Life History Paper

Marie was born in Vietnam into an upper middle-class family. Her father was a Vietnamese citizen of Chinese descent, while her mother was a French citizen of French and Vietnamese descent. Marie is the oldest of seven children in her family and has three brothers and three sisters. Now in her late forties, Marie was given a choice between the French or Vietnamese nationality when she collected her ID at the age of fifteen. She chose to become a French citizen and left South Vietnam for France in 1973 when she was seventeen-years-old to stay with her maternal grandparents. The rest of her family joined her two years later. Marie then migrated to the United States when she was twenty-one with her parents and siblings, although she was to receive her citizenship only thirteen years later.

When Marie and her family first arrived in the United States, everyone in her family became permanent residents except for her as she was the only child in the family who was older than 21. She was admitted on a one-month visitor's visa which was extended for more than a year. Eventually, her application for permanent residency was rejected and she was to be deported back to France. By then, Marie and her family had settled down in Jackson, Michigan, and opened a Vietnamese restaurant that firmly established them in the community. Confiding in one of her regular customers of her immigration problems one day led to a successful campaign launched by her community in Jackson to allow her to stay. In 1990, Marie finally received her American citizenship after an immigration saga that can be aptly described as harrowing. Since then, the family-run restaurant has closed down and Marie has been working at a fast-food restaurant in the University of Michigan. During her free time, she enjoys spending time with her nephew and nieces who often correct her English.

The interview with Marie illuminates several important theoretical concepts in the field of immigrant psychology, all linked to one another by the concept of identity. Marie's thirteen-year immigration ordeal highlights the structural discrimination and subjectification that the immigrant experiences. The incredible support from her community in Jackson provides a counter-point but also brings up the effects of social capital and the "whitening" process on the immigrant's negotiation of racial boundaries in the United States. Marie's mixture of Chinese, Vietnamese, and French heritage also provides us with an interesting study of multiracial identities and how they are negotiated and reconciled. Her choice of identity and affiliation at various stages in her life further sheds light on this negotiation. Her gendered identity is also evoked as she traverses different cultural terrains. The differential effects of psychosocial effects on her parents bring up gender differences in the impact of immigration. Lastly, Marie's acculturation attitude which underlies the discussions on discrimination, identity and gender concludes the analysis.

Marie's fight for citizenship highlights the important concepts of discrimination and subjectification. It was clear from the interview that Marie's fight for her citizenship was a defining and centralizing event in her life. Her tone was emotional and her frustration apparent as she recounted the immigration court interpreter's negative portrayal of her to the judge and her futile attempts to correct her story:

> Yes I hear and I told her not the way I say and she told me she has worked at immigration for a long time, and she translate, and I told her no, it's not right… but they don't let me talk, but the immigration judge don't let me talk, and they asked me where I came, and I say I came airport in New York. But this lady interpreted to them, she told them I just hide to pass the immigration, like an illegal immigrant, like I hide, like I didn't go through immigration in New York. But I told them no, I had a ticket, a passport, stamp, and the way she translate not good. But they don't let me talk, they don't let me say anything. And they say I'm liar. And I told them I said I'm not liar, I'm telling them the truth. And I apply they deny me. And I would appeal one time, one more time, 6 months after

> I would appeal. And six months they said they would make a decision and tell me. And before six months, my lawyer called me, he said we lost the case and the immigration in Detroit will close this case. And I have to go back to France.

The structural discrimination found within the immigration authority often leaves the first and most indelible impression on immigrants. Marie's experiences with the immigration judicial system only served to confirm prevalent fears among immigrants of the discriminatory nature of the judicial system. Her right to free speech in the new country was severely compromised by the biased interpretation put forth by her interpreter. The incompetent interpretation perpetuated the institution's structural discrimination and deepened the misunderstanding between the immigrant and the authorities. Her account also clearly highlights the importance of language for the immigrant. The immigrant who is not fluent in the language of the host country faces great difficulties as she negotiates her way around the judicial system. Language is often cited as a reason why immigrants do not seek help for depression (Portes and Rumbaut, 1996). It is also understandable why some immigrant wives suffer domestic abuse in silence, shunning the authorities and not seeking help (Abraham, 2000). Even though Marie had the financial resources to hire a lawyer to assist her, it still proved to be an uphill task. A non-English-speaking immigrant with no resources to hire legal assistance would be entirely at the mercy of the discriminatory nature of the judicial system.

