a salient issue and, to some extent, posed significant challenges.

Discussion

The findings of the current study confirm and contribute to existing literature in several ways. First, the current findings shed additional light on how cultural mechanisms (i.e., cultural values) shape the success of SEAA students. Indeed, previous studies have indicated that cultural values that emphasize the importance of education, family, and making sacrifices for family positively influence the success of SEAA students (e.g., Caplan et al., 1991; Freeman, 1995; Hutchinson & McNall, 1994; Koltyk, 1997; Lee, 1997; Penning, 1992; Robbins, 2004; Rutledge, 1992; Whitmore et al., 1989; Zhou & Bankston, 1998). The findings of the current study add to this existing literature by providing evidence that educational expectations, instilled at a very early age and leaving little doubt about whether SEAA students will go to college, could be a critical factor in shaping SEAA students' educational trajectories.

Second, while the current findings confirm the importance of positive parental influences or pressures in the experiences and success of SEAA students (Conchas, 2006; Hutchinson & Koltyk, 1997; Lee, 1997; McNall, 1994; Ngo & Lee, 2007), they also underscore the importance of students' internalization of those parental pressures and the development of intrinsic forms of motivation. This finding is consistent with research suggesting that parental encouragement positively influences the ability of youth of color to construct conceptual schemas that allow them to see themselves as potential college students (Pizzolato, 2006). Moreover, this finding is especially important because these participants' stories suggest that parental pressures may be central motivating factors at an early age—when SEAA students are not likely to recognize the full importance of education—and that the internalization of those pressures might be critical as SEAs move into adulthood and college life. It is possible that SEAA undergraduates who do not internalize their parents' high educational expectations, educational values, and responsibilities to pay back their parents for past sacrifices are more likely to become demotivated and drop out, but such analysis and testing of this relationship is beyond the scope of the current study and warrants further investigation.

Third, the findings indicate that if the pressures that SEAA students receive from their parents become excessive, these pressures could be detrimental. Earlier research has suggested that, for some Vietnamese students, pressure to succeed for the family and inability to do well in school can lead to an immense sense of failure (Conchas, 2006). The findings of this study suggest that excessive parental pressure might also lead to some SEAA students feeling that they cannot please their parents and are doomed to fail, ultimately resulting in a diminution of motivation to succeed. However, it is important to highlight that only two participants in the current study reported feeling such excessive pressure to excel. Thus, these findings do not suggest that such excessive pressure or "tiger parenting"—characterized by traditional, overly strict, and uncompromising pressure to excel—are common among SEAA families. Nevertheless, future research that examines whether and how larger samples of SEAA and other Asian American college students have experienced overwhelming pressure from parents and society is needed to fully explain this phenomenon.

Fourth, the findings contradict results of earlier studies suggesting that ascribed gender roles might pose challenges for Vietnamese and Cambodian American women (Pataray-Ching, Kitt-Hinrichs, & Nguyen, 2006; Zhou & Bankston, 1998). This is not to suggest, however, that gender does not play a role in the experiences of Vietnamese and Cambodian American female students. Indeed, it is very possible that gender

influenced the Vietnamese and Cambodian American students in a variety of ways but that they chose not to share such ways or that those gender influences were not the most salient factors shaping their educational trajectories. The findings do confirm earlier research suggesting that Hmong American women can face challenges due to lower educational expectations and greater emphasis on earning their status through fulfilling family obligations rather than achieving academically (Donnelly, 1994; Rumbaut & Ima, 1988; Walker-Moffat, 1995). However, only two Hmong American female students talked about experiencing lower expectations from their parents and communities, and one of them indicated that her parents' gender-based expectations had shifted over time—confirming earlier assertions that cultural gender norms shift and can make it easier for Hmong American women to pursue and succeed in college (Lee, 1997).

Finally, this is the first empirical study to shed light on the ways that parents can complicate the major choices of SEAA college students specifically. Researchers studying major choices among Asian Americans in general have argued that Asian American parents, particularly immigrants and refugee parents who are less acculturated, might steer their children into fields in which Asian American role models and networks already exist and fields that are likely to raise the family's socioeconomic status (Chung, 2001; Yee, DeBaryshe, Yuen, Kim, & McCubbin, 2007). Given the economic struggles that many SEAA parents have and continue to face, it is not surprising that they want their children to enter majors that will maximize the likelihood of financial security, and the findings of this inquiry suggest that some SEAA parents might pressure students to enter majors that are likely to be the most financially lucrative and stable (e.g., science and medicine). The findings also suggest, however, that such pressure to choose particular majors might pose challenges for students later in their college careers, such as increasing the risk that they will be unhappy in their majors, struggle with the choice to change majors, and have to navigate the difficulties in justifying these changes to their parents.

