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Cover Page Footnote

I'd like to thank my mentor, Dr. Stacey Lee for advising me every step of the way through writing this paper. I'd also like to thank my mentors at UT Austin, Dr. Anthony Brown and Dr. Keffrelyn Brown, for their constant support in my academic career.

Impact of the Model Minority Stereotype and Lack of Social Capital Among Vietnamese American Students

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Abstract

Within the context of the Asian American community and the pervasive “model minority” stereotype, my project hopes to bring to light the struggles and experiences of first-generation Vietnamese Americans from the Houston area. Through structured interviews, this pilot study hopes to archive specific Asian American experiences that continue to defy and disprove the persistent “model minority” stereotype—the durable and racialized identity that generalizes the economic and academic success of all Asians in the United States. This study hopes to also archive the structural and systemic inequities that impose unacknowledged challenges upon students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Southeast Asian Americans who do not conform to such expectations are neglected in a system that claims post-racial meritocracy. While the aggregated data taken on Asian American populations in the United States obscures the problems and experiences of these specific ethnic groups, the individual narratives recorded through interviews will help illustrate a clearer portrait of the problems Vietnamese Americans face within the public education system. I use the theoretical lens of social capital to show how academic tracking and racialized identities affect the educational outcomes of first-generation Vietnamese American students. The findings of my study demonstrate that first-generation

Vietnamese American students in the Houston area face several seemingly invisible problems emotional and financial burdens and unacknowledged mental health issues.

Keywords: Asian American, model minority, Vietnamese Americans, Southeast Asian Americans, social capital, tracking, Houston, first-generation, academic achievement.

Introduction

This study hopes to document how structures within the public education system affects the educational attainment of first-generation Vietnamese American students. Educational attainment can vary significantly among students, and a student's social networks and resources can have a significant impact on whether they feel like they can attain a higher degree after high school. In other words, social capital and socioeconomic status can have a significantly impact an individual's aspirations. In this study, I examine and investigate the educational attainment of Vietnamese American students and the obstacles they face in applying to and attending college. This attainment process includes the different variables that go into a student's decision to pursue a higher degree after high school. Social capital plays a fundamental role in academic achievement and students of lower socioeconomic status must find different means to achieving "traditional" pathways of success (Palmer, R. T., & Maramba, D. C., 2015; Museus & Mueller, 2018). Lack of social capital compounded with a racialized identity sets first-generation Vietnamese American students in a unique and unacknowledged realm within educational spaces. While they are presumed to do well because of their racialized identities, educational attainment or the lack thereof reflects a problem that goes unacknowledged and unseen. My project will investigate educational attainment and the relationship between effort, achievement,

racialized identities, and tracking. My research questions are: What obstacles do Vietnamese American students experience during their time in high school and how do these experiences affect their post-secondary educational career? What affect does social capital have on academic achievement, persistence, and aspirations?

My main methodology will consist of interviews. My qualitative interviews will be framed by a specific set of questions approved by Dr. Stacey Lee. I hypothesize that social capital will play a significant role in educational attainment. Dr. Lee and I discussed the importance of recording how one felt in specific situations and stimuli (e.g. one's attitude towards school, teachers, peers, etc.) to demonstrate how structural and systemic phenomena can affect effort. We also discussed how one's knowledge base and potential success was affected by their social networks and capital. In a meritocratic culture that blames students of color for not achieving a traditional mode of success because they did not appear to "work hard enough," the model minority narrative also glazes over students who don't meet traditional standards of success.

Methods

This project is a qualitative study on Vietnamese Americans. I interviewed five peers over Facetime or Skype to discuss their careers after graduating from high school. Aside from Tuan, four out of five participants are second generation Vietnamese Americans. All participants are 19-23-year-old Vietnamese Americans. The pool also includes individuals who are first generation college students and individuals who didn't pursue post-secondary education. I connected with these participants by contacting other mutual friends, but I personally know all these participants as they went to school with me at some point during my own career.

Participants were chosen knowing that they were first-generation college students or would have

been first-generation if they pursued a post-secondary education. Although this is a heavily biased and skewed set of participants, I believe that the qualitative nature of this project is not undermined. As a pilot project, this set of participants helps illuminate problems affecting Vietnamese Americans in the field of education. The individual narratives and stories each participant share another aspect within the multi-dimensional problem affecting disadvantaged minorities.

Each participant was interviewed separately, and each answered a set of semi-structured questions to investigate the factors that allow/ disallow a student from pursuing a higher education. I would call participants over Facebook video and initiate the interview after introducing my project. Before the interview began, I also acknowledged that this article will not be published and that their identities will be changed. I also primed the interview as “conversational” in tone and nature in order to communicate that this interview was not making any judgement about their personal choices.

Interview Questions:

I created these questions based upon my own research inquiries. The interview questions explored each participant’s relationship with school and the obstacles they faced when applying for college. The questions were chosen and written to illustrate a more holistic story and narrative that quantitative data is unable to show. I designed the interview protocol with input from Dr. Stacey Lee to identify specific identity markers such as income and first-generation status and to explore aspects of each individual’s racial identity. As is typical of semi-structured interviews, the interviews often strayed from just these questions. Because of my personal relationships with the participants, they felt freer to disclose extremely intimate aspects of their academic journeys. The interview protocol is at the end of the paper (appendix A).

The Houston Vietnamese American Population

The cause for the Vietnamese diaspora is attributed to America's loss at the end of the Vietnam War. After the Northern Vietnamese communist party, or the Viet Cong and People's Army of Vietnam captured Saigon, many South Vietnamese loyalists were subjected to displacement, punishment, and imprisonment (Rkasnuam & Batalova, 2014). To avoid the political repercussions of persecution, displacement, and governmental instability under the communist regime, these Southern Vietnamese populations and loyalists sought asylum in Western countries such as Australia, Canada, France, and other parts of Europe (Rkasnuam & Batalova, 2014). The largest population of Southern Vietnamese came to America, and historians identify that the immigration came in three distinct waves (Rkasnuam & Batalova, 2014).