Throughout these first encounters in the process of becoming a citizen, the immigrant is painfully aware of his or her subjectification (Ong, 1999). It was fortunate that Marie had the overwhelming support from her community in Jackson that enabled her to win the fight for her citizenship. However, a deeper analysis of the reasons for the support of her community and a closer scrutiny of its expression betray the dominant society's psyche and further bring the concepts of subjectification and ideological whitening of non-white immigrants to the fore. The

discrimination that Marie faced at the judicial courts might be blatant, but a subtler racism underlay the well-intended support from her community.

According to Aihwa Ong's article "Cultural citizenship as subject making" (1999), non-white immigrants are subjected to the processes of ideological blackening and whitening as they become American citizens. As part of this subjectification, they are measured against the white masculine ideal of self-reliance and independence of the state, and located along the black-white continuum of the American social framework.

> Citizenship is defined as the civic duty of individuals to reduce their burden on society and build up their own human capital – to be "entrepreneurs" of themselves… By the 1960s liberal economics had come to evaluate non-white groups according to their claims on or independence of the state… Attaining success through self-reliant struggle, while not inherently limited to any cultural group, is a process of self-development that in Western democracies becomes inseparable from the process of 'whitening.' (Ong, 1999)

The two opposing processes of blackening and whitening emphasize the fact that immigrants are subjected to differential treatment, often based on their "imputed human capital and consumer power", such that even within the Asian Americans, a wide disparity in attitudes can be found. This bifurcation is seen from how the affluent Hong Kong Chinese with high human capital are "whitened", whereas the Khmer refugees with little human capital are "blackened", as described in Ong's article.

Looking through the copious letters that the people of Jackson wrote in support of Marie, I was struck by the "whitening" that she was subjected to, either intentionally as a strategy to convince the authorities, or unintentionally due to the internalized disposition of the supporters. The white ideal of self-reliance and industriousness was a common theme throughout the letters, with the phrases "self-supporting" and "industriousness" appearing repeatedly in her defense. A

few letters even compared Marie and her family with other immigrant groups, making the black-white contrast even more apparent:

> It seems strange, that, in this 'Land of the Free', such a travesty of justice could be possible. Especially at a time when the Cubans are coming in by the thousands, who are not even "screened" before entry… (Marie) has proven her ability to be self supporting and an asset to the Community.

Another letter from a different person further reinforced this point:

> It is indeed difficult to comprehend how Immigration can permit many hundreds of Cubans to enter the United States, where it is very possible they will appear on welfare rolls in the near future. (Marie's family members) are self-supporting and of excellent character.

It is clear that model minorities like Marie's family had been measured against the white masculine ideal of self-reliance and whitened, while immigrant groups such as the Cubans had been ideologically blackened by the dominant society.

Marie also showed signs of having internalized this process of blackening and whitening that she had undergone as part of her social identity. This was seen in the way she distanced herself from the illegal immigrants:

> They see, they saw my passport but say that I just go under immigration, not to go through to them but to hide not to go through immigration, to go pass airport, the border, like an illegal Mexican…

The fact that this overwhelming support was launched by a customer of the Vietnamese restaurant run by Marie's family is also significant, as it highlights the possibility that Marie's successful fight for her citizenship might have been contingent upon her social class and capital. If Marie's family did not have the social capital needed to open a restaurant in Jackson, her predicament might never have been brought to public attention. Even if it did, it might not have elicited the same kind of support she garnered. Such is the nature of the dominant society's harsh economic measurement of the immigrant. Thus, we see how immigrants like Marie are

subjected to the ideological whitening or blackening by the dominant society, based on their "imputed human capital and consumer power".

