

## — Introduction —

### The Children of Vietnamese Refugees

Hai Nguyen, 17, and his family arrived in Versailles Village from a refugee camp in Malaysia when he was 11. His family settled in New Orleans because his mother, who was born and raised in the Vietnamese village of Vung Tau, had a brother there. Hai is a high school junior now, and he is planning to attend college after another year. He says he wants to go to Tulane or Loyola because he has friends from the neighborhood at both universities and he expects they will help him with any problems he may have.

Cuong Dang, 17, left Vietnam by boat with his mother when he was 8. Now he lives with his mother and stepfather in Versailles Village. His stepfather, a fisherman, is frequently away from home for weeks at a time on his boat in the Gulf of Mexico. His mother works as a checkout clerk at a grocery store. Cuong is still in school and intends to graduate, but he has no intention of going on to college. All his friends are Vietnamese, but none of them are interested in Vietnam or things Vietnamese. “All that, that’s all old stuff,” he says. When asked whether he considers himself Vietnamese or American, he simply shrugs; he doesn’t really care.

For the children of immigrants in the United States, the passage to adulthood involves growing up American. That’s no easy thing; it adds the conflicting pressures of assimilation and the demands of familial or ethnic loyalty to the common problems of adolescence. The children of refugees have it harder still, carrying the additional burdens associated with sudden flight from the homeland and all the losses that the search for safe haven entails.

This book tells the story of America’s single largest group of refugee children—the children of Vietnamese refugees—as they have experienced growing up American. The Vietnamese are members of a larger Southeast Asian refugee population that emerged on the American scene in sizable numbers shortly after the withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam and the fall of Southeast Asian governments allied to the United States. The Vietnamese form the core of this refugee population;

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between 1975 and 1990, the number of Vietnamese in America increased from an insignificant number to 614,547.

The arrival of the Vietnamese represents the advent of an entirely new ethnic group on the American scene. With the emergence of the second generation—some born in Vietnam and brought to the United States as young children; others born after the parents' flight from Vietnam—we have a phenomenon of greater significance still: the refugees' children will be the first generation to grow up largely or entirely on American soil. In contrast to their parents, the children of the Vietnamese immigrants—like all immigrant children—are unlikely to think of their parents' home country as a place to which they might return, nor will they use it as a point of reference by which to assess their progress in the new land. Rather, their expectations will be governed by the same standards to which other Americans aspire, and it is by those standards that young Vietnamese Americans will assess themselves and be assessed by others. While these young people launch on a quest for social and economic progress to take them well beyond the lower levels of their immigrant parents, it's not clear whether that quest will succeed. In the answer to that question lies the future of Vietnamese America. It is also the issue with which this book is concerned.

### **VIETNAMESE CHILDREN AND THE “NEW SECOND GENERATION”**

The children of Vietnamese immigrants belong to the “new second generation”—those U.S.- or foreign-born children of contemporary immigrants growing up in the United States and currently moving into maturity in rapidly growing numbers. Now, as in the past, the emergence of a second generation involves a new, decisive chapter in the ethnic experience. After the first generation moves to America seeking a better life for their families, their children either realize or smash those hopes. For the most part, American history is a story of immigrant children fulfilling their parents' dreams. But the past may not provide a reliable guide to the second generation experience unfolding before us today.

Contemporary immigrants have encountered an America different from the one encountered by the earlier immigrants. Today America has an emerging “hourglass” economy in which opportunities for movement from bottom to top have gotten harder for all (Zhou 1997a). Ever since the late 1960s, just when the United States began receiving larger num-

bers of non-European newcomers, economic restructuring has been profoundly altering the employment base of the American economy. In major urban centers, the industrial plants and their assembly-line operations that used to rely on a large force of semiskilled workers have migrated from high-wage countries to the Third World (Kasarda 1983; Piore 1979; Wilson 1978, 1987). As a result, urban labor markets have become highly segmented. One segment is a growing sector of knowledge- or capital-intensive jobs, offering high wages, good working conditions, career stability, and promotional opportunities, but requiring a college education and sophisticated job and interpersonal skills. The other segment is made up of burgeoning tiers of low-skilled, labor-intensive service jobs, offering low wages, poor working conditions, and few chances for upward mobility (Averitt 1968; Tolbert, Horan, and Beck 1980). Stable blue-collar jobs of the sort that used to pay adequate wages for a family and thus enabled many earlier immigrants to earn a decent living have become increasingly rare. Consequently, economic restructuring has undone the traditional ladder of social mobility, creating new obstacles for those newcomers who are poorly educated and lack marketable skills.