According to the Migration Policy Institute, the three distinct waves can be defined by social class and educational attainment (Rkasnuam & Batalova, 2014; Alperin, E., & Batalova, J., 2018; Museus & Mueller, 2018). At the Fall of Saigon in the beginning of 1975, the first wave came to America. This wave consisted of highly educated individuals from higher social ranks, particularly military personnel; these refugees were at a higher risk to be prisoners and targets of Vietnam's communist regime. Because this group of refugees were considerably more educated, they also had more transferable skills in America, making their transition into America's workforce smoother. In contrast, the second wave of Vietnamese refugees faced many more hardships.

The second wave of the late 1970s consisted of less educated individuals from rural backgrounds. The second wave was also known as the "boat people" because of the precariously small boats these refugees fled from Vietnam on towards refugee camps for days, weeks, or months. These people of these boats were vulnerable to pirates, overcrowding, and the piercing,

inescapable heat and elements of the Pacific— countless died on the perilous journey due to these harsh conditions. Second wave refugees desperately escaped displacement and endured a traumatic journey to come to America without many transferable skills. Their transition into American workforce and society was rougher. Many working-class Vietnamese people within the Houston area are second wave refugees (Kriel, 2016). The third wave consisted of immigrants coming to America in the late 80s and 90s. Many of them were Amerasians, or children of American servicemen and Vietnamese mothers and political prisoners.

As of today, there are more than two million people of Vietnamese descent residing in America and more than 120,000 residing in the greater Houston area (Alperin & Batalova, 2018). The Houston community also has the third largest Vietnamese population in the nation and their cultural presence is demonstrated through the prevalent food markets, small businesses and shops, and restaurants that dominate the strip mall plazas on Saigon/ Bellaire Boulevard. Houston is a metropolitan area filled with multicultural hubs. The majority of Asian Americans in Houston are foreign born; about 71% were born in another country (Binkovitz, 2016). Houston is the fourth largest city in the U.S. and is home to an extremely large and prominent Asian American community— which is its fastest growing group (Binkovitz, 2016).

Asian Americans within the Houston area have experienced tremendous growth within the last decade. Houston is also an extremely large and robust area with several different districts. Between 2000 and 2010, Harris County's Vietnamese population grew by 45% and it stands as the largest Asian ethnic group within the county. Roughly 31% of all Asians in Harris County are of Vietnamese descent, making them a significant and influential community in the Houston area (Binkovitz, 2016). Although Harris County's Vietnamese population is extremely large, and its voices are heard through HISD's Asian Advisory Committee, it's suburban neighbor Sugar

Land, does not have as large of a population (Chen 2018). While Sugar Land is 37.5% Asian, the Vietnamese community only makes up 15% of that portion (Klineberg & Wu, 2013). Because the Vietnamese are a small minority in Sugar Land, their voices aren't as heard and their presence is not reflected like it is in HISD, where they have an Asian Advisory Committee to ensure immigrant voices are heard (Chen 2018).

Model Minority Stereotype

In order to understand the model minority myth, it must be placed in the context of Other political structures concerning class and racial histories (Lee, S. J., 2009; Ngo B. & Lee, S., 2007). The model minority stereotype assumes that all Asians are high-achieving, well-behaved, and apolitically submissive. The durable stereotype is often used in contemporary conversation to justify that all minorities can succeed and prosper in America. Although some may perceive a stereotype defined by the generalized success and achievements of a racial group as a positive attribute, the stereotype neglects specific ethnic communities who are not performing as well. The stereotype is also intended to make other minority groups appear culturally deficient (Lee, S. J., 2009; Ngo B. & Lee, S., 2007). The “model minority” myth, which erases the complex experiences of different ethnicities within the AAPI community, is still reinforced through public school systems (Lee, S. J., 2005; Ngo B. & Lee, S., 2007). Several scholars also advocate for disaggregated data on local, state, and national levels and to train more AAPI teachers in order to serve the AAPI population better (Lee, S. J. & Kumashiro, K., 2005; Ngo B. & Lee, S., 2007; Ramakrishnan, K., & Ahmad, F., 2014). The aggregated data hides particular Asian ethnic groups that do not perform as well as other financially established Asian ethnic groups, such as Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans.

This myth perpetuates the disenfranchisement of many Southeast Asian refugee groups that do not achieve the same amount of educational success as other ethnic groups within the racial category of “Asian American.” The model minority myth is a political weapon against other minority groups, it suggests that all AAPI have overcome racial barriers to success. By citing the success of financially established ethnic groups (e.g. Chinese and Japanese Americans), the stereotype dismisses cases of racial inequality affecting all Asian Americans (Lee, S. J. & Kumashiro, K., 2005). Social class plays a significant role in educational attainment, and although it is more probable for Asian Americans to earn more than \$75,000 than it is for white people, it is also more probable for them to earn less than \$25,000 in a year than it is for white people (Lee, S. J. & Kumashiro, K., 2005). The model minority myth obscures the latter statistic, rendering lower-income Asian American communities invisible. Southeast Asian communities make up a large portion of the less traditionally successful Asian American communities (Yang, K., 2004).