It is also important to note that parental influences are likely not the only factor that pressures SEAs to choose particular majors. Indeed, racial stereotypes might contribute to assumptions that SEAs and other Asian Americans are competent in careers that require skills in math and science but are unqualified to assume professional positions that require social and verbal abilities (Leong & Serafica, 1995). There is at least some indication that such stereotypes might lead to pressure for SEAs and other Asian Americans to pursue science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) majors and careers. For example, in an analysis of the role of racism in 64 Asian American un-

dergraduates' experiences (Museus & Park, 2012), my colleague and I provide evidence that racial stereotypes might pressure students to pursue STEM degrees. If racial stereotypes do contribute to such assumptions, then these preconceived notions can further contribute to SEAA's being discontent with their majors and navigating the complexities of changing fields. It should also be noted that such stereotypes can constitute externally imposed barriers to SEAA's and other Asian Americans' vocational exploration in non-STEM areas but can also become internal barriers to such exploration as SEAA's and other Asian Americans internalize these stereotypes (Leong & Hayes, 1990). By diminishing such vocational exploration, such stereotypes can function to decrease SEAA's and other Asian Americans' opportunities in certain professional arenas (e.g., law, politics, education).

Implications for Research and Practice

This examination has several important implications for higher education research and practice. First, it is important to understand what effects these various parental pressures have on SEAA student success. While participants in this study indicated that parental influences were the greatest positive factor facilitating their success, given that the current study was not longitudinal or generalizable, we were not able to link those influences with actual success in college. Thus, quantitative studies that test whether, and to what extent, parental pressures have an impact on SEAA student success are warranted.

Second, one limitation of the current study is that it did not examine the role of structural influences or the interactions between cultural and structural influences in shaping the experiences of SEAA students. Given existing literature that underscores the reality that cultural and structural forces do interact to influence the experiences of students of color (Lareau, 2011; Ogbu, 1987; Venezuela, 1999; Zhou & Kim, 2006), it is likely that various structural factors (e.g., racial and economic conditions, systems of supplementary education, etc.) shape the influence of SEAA parents on their students' trajectories, and this is an important area for future inquiry. Scholars should examine the impact of structural factors (e.g., unequal distribution of resources, systems of supplemental education, etc.) on SEAA's educational trajectories as well as how these structural factors interact with culture to determine SEAA educational outcomes.

Third, more knowledge of the ways in which major choices shape the experiences and outcomes of SEAA students is needed. It has been noted that Asian American students have relatively low levels of satis-

faction with the college experience (Museus, 2009; Museus & Kiang, 2009). While there could be other reasons for these low levels of satisfaction, such as experienced prejudice and discrimination on campus, parental pressures that channel SEAA students into undesirable majors could be one factor contributing to their discontent in college.

Regarding practice, faculty and staff who work with SEAs must take into account the ways in which these students' lives are shaped by their parents, families, and communities and incorporate that understanding into their work. For example, counselors should consider how parental pressures, in addition to societal pressures, for SEAs to succeed might lead to immense stress and difficulties in college. Student affairs educators might want to consider developing programming that can facilitate SEAA college students' internalization of parental pressures and the development of stronger intrinsic motivations to succeed. And academic advisors should consider the ways that parental and family influences might be pressuring these students to choose academic majors that are not a good fit for them and consider ways that they can help students explore alternative major options.

Finally, it is important for college faculty and staff to consider ways that they can engage SEAA students' parents in educational processes to foster success among those undergraduates. For example, educating families—both parents and students—about the career options that are available to those who graduate from a wide variety of academic fields might help SEAA parents and their students collectively make more informed decisions about major choices that lead to better fit, increased satisfaction, and greater success in college.

Notes

¹ For the purposes of this article, Southeast Asian American (SEAA) refers to Asian Americans of Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, and Vietnamese descent.

² Major counts exceed 34 because some students reported being double majors.

³ All participant names used in this article are pseudonyms.

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