This new economic reality defines the world that confronts the children of immigrants. That encounter, as the sociologist Herbert Gans (1992) has suggested, is likely to involve one of two scenarios: the child either succeeds in school and moves ahead, or falls behind the modest, often low status of the parents' generation. Gans has labeled the latter scenario "second-generation decline." Children growing up in households headed by poor, low-skilled immigrants face uncertain prospects for moving ahead through school success. The parents, of course, have few of the economic resources that can help children do well in school. The environment does not help when neighborhoods are poor, beset by violence and drugs, and local schools do not function well. To add to this difficulty, immigrant children receive conflicting signals, hearing at home that they should achieve at school while learning a different lesson—that of rebellion against authority and rejection of the goals of achievement—on the street. At the same time, both real life and the television screen expose children to the wage and consumption standards of U.S. society, and children come to expect more than their parents ever had. As a result, Gans points out, children of the foreign born are unwilling to work at low-paying, low-status jobs of their parents, but they do not have the education, skills, or opportunities to do better.

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This mismatch between rising aspirations and shrinking opportunities will either lead to second-generation decline or provoke “second-generation revolt” (Perlmann and Waldinger 1997). This is the daunting dilemma that Vietnamese parents and their children face; how they negotiate it shapes their adaptation to American society.

In absolute numbers, the Vietnamese make up a relatively small component of today’s emerging second-generation population. Demographic characteristics and the American experience of the Vietnamese make this case ideally suited for assessing the problems and prospects of the children of immigrants growing up as the twentieth century comes to a close. The second generation to which the Vietnamese children belong reflects the influence of the migration waves that have transformed immigrant America over the past thirty years. The children of this generation of immigrants are linked mainly to source countries in Latin America and Asia. In 1990, Latinos comprised 52 percent of all foreign-born children under 18, with Asians accounting for another 27 percent; those proportions fell to 48 percent and 24 percent, respectively, among U.S.-born children with at least one immigrant parent (Oropesa and Landale 1997). And for most Latino and Asian groups—the Mexicans and Japanese Americans excepted—the second generation represents the largest part of the population born or raised in the United States.

Among today’s second generation, Vietnamese children are the newest of the new. As of 1990, 79 percent of all Vietnamese children could be classified as members of the second generation, having either been born in the United States or arrived here prior to the age of 5. Another 17 percent could be labeled as members of the “1.5 generation,” those who arrived in the United States between the ages of 5 and 12. Only 4 percent arrived as adolescents, and thus appropriately belong to the first generation.<sup>1</sup>

Like their counterparts among the other immigrant groups, today’s Vietnamese children will be the first to see whether they can really “make it in America.” The conditions under which many immigrants live, however, put that goal in doubt. Immigrant children are far more likely than their non-Hispanic white counterparts to live in poverty, to depend on public assistance, and to grow up in households where wage earners are disproportionately underemployed.

But the situation of the Vietnamese has even more problems. First, they arrived under circumstances quite different from those encountered by today’s typical newcomers. Unlike most other contemporary immigrants, the Vietnamese were pushed out of their homeland, forced to

leave without adequate preparation and with scant control over their final destination. Many possessed little in the way of assets—formal education, skills, English-language proficiency, or familiarity with the ways of an advanced society—that would ease the passage into America. No ethnic community, eager to help out with assistance of varying sorts, was ready to greet the early refugees; instead, the government, working in tandem with individual or institutional sponsors, decided where the Vietnamese would resettle. Consequently, many of the Vietnamese found themselves involuntarily dispersed, pushed into urban or suburban neighborhoods of a wholly unfamiliar type, often deteriorating areas where the residents were poor and the schools were inadequate. Although the two decades from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s saw the establishment and consolidation of Vietnamese communities throughout the country, many of the newcomers have not moved up far economically. As of 1990, poverty affected almost half the first- and 1.5-generation Vietnamese children, and just under a third of the second generation, as opposed to one tenth of the general U.S. population. Over a quarter of the Vietnamese depended on public assistance, in comparison with 8 percent among all Americans.