When viewing the AAPI community, focusing on the disaggregated data is fundamental to understanding the achievement, wealth, and health gaps and disparities between the different ethnic groups encompassed by the racial label “Asian American” (Ngo B. & Lee, S., 2007; Yang, K., 2004; Ramakrishnan, K., & Ahmad, F., 2014). Because Asian Americans are made up of numerous different ethnic groups with numerous different histories, each ethnic group’s experience will also differ. Considering the historical migration patterns of Vietnamese people to America, their experiences will be incredibly different from third generation Chinese, Korean, or Japanese Americans. Southeast Asian Americans, which includes Vietnamese, Laotian, Hmong, and Cambodian people, are struggling academically and economically (Palmer, R. T., & Maramba, D. C., 2015; Museus & Mueller, 2018). While 28% of the general American

population holds a four-year degree, 26% of Vietnamese, 14% of Hmong, 13% of Cambodian, and 12% of Laotian Americans hold one (Museus & Mueller, 2018). These Southeast Asian American groups also live in disproportionate poverty rates compared to other AAPI groups. While 9.7% of Japanese and 9.8% of Asian Indians live in poverty, 16.6% of Vietnamese, 37.8% of Hmong, 18.5% of Laotians, and 29.3% of Cambodians live in poverty (National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education, 2008).

KaYing Yang discusses the specific obstacles that Southeast Asian Americans face within the public education system. While families are supportive in terms of higher educational attainment, SEAA families face “limited English skills, discrimination, systematic miscommunication between students, parents, and teachers, and widespread feelings of alienation” from the schools they attend (Yang, K., 2004). The English language barrier is one of the most significant obstacles facing Southeast Asian American families, particularly the Vietnamese American population. According to the Center for American Progress, 34% of Vietnamese households in the U.S. are linguistically isolated (Ramakrishnan & Ahmad, 2014). Many Vietnamese American refugees still suffer from their traumatic experiences of escaping Vietnam and many never learned English. Teachers who reinforce an “American” culture in which they expect parents to reach out to them about problems, but parents who are not fluent in English are oftentimes too shy to reach out to school administration and staff (Yang, K., 2004). Vietnamese American linguistic isolation can also speak to the working-class jobs and the effect that has on Vietnamese American parental involvement. Incomes, job mobility, the quality of health care are also heavily linked to English proficiency (Ramakrishnan & Ahmad, 2014).

Negative stereotypes also cause teachers to see SEAA students as poor prospects— they are not a population to invest in because they are aligned with delinquency, gang membership, and

other fear evoking stereotypes (Yang, K., 2004, Lee, S., 2001). Lee's (2005) book on the educational experiences of Hmong American students in Wisconsin, many of whom have fallen through the cracks. Teachers valued White, middle-class norms and values, which the Hmong population does not reflect. Lee identifies the racialized paradigm in which the Hmong population was seen through—the traditional (who were predominately ESL students) and the “Americanized” (who predominately took mainstream courses). While the traditional group were found ways to preserve their cultural identities are seen as “good” kids, Americanized Hmong adopted a counter youth culture associated with truancy, delinquency, and gang membership. Americanized Hmong behaviors and counterculture reflect intergenerational tensions and a school system that does not accommodate or acknowledge cultural or racial tensions (Lee, S., 2001). These misconceptions can further the neglect and dismiss the complex obstacles that Southeast Asian American youth face in unaccommodating school environments.

Social Capital & Tracking

Zhou and Bankston argue that the implications and social capital in being a member of the ethnic Vietnamese community is a large cause for success for Vietnamese American students (Zhou, M., & Bankston, C., 1998). In their study, Vietnamese American student success and socioeconomic advancement depended heavily on the support and control enforced by networks of social relations. Support and control stems from the “respect” and affirmation of authority figures, immersive and constant ethnic involvement on economic, religious and psychological levels, and a system of norms and values associated with constructive behaviors. Positive outcomes seem to derive from the patterns of social capital that exist within the Versailles Village community and how these patterns of social relations harmonize with America's contemporary social structure. On the other hand, non-conforming identities are ostracized and

condemned. In the context of Vietnamese Americans who do and do not achieve mainstream success within the context of the model minority myth, my project hopes to analyze Vietnamese Americans who do not live up to the model minority achievement stereotype.

According to Bourdieu (1986) the term, “social capital” is defined as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group.” Social capital can be defined as the collection of social networks, connections, and knowledge bases an individual can access (Lan, N., 1999; Museus, S. D. & Mueller, M. K., 2018; Palmer, R. T., & Maramba, D. C., 2015). Social capital is not just a matter of simply having these networks and connections, but knowing how to use them in order to advance in society (Palmer, R. T., & Maramba, D. C., 2015). Palmer and Maramba’s study found that care agents such as counselors, relatives, and supportive teachers were paramount to Southeast Asian American student success and application to colleges and universities (Palmer, R. T., & Maramba, D. C., 2015). These “care agents” served as institutional agents that linked individuals to otherwise inaccessible knowledge bases and networks, thus acting as a form of social capital. Organizations, pre-college programs, and specific student services were also responsible for application success amongst first and second generation SEAA. The cultural capital of our nation’s schools is governed by whitestream, middle class values, which can systemically exclude students of color from low-income backgrounds, e.g. Southeast Asian Americans (Museus, S. D. & Mueller, M. K., 2018; Lee, S., 2006). The organization of schools and tracking is directly intertwined with social capital in many ways.

Academic or curricular tracking is “a social structure” that assigns students to certain academic classes based upon overall achievement (Carbonaro, W., 2005). Because students are

placed on different tracks that offer different academic opportunities, tracks create and reproduce inequities within the educational system (Ochoa, G., 2013; Carbonaro, 2005; Oakes, J., 1985). Different classes provide different and even limited opportunities for learning, thus affecting what a student could and should learn (Carbonaro, W., 2005; Oakes, J., 1985). For example, if a student is encouraged to take pre-AP/ AP classes in high school, they are prepared to take those respective AP tests. These students gain a skillset in studying for more rigorous tests and a more challenging curriculum. They can also gain a form of financial capital by scoring well on AP tests, as these scores can translate into college credit. Students who remain on non-AP or non IB tracks do not gain these study skillsets, nor are they taught at the same pace or curriculum as AP or IB students. Simultaneously, they are denied access to the financial capital that AP tests provide. The results of Carbonaro's study on tracking suggest that we should not assign blame on students, but rather, we should evaluate the class environment that appears to be discouraging students from exerting effort and instead, cultivate an environment that challenges and stimulates (Carbonaro, W., 2005).