Marie's identity was not only being shaped in the eyes of the dominant society, but also underwent much negotiation and renegotiation in her mind as she traversed different cultural terrains. Marie might have been "whitened" by her community in Jackson, but her multiracial identity was clear right from the start of the interview when she introduced herself:

> My family and myself we live in Vietnam all my life. My grandparents from my father's side are Chinese, and they came from Vietnam and lived in Vietnam and were born in Vietnam and my grandparents from my mum are French citizens. And they decided to come here. And we lived in Vietnam, and born in Vietnam I was Vietnamese citizen.

By choosing to introduce herself by clearly describing her multicultural heritage, she showed how central this heritage is to her identity.

The importance of emphasizing the multiracial context for people like Marie is highlighted by the model of multiracial identity put forth by Root (1999). In the article, Root proposes a more sophisticated model of identity that goes beyond a "black-white polarized model of pure race" that will better enable us to understand the multiracial experience.

> In order for many multiracial people to make peace with themselves, they must individually construct a reality that allows for duality and multiplicity, with an awareness that one may be perceived and categorized very differently than one perceives one's self.

Marie's multiracial experience illustrates many elements of Root's model. Firstly, Root highlights the phenomenological aspect of physical appearance in the multiracial experience. This was an important part of Marie's multiracial experience when she was back in Vietnam, where she faced discrimination from other children due to her unique physical features:

> Yes, they teased me a lot. Yes, because I have mixed blood. And my face is round like some Chinese. And my eyes and my nose they are flat. The Vietnamese people they have eyes that are tiny, but mine not. Plus I will be taller

> and a little bit fat than other kids. And I was a little bit different. And I say I don't like. I hate this country. I say when I grow up, I will go back to France. No, they don't treat me right. They treat me like some foreigner, they say I'm half Chinese, half French. Not Vietnamese. And Vietnamese kids they don't like me too much… Long time ago, they think me to be Chinese, because I have round face. But after, when I grow up, my skin is different from them. Their skin will be a little bit yellow and a little bit dark. My skin will be very white. Different, and they know right away. They know right away that I am different from them.

Besides her unique features that set her apart from the other children, her French name also became a source of negative attention:

> Because when we live in this country, in Vietnam, you have to have a Vietnamese name. And I am not. I have a French name. And they don't like too much about this.

These perceptions of discrimination during childhood are consistent with the finding that children are most likely to report perceived discrimination (Zhou, 2001).

Secondly, the model takes into account the multiple and fluid identities among multiracials governed by changing contexts, malleable over one's lifetime. This is once again clearly seen in the interview. The choices she had to make about her identity were important markers in her life, such as the making of her ID card when she was fifteen.

> When I was fifteen years old, you have to make ID card, and you have to choose two nationalities, which one you like, and I went Vietnamese county. And they say I were to take Vietnamese ID, and when I would be eighteen, I would go back to take my French nationality, I don't want to be Vietnamese citizen. But in fifteen years old you have to take ID cards to go on the streets. They would check and you have to have ID cards, and I told them I don't want to change the name. And I refuse to be Vietnamese citizen. (laughs) Strange right? I don't know why.

Later, she talks about being discriminated because of her French name and declares:

> I don't like to stay in my country anymore, when I grow up, I will go back to my country and marry a Frenchman than with a Vietnamese man.

This symbolic rejection of her Vietnamese identity was in sharp contrast to her pride in her Asian identity just minutes earlier when she talked about discrimination in the United States:

> Yeah, I worked very hard to let them know I know more about the job than them. Because some time, they don't know, but they just don't listen to what we say. So we just have to do something, a good one to let them see our people, the Asian people work very hard. To let them see, to let them open their eyes… I am proud of being Asian. I feel a little bit happy, not to be American people, and I'm thinking I am not very dumb, we are smart and diligent and we work very hard to earn. And we have the pride. We left our country and we came over here and we have to have a beginning and it's very difficult. And we make it here in here, in US and we earn money and we learn something more. So I'm very proud to be Asian.

This striking juxtaposition of rejection and pride highlighted the changing attitudes toward her multiple identities according to the context within the course of one interview. When her narrative located herself in the context of being discriminated based on her Asian identity, an adaptive reactionary attitude to this negative social mirroring was engendered and her Asian identity gained a positive valence (Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Conversely, when her narrative located herself in the context of being discriminated based on her French identity, her French identity became salient while her Asian identity was subjugated and assumed a negative valence. Finally, when Marie describes her fight for her citizenship and her eventual victory, her American identity is brought into focus and gains positive valence.