Thus, the prospects seem dim. But there is evidence that the future is looking much better. As will be shown in the chapters to follow, Vietnamese children seem to be doing exceptionally well in school. Though a significant minority is lagging behind, for reasons that will also be discussed, the school success of the Vietnamese suggests that ethnic progress depends on more than the human and financial capital with which the immigrant parents begin. Instead, the ingredients of success seem bound up with “ethnicity,” a term that will later be discussed in more detail but that now serves as shorthand for a group’s distinctive cultural and social-organizational traits. Since the circumstances of their immigration appeared to spell trouble, understanding the Vietnamese experience promises to shed light on the conditions that influence prospects for the much larger second-generation population, of which the Vietnamese are so clearly an emblematic case.

But if a study of the Vietnamese is likely to generate broader lessons, this group deserves attention for reasons of its own. Southeast Asian refugees arrived and were resettled under the auspices of the U.S. government; whatever the moral case for refugee admission and resettlement, the taxpayer might want to know whether his or her dollars were well spent. The size and ubiquity of the Vietnamese population make this a matter of more than academic interest. The Vietnamese have been

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dispersed to every state and can be found in almost every major city, including those that have historically received very few immigrants. Numerically, the Vietnamese are on an upward curve, in large measure because of the population's youth; by the year 2000, the Vietnamese are expected to constitute the nation's third-largest Asian group, ranking just after the Filipinos and the Chinese (Lee 1992).

Notwithstanding the group's size, its growth, and its recent history, it has attracted less than its fair share of scholarly attention. Recent years have seen the publication of a few excellent studies of Vietnamese children and the Vietnamese family (see, for example, Caplan, Choy, and Whitmore 1991; Kibria 1993; Muzny 1989; Rutledge 1985; Starr and Roberts 1985). Most of this work, however, has been concerned with specific issues associated with resettlement and attendant changes in Vietnamese family life, providing important baseline information but not fully exploring the complex process of adaptation among the newer generation. These earlier studies have also tended to focus on the role of the family and the importance of the Vietnamese ethnicity, paying less attention to the ethnic community. By contrast, a concern with the community, its organization, and its impact on socioeconomic adaptation lies at the heart of our work, adding an entirely new dimension to an understanding of the process by which the Vietnamese have sought to get ahead.

### FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

#### **The Effects of Social Class and Race/Ethnicity**

Individual traits, family socioeconomic backgrounds, and racial or ethnic characteristics are the crucial ingredients of second-generation adaptation. Since childhood is a time of acquiring skills, the most important individual characteristics influencing their adaptation are those associated with exposure to American society, such as English language ability, place of birth, age upon arrival, and length of residence in the United States. Conventional theories of immigrant assimilation predict that proficiency in English, native birth or arrival at a young age, and longer U.S. residence should lead to adaptive outcomes.

But this is not always how it seems to work. Recent studies have revealed an opposite pattern: regardless of national origin, the longer the U.S. residence the more maladaptive the outcomes, whether measured in terms of school performance, aspirations, or behavior (Kao and Tienda 1995; Rumbaut and Ima 1988; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco

1995). Clearly, the outcomes of adaptation vary according to where immigrants settle, whether in affluent middle-class suburbs or in impoverished inner-city ghettos. While the emergence of a middle-class population is a distinctive aspect of today's immigration, a disproportionately large number of immigrant children converge on underprivileged and linguistically distinctive neighborhoods. There, the immigrants and their children come into direct daily contact with the poor rather than with the middle class; they are also apt to encounter members of native minorities and other immigrants rather than members of the dominant majority. At the school level, many immigrant children find themselves in classrooms with other immigrant children speaking a language other than English or with native minority children who either have problems keeping up with schoolwork or consciously resist academic achievement. Under these circumstances, exposure to American society can either lead to downward mobility or confine immigrant offspring to the same slots at the bottom level from which they began (Ogbu 1974; Perlmann and Waldinger 1997; Portes 1995; Portes and Zhou 1993).