Tracking reproduces social inequities by placing different "types" of students on different pathways. It also disproportionately affects low-income students of color (Ochoa, G., 2013; Oakes, J., 1985). In her book, *Academic Profiling*, Ochoa investigates the systemic structures that create and reproduces racialized and classist inequities in a racially mixed school comprised of Asian and Latinx students. In her study, she found that tracking excludes poor Latinx and Asian populations and reproduces students who are probably unprepared for a higher education. Tracking can also be interpreted as a form of racial and classist segregation (Ochoa, G., 2013; Oakes, J., 1985). When students of color from low-income backgrounds are funneled into lower tracks, they are fundamentally given less opportunities to succeed. Their social capital and

networks are limited to the tracks they are funneled into. They also engage in less stimulating environments and are not held to the same standards as higher track peers (Carbonaro, W., 2005). This inequity within the school’s organizational structure translates into inequities post-graduation, as lower track students with less opportunities and knowledge bases are expected to compete against their peers who have accumulated greater social capital. While schools give students the autonomy to choose their tracks, choices can be limited. In schools with lower-income racially isolated communities, lower-level classes outweigh higher level classes due to funding and resource distribution (Oakes, J., 1985). Even in schools that are racially mixed, lower-income students of color are still tracked into lower-level classes (Ochoa, G., 2013; Oakes, J., 1985).

Results

	Age	Current Occupation	First Generation Status/ Highest	Reduced Lunch
Michelle Nguyen	19	Barista, CC	First Generation college student at Community College	Y
Gwen Nguyen	21	Unemployed	Parents did not go to college	Y
Tuan Duong	21	Unemployed	Parents did not go to college	Y
Vincent Le	23	Marine Corps	Parents did not go to college	Y
Jonathan Tran	21	UT Student	First Generation college student at UT Austin	Y

Participant and smaller school names have been changed. All participants, aside from Tuan, are second generation Vietnamese Americans. Out of the five participants, only one (Jonathan Tran) attended a four-year university. Michelle Nguyen is currently attending Bartone County Community College and is planning to transfer to Texas Women’s to pursue a degree in

Nursing. Vincent is planning to attend UT Austin spring 2020. Although both Tuan and Gwen expressed a desire to attend college in the future, they have not set a specific date or plan due to a variety of obstacles.

Financial obstacles and lack of social capital was the most persistent problem and factor that determined whether a student pursued a higher degree. Many participants felt limited and constrained by personal issues such as abusive relationships, divorce, drug addiction, and other mental health issues. In a system where these personal issues stray from what is conceived of as normative, first generation, low income students face these problems alone. Many first-generation students come from low-income backgrounds, and all the participants disclosed that they were on free/ reduced lunch at one point in their lives. I classify these recurring problems and conflicts into several different categories/ themes.

While analyzing the interviews collected at the beginning of July 2019, I noticed three apparent themes throughout the five transcriptions: 1) Financial Burden, 2) Mental Health as a Taboo, 3) Esteem/ Merit/ Model Minority. The most apparent theme was the financial obstacle of attending a four-year university straight out of college. All participants cited a financial obstacle in pursuing a four-year degree. The word, “burden” came up often during interviews and the concept appeared to be intertwined with the individualistic outlook on achieving merit many participants held. This outlook can be identified as having to do everything for themselves by themselves. A theme that intertwined with the ideas of “burden” was a low-esteem when it came to talking about their effort during their time in school. Another trend that I noticed was the lack of conversation revolving around mental health within the Asian American community, specifically the Vietnamese American community. Three out of five participants cited some emotional or mental strain that stood as an obstacle during their time in high school and post-

graduation. These specific strains were intense amounts of stress, toxic relationships, and drug abuse— all of which had a negative impact in their decisions to not pursue a higher education. Not having health insurance, lack of support/ acknowledgement from family and community members disallowed any avenue of discourse in navigating these “invisible” issues. Michelle, Gwen, and Tuan all cited that they felt that they did not have adult mentors who could help or advise them when they applied for college. They described their lack of trust for adult figures and sincerely thought they were supposed to do everything by themselves.

Financial burdens, the lack of discourse concerning mental health, and the effects of the model minority stereotype are all linked to a lack of social capital. This lack of social capital compounds the financial burdens, racialized identities, and mental health issues Vietnamese Americans experienced during their time at school. When any one of these students struggled, each student assumed that was how the system was meant to be. As low-income Vietnamese students whose parents did not attend college, this mentality and approach to navigating a school system that favors students from more privileged backgrounds, disallows mistakes and compounds personal hardships. These next few pages will discuss participants’ narratives in order to illustrate the multi-dimensional problems affecting first-generation Vietnamese students.

1) Burden

A burden of guilt and finance seems to stem from Vietnamese American history and the culture of work connected to it. The immigrant narrative in which one’s parents has lifted themselves by their bootstraps and that they work hard for their children’s benefits is a common one within the Vietnamese American community. Many Vietnamese immigrants live working class lives; many work more than ten hours a day to provide for their children (Zhou, M., &

Bankston, C., 1998). All participants cited that their parents worked at least one, sometimes two, jobs at a time, making them absent from most of their academic careers.