These ambivalent attitudes toward her multiple identities also bring to mind the three general processes of identity exploration and integration described by Root (1999). Specifically, Marie appears to be in the exposure/absorption process of absorbing the input from significant others through a schema of "constructive differentiation" or "destructive differentiation" (Root, 1999).

Thirdly, Root's point about how multiracials may not be able to find refuge in an ethnic community is also relevant to Marie's experiences. This is seen in her difficulties relating to other Vietnamese in the United States:

> Because if I were to marry with my country Vietnamese. I don't know them too much. The culture will be different. I tried one time and the way we talked, and everything and Vietnamese friends and one time we had a meeting one time for young people, for meeting in Jackson one time, and after they said I was very different, the way they talk and the way… the way the food, was different.

As a result, Marie did not mix around much with the other Vietnamese in Jackson and did not have many Vietnamese friends. This circumscribed her source of social support to her family and might have impacted the acculturative stress she experienced.

Lastly, Root emphasizes the "simultaneous aspects of other identities that inform the core of our existence", such as social class and gender. In Marie's interview, we see how race and culture can be conflated with social class.

> Yes, exactly. They have the rich one and the rich one would go French. And you know right away, when the kids, when they go to school, they have Vietnamese and French school, and you know to be poor one or rich one.

Possibly due to this conflation of culture and social class that led to her construction of a cultural hierarchy, compounded by the rejection of her Asian identity by the Vietnamese around her, Marie built her primary identity around her French roots. When asked what her primary identity was, she said:

> Sometimes, I would think of myself to be not American, I would be the French, I feel more French than Vietnamese in my blood. Mostly I was more French.

Perhaps because of the structural discrimination she faced in the US and her difficulties with the English language, she was never able to achieve a wholly hyphenated identity.

Thus, Marie's experiences were consistent with Root's model and showcased many elements of the multiracial experience, such as the phenomenological aspect of physical appearance, the shifting of multiple identities depending on context, and the inability to take refuge in one's ethnic community in the host country. In addition, it also highlighted the many

intersectionalities of identity, of which gender is one important dimension that we would now focus on.

Marie's interview brought up important differences in gender attitudes between generations and between the sexes. It is interesting that Marie did not cite gender as a factor in her search for employment. Akin to the victims of domestic abuse who eschew seeking help due to racial discrimination from the dominant society, Marie's racialized identity supercedes her gendered identity. It is also noted in the article by Patricia Pessar (1999) that:

> Immigrant women, we are told, are more likely to base their dissatisfactions about life in the United States on injustices linked to class, race, ethnicity, and legal-status discrimination than to gender.

This brings up the question of whether migration hinders the development of a feminist consciousness. This is however not the case for Marie, who possesses strong opinions pertaining to her gender and female independence. When asked if she would prefer to marry a Vietnamese, Marie replied that she would prefer to marry an American and cited culture as a reason:

> Because I lived too long in France and US too and after I was to get used to here. And if we get married, they say you have to stay home and you couldn't drive a car and you have to wait husband come back home from work. And I say no you can't do like this one. And they say well, when you have to get married you have to stay home to take care of the kids and you couldn't wear too much make-up and I say no, I can wear anything I want to.

This highlights her conflation of gender and culture, and shows how her gendered identity affected her identification with the other Vietnamese immigrants in America. It also highlights differences in the migration experience between males and females. Immigrant women are given more freedom and autonomy in terms of employment, while males lose the status that patriarchal cultural values and traditions bestow upon him. Greater contribution to the finances of the family, spatial mobility and access to social and economic resources beyond the domestic sphere, provide females with greater leverage in their appeals for even greater autonomy and

independence. Males seek to impose the traditional gender roles prescribed by his culture and may even turn to violence. However, Patricia Pessar (1999) made a somber conclusion that "in general, immigrant women's gains have been modest". She notes that the literature on immigrant families "unearths scant evidence of a radical revamping of gender ideology and lines of authority nor an emancipatory abandonment of conjugal units" (Pessar, 1999). Women may reject feminist ideals of independence and autonomy and adopt traditional gender roles to defend and hold together the family. This is not the case for Marie, who embraces her financial independence and autonomy. What then sets Marie apart from the other immigrant women that Pessar studied? It might be due to her status as a single woman that helps her abandon traditional notions of gender roles which are especially salient in the spousal context. Another plausible reason could be her multiracial identity that frees her from the traditional affiliations to culture and associated gender identities.