Family socioeconomic status shapes the immediate social conditions for adaptation, because it determines the type of neighborhood in which children live, the quality of school they attend, and the group of peers with whom they associate. Immigrant children from middle-class backgrounds benefit from financially secure families, good schools, safe neighborhoods, and supportive formal and informal organizations, which ensure better life chances for them. Children with poorly educated and unskilled parents, in contrast, often find themselves growing up in underprivileged neighborhoods subject to poverty, poor schools, violence, drugs, and a generally disruptive social environment.

The sociologist James S. Coleman and his associates, in what has become well known as the Coleman report (1966), reported that children did better if they attended schools where classmates were predominantly from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. Children who live in poor inner-city neighborhoods confront social environments drastically different from those who live in affluent suburban neighborhoods. These children suffer from the unequal distribution of educational resources, which seriously curtails their chances in life, trapping them further in isolated ghettos (Davis 1993; Jencks and Mayer 1990). Ghettoization, in turn, produces a political atmosphere and mentality that preserve class division along racial lines, leading to the greater alienation of minority children from American institutions and further diminishing their chances for upward mobility (Fainstein 1995).

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However, recent research has revealed that immigrant children tend to do better than their U.S.-born peers of similar socioeconomic backgrounds who attend public schools in the same neighborhoods (Portes 1995). How can one account for this peculiar phenomenon? The anthropologist John U. Ogbu (1974) attributed varying outcomes to the social status of groups in the receiving society. He distinguished between immigrant minorities (whose arrival in the United States is by choice) and caste-like minorities (whose arrival is forced or whose disadvantaged social status is imposed). He reasoned that group members of racial minorities can either accept an inferior caste status and a sense of basic inferiority as part of their collective self-definition, or they can create a positive view of their heritage on the basis of cultural and racial distinction, thereby establishing a sense of collective dignity (see also De Vos 1975). This choice is available to both immigrant minorities and caste-like minorities; the difference in the direction taken, Ogbu found, lay in the advantageous or disadvantageous aspects of racial or group identity. Ogbu (1989) showed in his research on Chinese-American students in Oakland, California, that in spite of cultural and language differences and relatively low economic status, these students had grade point averages that ranged from 3.0 to 4.0. He attributed their academic success to the integration of these students into the family and the community, which placed high value on education and held positive attitudes toward public schools.

Ethnic or racial status influences the social adaptation of immigrant children in ways closely connected to family socioeconomic status. Indeed, the sociologist William Julius Wilson (1978) argued that contemporary racial inequality became largely a matter of social class. Past racism, in his view, essentially delayed the entry of racial minority members into full participation in the American economy until the old blue-collar opportunities largely disappeared, leaving nonwhites in jobless neighborhoods. This perspective emphasizes the impact of economic restructuring, but we place more emphasis on the effect of continuing racial discrimination. Minority status systematically limits access to social resources such as opportunities for jobs, education, and housing, with the result that racial/ethnic disparities in levels of income, educational attainment, and occupational achievement persist (Lichter 1988; Tienda and Lii 1987; Wilson 1978; Zhou 1993; Zhou and Kamo 1994). The sociologists Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton (1987) provided convincing evidence that the physical and social isolation of many black



Americans was produced by ongoing conscious, discriminatory actions and policies, and not simply by racism in the past.