This immense sacrifice amongst the Vietnamese American community imposes a sociocultural norm on young Vietnamese Americans to succeed. As Vincent said in his interview:

“... My mom was a little bit more on the... on the like... heavier side, when she was saying what she was saying. You know like, it was a pressure of like: ‘Hey, I came to this country to have a better life, so you would have a better life.’ And I’m not going to say all but a majority of Asian— first-generation Asian culture— their parents came to this country to work hard, so that their kids could have a better opportunity, which is true um but— and they only see education as the way to a better opportunity— in the way where they’re like more so as like: ‘You have an education, you get a degree, you do this, you won’t have to work as hard as I do.’ And it comes from a good place. It comes from a place where they want their child to be successful, *where they’re not struggling as much as they did coming up*. In high school I had already thought about it, and I saw what it actually took to you know be successful, whatever, in whatever way you think being successful is— and in any path to be successful, there is hard work involved. That aspect of hard work never disappears. And I wouldn’t say that they don’t understand that but like to a certain extent they don’t.”

Here, Vincent refers to the physical, mental, and emotional toil that the Vietnamese immigrant experiences. The pressure to alleviate one’s parents from working away their entire lives is imposed on children, and school is seen as one of the most viable and respectable options. Academic achievement is reduced to the only route towards a life where one is not constantly toiling in a service job that does not fulfill, create, or give purpose. Vincent also

speaks to the meritocratic culture attached to the Asian American immigration narrative, where one is obligated to work hard to ensure parental sacrifices do not go to waste. This immigrant narrative places an emotional burden on students who do not achieve their parent's expectations.

The obligation to achieve and bring one's family out of the working class can be interpreted by children in many ways, but it ultimately places a heavy pressure on students who may not have the resources or social capital to do so. No matter how hard a student works, not having access to resources can block a student from achieving their dreams. In conversation with Vincent's anecdote above, Tuan seemed to view his effort as inferior or "not as serious as [it] should be." Not being able to achieve a specific standard, i.e., taking the four-year route, Tuan states that an investment in a four-year education seems futile and not valuable.

"Brooke: And your parents were able to afford it?"

Tuan: Yeah, they would be able to afford it, but like all the other miscellaneous things are preventing me from doing it.

Brooke: What miscellaneous things?

Tuan: Just commuting, and moving out of the house, and renting an apartment just to go to school and stuff.

Brooke: Is that scary to you or?

Tuan: Not scary... just like... I don't want to use so much funds or burden my parents even more. Especially when I'm not as serious as I should be in education.

Brooke: I mean it's pretty serious, you're taking your school very seriously. An education just shouldn't cost that much I feel. It shouldn't be a burden to anybody.

Tuan: Yeah well it is."

Within the past few years, the price of a higher education has soared to nearly impossible prices for lower-income students, systematically denying them direct access to higher institutions. While lower-income students can take out loans and receive grants, debt from other incurring costs (e.g. housing, books, and commuting) and the risk of pursuing a higher degree can be a significant deterrent. Debt and risk compounded by no mentorship can make obtaining a higher degree feel like a bad investment. In Tuan's case, he also interpreted his own efforts as "not as serious as [he] should be," despite his constant descriptions of the time, effort, and work he put into school. This distortion of how he views his effort and the uncertainty of financial instability can also make education appear as not worth it or futile.

As Tuan puts it:

Brooke: So at the end of high school did you want to go to college?

Tuan: Yeah, I did, but I didn't know which one, and I didn't know whether I wanted to pay for a higher institution instead of community college. And I didn't know if I should go from community college to just going into the work and try to make as much money, to gain the capital, to trade.

Brooke: What deferred you from pursuing a higher—?

Tuan: The cost I guess. The fact that I had to commute all the way to a higher— just take UH for example, it would take anywhere from 45 to an hour just to get there, so I didn't want to make that investment.

Tuan is not alone in his decision to not attend a four-year institution. All participants in the study cited that although going to college was a priority for their family, it placed an absurd financial burden on the family. Even for participants who disclosed that their family could have paid for

college, participants felt that their dream would still place a burden of immense guilt on themselves if they pursued their ideal routes.

In her interview, Michelle Nguyen opened up about her personal and familial circumstances:

Brooke: Did you ever feel like your home life every bled into your school life? Or that it added stress into your school life?

Michelle: [pause] A little bit... a little bit. Because most students work, so they have to balance that work and school life, and like, you know like, you know that my parents are divorced right? And you know that plays a large part of it. In that time, late middle school and early high school, was when they were processing the divorce, and Kyla (Michelle's younger sister) was young and she didn't know, or at least she didn't like understand... it was a lot to take in... to adjust and change lifestyles.

Brooke: How did your lifestyle change?

Michelle: It was more of a struggle financially... that was the biggest thing. It was just my mom... and Gwen (Michelle's older sister) and I couldn't drive until we were 18... and then Gwen was like rebelling at the time. She was supposed to be the oldest and like the role model, you know what I mean? So I had to step up and grow up fast to help my mom and take care of Kyla and work and school... It was just a lot of pressure.

The pressure described by Michelle in this interview was a burden placed on Michelle during some of her most crucial years of academic development. Later in her interview, Michelle stated that she was unable to take more AP classes due to stress. The adjustment in lifestyles between a two-parent household to a single parent household with half the income became an additional struggle for Michelle during her time at school. This struggle was compounded by other familial

hardships that burdened Michelle's performance in school. Michelle's anecdote demonstrates that financial burdens can indirectly impact a student's mental health and social capital. Because Michelle couldn't take more AP classes, she, in theory, was exposed to less opportunities and knowledge bases than other peers who took more AP classes.

If we compare the academic journeys of Jonathan Tran, who currently attends UT Austin to Tuan Tran, who dropped out of community college, the differences in resources are extremely apparent. When I asked Jonathan about the resources available to him at his magnet high school, he was able to single out specific mentors and programs that helped him succeed:

Brooke: Can you describe the resources that helped you apply to college?