Marie's strong opinions about freedom and autonomy also led to conflict with her mother, who still held on to more traditional values. It was interesting that Marie's mother herself experienced advances in terms of employment opportunities and financial contribution to the family:

> My parents, I think my father, most of the fathers in Vietnam, most would be working, and my mum was a housewife, not work. Because in Vietnam, we would not work like in US. And the man would work and provide for the family.

Marie's mother matched the profile of the female immigrant who still held on to traditional values and gendered roles despite greater employment opportunities and financial independence. Women like her may view their employment as an extension of their obligations as wives and mothers (Pessar, 1999).

This difference between mother and daughter highlights a weakening in traditional gender values across the generations. This difference can become a source of inter-generational conflict. When Marie was asked if this difference in attitudes toward gender roles led to conflict with her mother, she answered:

> She think like this one too. But we say we live in this country, we have freedom. We can do anything we want. And sometime we argue with them a lot. And they say we have to keep a bit of our culture, just 20 to 30 % of our culture. But sometime I say yeah, but we don't like to keep… I say when we live here in US, we have to make the life the same as American people. We don't want to be a different one.

Comparisons between Marie's parents also bring up the gender story for the immigrant family. Compounding her father's loss of status as the sole breadwinner for the family was his inability to navigate the social terrain of the new country due to language difficulties. His role as a parent was also undermined as he relied heavily on his eldest daughter to run the restaurant and fend off discrimination from the dominant society. He also experienced a considerable loss of social status when he left his job in Vietnam to become a cook in the United States:

> She (Marie's mother) likes to work here, but my dad is not very happy, because of the life here in US. Because he doesn't speak English and don't understand too much of English. Both of them. But he's not very happy, because in his country, he's the man to support the family, and he's a business man and everything, but when he came to US, he is a chef cook. And he is not very happy.
> *(I: Does he cook back in Vietnam?)*
> No, never. (laughs) And we have a housekeeper, back in Vietnam, and we have a chauffeur to drive a car, a chauffeur and everything. And when we come in here, he has to work for himself, nobody will work for him. Because he has to earn money, and he has to work, but in Vietnam it's very different. It's very hard here, so sometime he is not very happy to live in this country. But he has to have a life for us, a good life, a comfortable life and everything in US. And we have to come in here.

This difference in attitudes between her parents is also consistent with research literature that shows that female immigrants evince a greater desire to settle in the new country due to gains in

gender equity, while the male counterparts seek to return home to regain the status and privileges that migration itself has challenged (Pessar, 1999).

Finally, a common thread that connected these discussions of discrimination, identity and gender was Marie's attitude towards acculturation. According to Berry's seminal article on acculturation attitudes, there are four types of acculturation attitudes – assimilation, separation, marginalization, and integration (1989). Marie's acculturation attitude was closest to the assimilation path or mode as defined by Berry. The assimilation path is adopted when one individual of Culture B does not wish to maintain his identity and seeks daily interaction with Culture A. If we view Culture B as the Vietnamese culture that Marie was born into, and Culture A as the American culture that she migrated into, we can see how her assimilationist attitudes with regard to these two cultures appeared throughout the interview. Marie's explanation for the support of her community in her fight for citizenship reflected this:

> …because they (Jackson community) say we work very hard and we make other friends and we are nice to them and we copy everything. I didn't say I copy everything, but when I come to US and life everything I have to change. And everything I will change completely. I say when we come and live in US, and we have to, I didn't say copy cat. We have to do exactly the same as American people.

Acculturation also emerged in her discussion about gender, when she told her mother that she would not adopt traditional gender roles due to her beliefs in assimilating into the American society.