Race and ethnicity may be related to school performance for cultural reasons, as well as for purely socioeconomic reasons. It is possible that Vietnamese cultural values, such as a tradition of respect for teachers, affect how young people respond to the American institution of public education. The experience of immigration, moreover, can reshape cultural values. Ogbu (1974, 1983, 1989, 1991) pointed out that immigrant groups frequently sought upward mobility, so that education often came to occupy a central place in immigrant aspirations. But the deliberate cultivation of ethnicity may also be a factor. The anthropologist Margaret A. Gibson 1989, for example, found that the outstanding performance of Punjabi children in a relatively poor rural area of northern California derived from parental pressure on children to adhere to their own immigrant families and to avoid excessive Americanization. Similarly, the psychologist Nathan Caplan and his associates found that Indochinese refugee children (except for Cambodians and Hmongs) excelled in the American school system, despite the disadvantaged location of their schools and their parents' lack of education and facility with English (Caplan, Whitmore, and Choy 1989). These researchers, too, attributed refugee children's academic achievement to cultural values and practices unique to Indo-Chinese families. While more recent studies of the educational experiences of Asian American children have shown that parents' socioeconomic status, length of U.S. residence, and homework hours significantly affected academic performance, they also found that controls for such factors did not eliminate the effect of ethnicity (Kao and Tienda 1995; Portes and Rumbaut 1996; Rumbaut 1995b, 1996; Rumbaut and Ima 1988). More significantly, the sociologists Alejandro Portes and Dag MacLeod (1996), using National Educational Longitudinal Survey data, reported that the negative effect of disadvantaged group memberships among immigrant children was reinforced rather than reduced in suburban schools, but that the positive effect of advantaged group memberships remained significant even in inner-city schools.

Racial or ethnic group membership can entail serious disadvantages in the American public school system. The inequalities of race and class that plague American society are carried into the American educational system where minority group members often attend schools that provide poorer resources than those available in other schools. Schools may thus become "arenas of injustice" that provide unequal opportunities on the

basis of race and class (Keniston et al. 1977). Ethnicity may therefore be of limited advantage for castelike minorities. If a socially defined racial minority group wishes to assimilate but finds that normal paths of integration are blocked because of race, the group's members may be forced to use alternative survival strategies that enable them to cope psychologically with racial barriers but that do not necessarily encourage school success. Further, the historically oppressed group, such as castelike/involuntary minorities, may react to racial oppression by constructing identities in the form of conformity—"unqualified acceptance of the ideological realm of the larger society"—and, more frequently, in the form of avoidance—"willful rejection of whatever will validate the negative claims of the larger society" (Fordham 1996, 39). As a consequence, it may be the willful refusal to learn, not the failure to learn, that affects the academic outcomes of the children of castelike/involuntary minorities (Kohl 1994). Under the pressure of the oppositional youth subculture, then, minority children who do well in school may be forcefully rejected by their peers as "turnovers" acting "white" (Bourgois 1991; Gibson 1989; Portes and Stepick 1993; Waters 1996).

### **The Ethnic Factor: Sources of Social Capital or Liability**

Refugee resettlement and family socioeconomic situations place Vietnamese children in specific neighborhoods and facilitate contacts with specific peer groups. If growing up in poor neighborhoods has adverse social consequences for native-born minority children, how, then, do neighborhood and peer-group settings affect Vietnamese children? One common response to the disadvantages imposed on a minority group by the larger society is group solidarity among the members of that minority. We therefore first examined to what extent the Vietnamese were able to use their common ethnicity as a basis for cooperation to overcome socioeconomic disadvantages. To explore this question, we ventured into a typical poor urban minority neighborhood to investigate how the children of Vietnamese refugees managed to overcome their class disadvantages to adapt to American schools. The focus on Vietnamese children from poor socioeconomic backgrounds enabled us to examine the ethnic effect while controlling for the social-class factor. Specifically, we perceived that the ethnic factor as a social context that influenced children's adaptation through support as well as control.