We had- so off the top of my head, Kett HS was really good with dual credit. We had a ton of dual credit classes and like partnering with community colleges like HCC and I think maybe Lonestar helped us out a bit? UH had some classes as well for us, um and so that gave us a jumpstart with college credits. Our counselors had mandatory— I think it was mandatory— we had to go talk to them just about our colleges, the options we had or were considering. We also had a college career readiness center and their job was to help us with applications again with those dual credit classes, and just mentoring us about how the whole process looks like and what we should be looking forward to.

When I asked Tuan about these resources, I received an extremely different answer:

Brooke: Did anybody help you with applying to college?

Tuan: I forgot her name... the black lady next to Mr. Delta. Yeah, she did, but she didn't help as much as I thought. Like I found a way to fill out my applications for community college, but I didn't like, but I didn't understand how I was supposed to transfer after that... I didn't know what to do after that.

Brooke: She helped you with FAFSA then? She was only one woman yeah, I remember that...

Tuan: Yeah and there were like 30 kids coming in. It was like really a constraint on time... a tension.

Brooke: Did you ever think of somebody as somebody who could get you into [a four year] college? Besides the college advisor?

Tuan: Nope, I only went to her... so I guess it was a fault of mine.

Jonathan and Tuan went to two different high schools within the Houston- Sugar Land area. While Jonathan attended Kett High School, where the Vietnamese population has a greater voice in the educational system, Tuan attended Geyser High School in Sugar Land, where the Vietnamese population makes up a small minority of the Asian population. Although they live about ten minutes away from one another, the distribution of college access resources between the two students' schools had a significant impact on their academic achievement. While Jonathan went on to UT Austin, Texas' premier state school, Tuan dropped out of community college. The burden of achieving "less" is also evident in Tuan's self-blaming rhetoric stating: "Nope, I only went to her... so I guess it was a fault of mine." Despite visiting and engaging with the main college access resource at his school, Tuan still felt like it was his fault for not achieving more. There is an acknowledgement that the academic advisor was overloaded with kids to help, yet Tuan still pays an emotional burden. The financial burdens that place enormous amounts of pressure on Vietnamese American students as they pursue their dreams can translate into guilt and shame when those goals are unachieved.

2) On Mental Health as Taboo

Although mental health was not a direct issue I addressed through my questions, it became increasingly clear throughout the interviews that mental health issues were stigmatized

and undiscussed. Out of five participants, three of them cited extreme amounts of stress, ADHD, abusive relationships, drug addictions, and familial instability. The model minority stereotype and the ideas of achievement attached to the stereotype obscures the prevalence of mental health issues. In Tuan's case, viewing mental illness as an individual deficiency also disallows any conversation related to mental illness. Mental health issues remain unseen because it does not align with the mythical and smooth success of Asian Americans.

Tuan spoke about his ADHD diagnosis at the beginning of his high school career:

Brooke: How was your relationship with high school versus college?

Tuan: Beginning of my high school years, I was— I didn't really care about school that much. I was on the basketball team, so I was focusing on that, but I almost failed one of my classes and I got diagnosed [with] ADHD around the end of 9th grade. And I didn't start medication until like the end of 10th grade. Until then, I just took like therapy and stuff to help manage my ADHD. And around 11th grade to 12th grade, I started to take school more seriously... I started to take more AP classes. And from then there on, I just tried to get to the best college I could. I guess I kind of strayed from that.

While Tuan was diagnosed for his ADHD, it wasn't until the end of 10th grade where he started to take Adderall. Even after being diagnosed, Tuan still did not feel comfortable with telling anybody about his condition. ADHD is a condition that can make it impossible for somebody to focus and it can adversely affect their productivity and schoolwork ("NIMH »ADHD: The Basics," 2019). It is also important to note that Tuan was also on a regular track up until 11th and 12th grade. Despite these effects, Tuan felt that his ADHD was something he had to get through alone:

Brooke: Did you feel like you were being helped? Did your teachers even acknowledge that you had ADHD?

Tuan: I actually didn't tell them. So I just worked with it... without them knowing.

Brooke: Why not?

Tuan: *I don't know, I just didn't want to take the effort to like make them know that I was inferior in some way... you know?"*

Because having ADHD strays from normativity, it carries a negative stigma and it can be wrongfully internalized as a deficiency. In Tuan's case, he appears to believe that ADHD made him "inferior in some way." Tuan viewed it as something shameful, so he endured the problems caused by ADHD alone rather than asking his teachers for help or accommodations.

Aside from his ADHD, Tuan also chose to disclose the unhealthy relationship he developed with school and his consequential drug addiction:

Tuan: I [would] just stick to thinking about when I was happy when I wasn't taking any drug most days to keep myself from taking any drugs (aside from smoking cigs). I can't pinpoint the exact time when I fell into the habit, but it definitely started with me being obsessed to keep up with the top of my high school classmates. *Starting around the middle of the 11th grade, if I didn't get the top score, I'd get angry at myself for not pushing myself harder to achieve the best possible grade to the point I'd self-harm just to "motivate" myself to do better since I knew I was well behind...* I started to realize how far behind I was and I just continued pushing myself further via amphetamine (Adderall) & cocaine to get the results I wanted. It continued throughout my senior year since I took all AP classes then and all my peers were smarter and younger. Eventually I just burnt out.

Although I am not qualified to diagnose Tuan in any way, the way in which Tuan saw his achievements is objectively not healthy. The compounding pressures placed on achievement in the context of Tuan's ADHD demonstrates a need for more resources and outreach for people like Tuan.

Another family that cited mental illness were the two sisters, Michelle and Gwen. Because Michelle and Gwen's family do not have a health insurance plan, they do not visit the doctor, nor have they ever been diagnosed with any mental health issue. Michelle cited issues of extreme stress and Gwen stated that she was unable to focus on any of her assignments or studies. Despite wanting to reach out to a professional for help, Gwen felt financially unable and accepted that she would have to work around her inability to focus by herself when it came to her studies.