According to Berry's model, Marie would be better off adopting the integration strategy, which is optimal as it appears to predict more positive outcomes consistently. Bhatia and Ram (2001) however argue that Berry's model is overly simplistic and does not take into account the "multiple, hyphenated and hybridized identities" that immigrants possess. They argue that immigrants are constantly negotiating between their old and new cultures and dismiss integration

as the optimal end-point for the acculturation process. This would be applicable to Marie, considering the above discussion about her multiracial identities and how various identities are made salient according to the context of the narrative. Marie's willingness to assimilate into the American society does not negate the fact that she is ultimately unable to achieve a wholly American identity or an integrated and hyphenated Asian-American identity. Her multiple identities remain separate and exclusive. This also challenges the traditional acculturation model posited by Berry (1989). Bhatia's criticisms of the traditional acculturation model and the use of postcolonial theory to further refine the model can be aptly applied here (Bhatia and Ram, 2001).

The interview with Marie also made me reflect on several aspects of my own life. Although I never had the experience of permanently relocating myself in another country, my experiences in Singapore and as an international student in the United States share several commonalities with Marie's life experiences.

Singapore is one of the many developed countries today that are increasingly coming under the cultural influence of American media and pop culture. Political and economic realities cement this relationship with American culture. So powerful is this influence that in many ways, millions of children like me growing up in their own countries share the "immigration experience" like Marie.

For example, I totally empathize with her conflicts with her parents over cultural differences, a generation gap which might be universal, except that ours is built upon the same framework which views American and Asian cultures as opposing. Talking to Marie about her generation gap in terms of marriage customs and other traditions also strike a chord in me. I remember fondly the instances when I argued with my parents over their old-fashioned mindsets and foolishly adamant attempts to preserve démodé customs.

Due to my greater exposure and contact with the English language and American culture, my parents often relied upon me to navigate the "adult world" which is increasingly coded in English. This premature exposure forced me to grow up faster in many ways. In the same way, Marie had to help her parents run the restaurant in Jackson due to the language barrier. She also helped to fend her parents from the discrimination they faced as they navigated the American social terrain. This probably contributed to her resilience and independence demonstrated in her valiant fight against the American immigration authorities.

Language has also been a very important issue in Marie's life. Not only do I share her experiences of having to help my parents cope with the English language, I also share the regrettable experience of language as a barrier when I try to communicate with my grandparents. The frustration that Marie and her parents felt when they first started learning English is not alien to me. Language can be such a great source of power and the lack of language abilities can lead to much misunderstanding. Her encounters with an incompetent interpreter parallel my own when my relatives try to translate what I am trying to say. It is oftentimes not accurate and I really wonder how much I am trying to say is conveyed. This loss was especially acute when my grandmother was hospitalized and I found it difficult to provide words of comfort.

Lastly, Marie's multiple identities and their varying salience in different contexts made me reflect on my own social and cultural identities. I remembered how my Asian identity was brought to the foreground when I first arrived in the United States. My affiliation with the Asian culture never felt so strong when I was back in Singapore. On the other hand, when I was back in Singapore over summer, I became conscious of my American ideals and values that I have gradually internalized over the course of the two years here. This is consistent with Root's

model of multiple identities. Due to these commonalities between Marie's experiences and mine, the interview became much of a self-exploration for me as well.

To conclude, this paper seeks to highlight the many concepts of immigrant psychology that surface in Marie's narrative. I have shown how she was subjected to much structural discrimination at the immigration courts due to language barriers, and also racism of a much subtler form as she was systematically "measured" and "whitened" by her supporters with their nonetheless benevolent and kind actions. She also provided us with an interesting case study of shifting multiracial identities, and proved how fluid and contextual these identities are. No narrative is complete without a discussion of gender and its effects on the immigrant. Marie's narrative highlighted important gender differences and the negotiation of cultural boundaries where culture and gender are conflated. Lastly, I concluded with her acculturation attitudes that tie up these concepts.

Through all her experiences, Marie's perseverance and determination shone through and made her story a tremendous source of inspiration for all immigrants. Marie had been very forthcoming throughout the interview and I really appreciated her willingness to share her experiences with me. I certainly hope I have done justice to her remarkable character and indomitable spirit, and all other immigrants who have undergone the same difficulties and tribulations and emerged triumphant in the end.

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