We do not believe that it can be assumed that the Vietnamese, as

members of a new ethnic minority group, are necessarily always victims of racism. In some situations, they may even be involuntary beneficiaries. While they often settle in minority neighborhoods, it is quite possible that they experience fewer obstacles of prejudice and institutional discrimination than native-born children of American minorities. Racial stereotypes such as the stereotype of Asians as the “model minority” may conceivably even work in favor of individual Vietnamese. We argue that while structural and individual factors are certainly important determinants of immigrant adaptation, these factors often work together with immigrant culture and group characteristics to shape the fates of immigrants and their offspring. An immigrant culture may be referred to as the “original” culture, consisting of an entire way of life, including languages, ideas, beliefs, values, behavioral patterns, and all that immigrants bring with them as they arrive in their new country. This original culture may be seen as hindering the adaptation of members of the ethnic group (the assimilationist perspective) or as promoting this adaptation (the multiculturalist perspective).

To see an immigrant culture as an American microcosm of the country of origin, however, is to overlook the historically dynamic nature of all cultures. As the historian Kathleen N. Conzen (1991) recognizes, immigrant cultures are constantly changing and adapting to new environments. Cultures may persist while adapting to the pressures of American society, resulting in many similar patterns of cultural orientation among different immigrant groups. These newly adapted cultural patterns are often confused with those of their original cultures. American ethnic foods offer an example of this cultural reshaping. Each type of ethnic food—Italian, Mexican, or Chinese, for example—is distinctive in itself, but they are quite similar in fitting the taste of the general American public. If a particular dish does not appeal to the public taste, it will not be known or accepted as an ethnic dish no matter how authentic it may be.

Similarly, the cultural traits that characterize a group depend not only on how the group selects these traits as its identifying characteristics but also on how the larger society responds to them. If the cultural characteristics an immigrant group selects for display in America are approved by the mainstream, the group will generally be considered to have an advantageous culture; otherwise its culture will be deemed deficient. For example, most of the Asian subgroups whose original cultures are dominated by Confucianism, Taoism, or Buddhism—such as the Chinese, Koreans, Japanese, and Vietnamese—often selectively unpack from their

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cultural baggage traits such as two-parent families, a strong work ethic, delayed gratification, and thrift that are suitable to the new environment. They either leave packed or keep strictly to themselves other traits not so well considered, such as nonconfrontation, passivity, submissiveness, and excessive obligation within the family. Since the things unpacked resemble the ideals of the mainstream culture, these “proper” original cultures create an image that elicits favorable treatment from the larger society, which may give the group more help in dealing with the difficulties of adjustment and enable group members to capitalize on the ethnic resources.

On the other hand, if a group displays characteristics that are not comparable to the ideals of the mainstream, or that resemble characteristics identified with or projected onto native-born minorities, such as matriarchal families, these traits will be combined with the race/ethnic factor and seen as deficient cultural characteristics and stigmatized. The groups so stigmatized will receive unfavorable treatment from the larger society, exacerbating their problems and trapping them in a vicious cycle. Therefore, the effect of an immigrant culture varies depending not only on the social structures of the ethnic community on which the immigrant culture is based, but also on the social structures of the larger society of which the immigrant culture is a part.

Immigrant cultures may be defined as patterns of social relations involving shared obligations, social supports, and social controls. When, for example, Korean Americans obtain from other Korean Americans low-interest loans requiring little collateral, or Chinese American students in after-school Chinese language classes receive encouragement and approval for their general academic orientations, these are forms of social support inherent in particular patterns of social relations. When, on the other hand, an Asian Indian American or a Japanese American receives disapproval, or even ostracism, from coethnics for failing to attain a respected occupation, this is a form of social control.

Clearly, social support and social control may channel individuals into particular forms of behavior through material and social-psychological means; both support and control, however, stem from relationships based on value-orientations brought from the home country and adapted to the circumstances of the host country. Two sociological concepts are useful in a consideration of the issue: James S. Coleman’s concept of social capital and Emile Durkheim’s concept of social integration. Coleman (1987) defines social capital as the existence of a system of

relationships that promotes advantageous outcomes for participants in the system. More specifically, he explains that “what I mean by social capital in the raising of children is the norms, the social networks, and the relationships between adults and children that are of value for the child’s growing up. Social capital exists within the family, but also outside the family, in the community” (p. 34; see also Coleman 1988, 1990b).