Gwen also talked about her mother, who recently lost her job in the wholesale industry:

Gwen: "Yeah and now... she [Gwen's mother] only works [at the nail salon] only on the weekends. But on the weekdays, she has Kyla most of the day. And most of the day, she'll be in her room doing karaoke to make the stress away. She'll sit there for hours, dude."

Although I'm unqualified to diagnose any of these issues, the behaviors and hardships cited seem to qualify more inquiry on mental health resources. Not having insurance that can give access to such resources worsens the impact of these issues, making it a systematic problem related to social and financial capital. When working class people are unable to access resources concerning conditions that largely affect them, such as going to the doctor to be diagnosed for mental illness, these problems are not classified as problems. These problems will remain invisible in Asian American communities for as long as they remain unaddressed. Mental health issues can be crippling and disabling, but with proper treatment, education, and discourse

surrounding the issue within the Asian American community, its effects can possibly be minimized.

3) Model Minority Myth

The model minority myth generalizes and obscures the systemic and racial obstacles that first-generation Asian Americans confront during their education. The pressure of achievement can also become compounded by personal, familial, and financial hardships. In Michelle's case, her social networks misinformed her about the meritocratic structures of the college application process. She ultimately seems to blame herself for not achieving more, despite the stress of being raised by a single mother in a low-income household:

Michelle: "I could have done better... because everybody was like once you're in college, everything you've done in high school won't matter. Like grade-wise and all that stuff like SAT scores... all that won't matter once you get into college. So, I just thought, as long as I meet the requirements to get into college, I'm good! So there's no need to go above and beyond to get that high score... but I should have! Because then I could have gotten into a better college and stuff... Yeah that's the only thing, I could have done better. I've taken AP classes and stuff and I could have done better if I really tried, you know? Because I'm not really book-smart, and if I wanted to get a good grade and a high rank, I would have to like... really try. But a lot of people at Kempner are just like naturally gifted and they're like just super smart so..."

Lee and Zhou write about the very "achievement paradox" Michelle is referring to in the *Asian American Achievement Paradox*; while Michelle has internalized a growth mindset by saying she should have tried harder, she applies a fixed mindset to her peers by describing them as "naturally gifted... [and] super smart" (Lee, J. & Zhou, M., 2015). When Michelle was faced with the numerous hardships that she could not handle by herself, these two mindsets on

achievement clashed. By her logic, higher achieving students achieved more because of sheer intelligence. Michelle seemed to believe that if she tried harder, she could have achieved the same. The result appears to be self-blame and a sort of embarrassment for not “try[ing] harder,” even when faced with her individual hardships. The two different mindsets mutate into a perception that blames her lack of effort, rather than her lack of social and financial capital.

Despite her adverse circumstances, Michelle plans to get her bachelor’s degree in Nursing. Although Michelle had no control over the factors that put her at a disadvantage, Michelle used a self-blaming rhetoric to place a significant amount of the blame upon herself throughout her interview. Meeting the expectations for academic achievement or attending a four-year university becomes an impossible task when one’s hierarchy of needs are not being met at home. Michelle also expresses a meritocratic and individualistic outlook on how she could have achieved more if only she had “tried harder.” In a system where Michelle was not given the resources to go directly to a four-year university, this growth mindset can only go so far. These instances of self-blame are also compounded by thoughts of low esteem. These interviews further demonstrate that social and financial capital greatly impacts student achievement.

While the model minority myth expects all Asian Americans to do well, many first-generation Vietnamese Americans lack the social capital to reach that expectation. Much like Michelle’s clashing mindset concerning her peers and her own achievements, Tuan described his mother’s expectations and how no amount of effort could get him to that standard:

Tuan: “Yeah at the end, she guessed I wasn’t going to be at the front of the line [magna cum laude]. I was ranked in the 400s beginning of my 11th grade year & only managed to jump to 245 by the 2nd semester of 12th. She was just expecting me to graduate, I guess. I mean, I don’t want to say it, but it made me complacent and just made me give up, but it kind of did. Because

by the end of 12th grade, I mean I wasn't doing my homework or doing well on any of the tests or anything. I just kind of gave up. I didn't see any reason for why I should push forward. I guess I just wanted to wait until I found something that I really wanted to do....”

Tuan remained on a regular track up until 11th grade after he began treatment for his ADHD at the end of 10th grade. By taking the regular track for half of high school with untreated ADHD, the two factors relegated him to the lower half of Geysers' class of 2016. No matter how many A's Tuan made in his AP classes, there were many other students who took more AP classes, and therefore had a higher ranking. Tuan's mother set an impossible standard and as cited above, Tuan exerted an unhealthy amount of effort, resorting to drugs to stimulate his academic performance. His achievement is based on external performance markers such as rank and grades, mitigating and undermining the holistic obstacles Tuan confronted throughout high school. The stereotype obscures these obstacles, making them appear illegitimate to the victim of inequities.

Discussion

In this study, I investigated the effect of social capital, the model minority stereotype, and tracking on Vietnamese American academic achievement. I replaced all the names of the participants and all schools with pseudonyms. Although the results of my study significantly align with the current literature we have on Asian Americans, my results also raise many different problems and concerns pertaining to the Vietnamese American community in the Houston area. The results of this study confirm that social capital, tracking, and the model minority stereotype play powerful roles in the academic achievement of Vietnamese American students.

The results of my study indicate that Vietnamese Americans face three distinct issues in their pathways towards academic achievement. Tracking can limit the social capital students can potentially gain at their time in school. Furthermore, it simultaneously creates an achievement gap between students on lower and higher tracks. Another trend was the subtle pervasiveness of the model minority stereotype and the toxic meritocratic culture attached to it. Participants seemed to share an individualistic perspective on achievement. They neglected to holistically acknowledge their own achievements in the context of their struggles, and this affected how they perceived themselves and their accomplishments. Failure to accomplish or go above expectations set by parents in the context of the traumas and sacrifices of Vietnamese refugees can translate into a heavy emotional burden. This emotional burden appeared to have an extremely negative effect on their mental health, self-esteem, and motivation.

As this is a small-scale pilot study, its limitation lies in the size and variety of the sample I collected. I chose the pool of participants based off of my own social groups and networks, indicating a skew in how the data is collected. Although I have personal relationships with all the participants and that facilitated trust and conversation, there could still be some bias in their answers. Ideally, if I were given unlimited funding and more time, I would have more participants. I would focus on people who went to college and who did not go to college, to see how certain resources were distributed between the two populations. Half of them would come from Sugar Land and the other half would come from a selected part of Harris County. Evaluating the resources distributed between schools in different Houston area districts where the Vietnamese population is more and less prevalent can illustrate a more holistic picture of the achievement disparities between differently zoned students.

Conclusion & Implications

In summary, the results of this study suggest that we need 1) disaggregated data for the AAPI population, 2) more support and discourse concerning mental health within the Vietnamese American/ AAPI community, 3) more reliable community resources and outreach for first-generation students from immigrant families, and 4) education for the awareness and consciousness of students who come from different financial and multicultural backgrounds. Although the bulk of Vietnamese immigration happened more than 40 years ago, the history and culture of hardship and sacrifice translates into intergenerational issues. Many of the same obstacles that second generation and 1.5 generation Vietnamese Americans navigate in their lives will also persist in other immigrant populations. In America's contemporary political climate, studying and advocating for the nuanced analysis of minority groups extends to all who suffer from inequities in a whitestream, racist, and classist America.

1. In order to serve the AAPI community and the diverse ethnic groups within this population, we must have the statistical data to assess the problem thoroughly and effectively. Disaggregating the data on local, state, and national levels will shed light on problems within marginalized communities and ethnic groups. Although the size of the Vietnamese American population is quite significant, the disaggregation of data would also benefit other smaller, overlooked Asian American communities.
2. Within general cultural discourse, mental health remains a taboo within the Asian American community. As a Vietnamese American, I have known several other members of my community who denied the existence and validity of depression and ADHD. Drug addictions are not viewed as a community problem, but rather the fault of an individual. The stigma associated with mental health limits healthy conversation and education on

the topic. Hopefully, with more attention, conversation, and education dedicated to minority and at-risk populations, mental health can become more normalized.

3. As the results demonstrate, the social networks and connections students have access to can greatly affect their academic achievement. Navigating how and when to apply for colleges and scholarships is an extremely daunting task for any person unfamiliar with the system. Scholarships and financial aid can also determine whether one can invest their time in college. College advisory resources for first-generation students must be properly distributed between the different tracks in schools.
4. Faculty and staff must become more culturally competent and aware of student backgrounds in order to serve them ethically and equitably. While surveys and statistical data can give a cursory illustration of the student body, it is the personal relationships and mentorships cultivated between students and adult figures that can make a difference in a student's overall performance and achievements. Jonathan, the UT student cited Ms. Apple as a significant reason for his achievements in high school and post-graduation. Connection and belonging to a community are paramount to student success and an investment in more mentorship programs and the education of staff and faculty can facilitate more positive relationships with minority students.

My findings of this pilot study point towards a future study of the psychological effects on self-esteem and self-efficacy associated with not going to college. Throughout my interviews, the shame of not meeting parental and sociocultural expectations was an extremely prevalent theme. In the future, I hope to conduct more interviews that delve into the narratives, emotions, and discourses concerning mental health and academic achievement in the Vietnamese and larger AAPI communities. This small-scale study shed light on

extremely specific issues specific to first-generation Vietnamese Americans and I hope to build upon this study by addressing mental health and resource disparities in future projects.

Appendix A

- 1) What is your name? How old are you? What's your current occupation?
- 2) Were you ever on free/ reduced lunch?
- 3) Did your parents go to college? How many years? What were/ are their occupations?
- 4) You attended _____ High School. Tell me about the student population.
 - a. Can you describe your relationship with school? Could you describe your attitude towards school? How did school make you feel?
 - b. What was your happiest memory from high school?
 - c. Did you have memories in high school where it was difficult?
 - d. Who did you go to for support if you had a problem?
 - e. Were you ever in ESL?
- 5) How often did you think about your race at school? There's a stereotype about how the Asian American population does supremely well in life—that we're high performing and intelligent (e.g. we were supposed to be good at math and science). Did you ever feel like anybody (peer, teacher, counselor, family) imposed this on you during your time in high school?
- 6) How involved were your parents in your academic career? What kinds of things did they say about education? Were they able to be involved? Why or why not?
- 7) Have you always aspired to pursue this route (Earlier you said you were.....what you're doing right now)? Did you want to go to college? What deferred you from pursuing a higher degree OR what made you decide to pursue this path? What did you dream of being when you were in high school?

- 8) Do you remember any specific obstacles that prevented you from pursuing your most ideal pathway?
- 9) Did you feel like you had access to resources that could have helped with college (e.g. scholarships, financial aid information, where to apply, how to apply, how to write application essays)?
 - a. If you were making plans on going to college, who did you go to (parents, peers, counselors, teachers... anybody else)?
- 10) Did you take AP classes? Why/ why not? Did you feel that your classes prepared you for what you're doing now?
 - a. How did you feel about the things you were learning in school?

Each interview concluded with a reminder that this paper will not be published and that their names will be changed to protect their identities.

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