Norms, social networks, and relationships between adults and children may have absolute value; that is, some types of relationships or norms may be of value to children in any environment. In the present context, certain general characteristics of Vietnamese families, such as two-parent families and respect for elders, may help children advance in any segment of contemporary American society. If, however, these families live in social environments that are not conducive to academic achievement and upward mobility, then these characteristics may take on even greater importance. Therefore, the importance of accepting community-prescribed norms and values and cultivating social relationships depends largely on the opportunities offered to immigrants in their host country. In disadvantaged neighborhoods where difficult conditions and disruptive elements dominate, immigrant families may have to consciously strive to preserve traditional values by means of ethnic solidarity to prevent the next generation from acculturating into the underprivileged segments of American society in which their community is located.

Moreover, as Coleman observes, the community provides a context in which social capital is formed. The adult society surrounding a family can reinforce familial support and direction. In this sense, an ethnic community can be perceived simply as consisting of various sets of social ties among members of an ethnic group. Membership in any group, however, is a matter of degree; individuals may belong to social groups to varying extents. If norms, values, and social relationships within an ethnic group do influence the adaptation of group members, the influence should logically depend on the extent to which individuals hold the norms and values and participate in the social relationships. Hence, participation in social relationships and acceptance of group norms and values are interrelated; the more individuals associate with a particular group, the greater the normative conformity to behavioral standards and expectations prescribed by the group. At the same time, ethnic communities may also hinder the adaptation of young members of immigrant groups. The writer Richard Rodriguez, in his eloquent memoir *Hunger*

*of Memory* (1982), maintains that his own success has depended on leaving his Spanish-speaking neighborhood behind. It is possible that young Vietnamese must similarly cast off their traditions and language to participate fully in American society. The question is whether the person who succeeds in leaving the poor ethnic community represents an aberration or a trend.

The ethnic context also serves as an important mechanism for social control. For this reason, we understand the concept of social capital as a version of one of the oldest sociological theories, Durkheim's theory of social integration. Durkheim (1951) maintained that individual behavior should be seen as the product of the degree of integration of individuals in their society; social integration involved not only participation, but also socialization into shared beliefs, values, and norms. Thus, the greater the integration of the individual into the social group, the greater the control of the group over the individual. In the context of immigrant adaptation, children who are more highly integrated into their ethnic group are likely to follow the forms of behavior prescribed by the group and to avoid the forms of behavior proscribed by the group. In any consideration of whether Vietnamese ethnicity should be seen as a source of social capital or as a disadvantage, then, it will be important to look at how integration into the Vietnamese community affects the adaptation of young people.

We see our work as describing how patterns of adaptation among young Vietnamese are shaped at a number of contextual levels that determine what opportunities are available to them and how they respond to those opportunities. Some of the shaping forces include the structure of opportunities, expectations created by the host society, and externally imposed racial and class constraints, as well as the adaptive controls and supports provided by ethnic groups or other social groups. Whether or not an immigrant group's social relations actually are adaptive depends on the structure of relations within the group and the fit between the group's sociocultural structure and that of the larger society. Although we are specifically concerned with the process of adaptation among Vietnamese children to American society, we believe that the analytical framework we have just described can be applied to members of other ethnic groups, immigrant or native, as an alternative way of understanding why ethnic groups show characteristic patterns of adaptation to school and to American society and why interethnic differences exist.

## DATA AND METHODS

### **The Case Study of Versailles Village, New Orleans**

This book relies mainly on a case study of Versailles Village, a low-income urban minority community in New Orleans and the second largest Vietnamese community (after the one in Houston) outside California. Chapter 3 provides a detailed description of the community. Our work in Versailles Village began in April 1993 and continued through the spring of 1995. During this time, we engaged in participant observation, undertook intensive interviews using open-ended questions, and administered two surveys of neighborhood high school students. One of the authors, Carl L. Bankston III stayed on the research site for the entire research period, serving as a volunteer in community-based youth programs and as a substitute teacher in one of the high schools being surveyed. Our in-depth interviews involved a snowball sample of one hundred young people, parents, grandparents, educators, counselors, community leaders, police officers, and refugee agency officials.

The two surveys elicited information from Vietnamese students in grades 9 to 12 attending public high schools in the study area. The Versailles Survey of 1993 focused only on Washington High School, a pseudonym we have given to the neighborhood high school located in Versailles Village and attended by over half the Vietnamese youths residing in the neighborhood. At the time of the survey, the school was a typical urban public school with a student body that was 77 percent black and 20 percent Vietnamese. We surveyed the entire Vietnamese student population who were present at school on the day of the survey in May 1993 ( $N = 198$ ). For this survey, we used a questionnaire that included ninety-eight close-ended questions and one open-ended question, covering a wide array of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of children and their parents, cultural values, identity, language proficiency in both English and Vietnamese, school grades, academic aspirations, future orientations, and mental health.

In the spring of 1994, we conducted a second survey of the Vietnamese students in Versailles Village, incorporating many of the items in the 1993 survey, refining the measures on language proficiency and school grades, and adding a set of new items on peer-group association, tastes and interests, deviant behavior, religious participation, and com-

munity involvement. The sample surveyed in 1994 contained 402 Vietnamese high school students from three public high schools in or near Versailles Village: 204 students from Washington High School where the 1993 survey was administered, 183 students from Jefferson High School, our pseudonym for another nearby public high school attended by the rest of the Vietnamese high school students residing in the Versailles enclave; and 15 students from a magnet high school attended by the best students in the New Orleans area.<sup>2</sup> The sample represented an estimated 75 percent of all Vietnamese high school students in Versailles Village. This 75 percent response rate thus refers not to a sample, but rather to three-quarters of the entire population under consideration.

### Secondary Sources of Data

*The Los Angeles Times Poll of 1994* Between March 29 and April 29, 1994, The *Los Angeles Times* conducted a poll that randomly surveyed 861 Vietnamese adult residents of Los Angeles, Orange, San Diego, Riverside, San Bernardino, and Ventura counties in California from a pool of Vietnamese surnames in telephone directories. The interviews were conducted by telephone in Vietnamese and in English by Vietnamese American interviewers. Vietnamese residents in Orange county were oversampled ( $N=502$ ) with the sampling error of plus or minus 5. The sampling error for residents in all other counties surveyed ( $N=359$ ) was plus or minus 7. The poll also acknowledged possible errors that might have been affected by factors such as question wording, the order in which questions were presented, and the omission of individuals with unlisted telephone numbers and those who did not have Vietnamese surnames (*Los Angeles Times* 1994).

*The U.S. Census of Population and Housing, 1980 and 1990* Specifically, we used *The U.S. Census Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) Data of 1980 and 1990*. The PUMS data were used to identify national trends. In their raw form, these data were hierarchic, with households serving as the primary units of analysis. In order to build a file in which children served as the units of analysis, we used the SPSS INPUT PROGRAM to redefine PUMS. For this study, a child, who was under 18 years of age and still resided with his or her parent(s), was defined as the case of analysis. The SPSS INPUT PROGRAM cycled through the raw data and selected information from the housing unit record as well as



information on the household head and spouse (if present). The file on which this study was based was built from a combination of up to four different types of records: the housing unit records, the household head record, the spouse record, and the child record. We identified two groups of Vietnamese children by using the nativity variable for children and their parents—foreign-born children who arrived at 5 years of old or over and U.S.-born children or foreign-born children who arrived at the age of 4 or under. We built a data file on the 1980 PUMS and a comparable file on the 1990 PUMS. A sample of young adults aged 18 to 24 was also drawn from the PUMS that included those living with their parents and those living by themselves.

*Immigration and Naturalization Service Data* We compiled statistics from the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) statistical yearbooks from 1975 and 1995 to document the trend of refugee influx and the demographics of the Vietnamese admitted to the United States.

*The Graduation Exit Examination of 1990 of the State of Louisiana* We used data from the Graduation Exit Exam (GEE) of Louisiana to examine the academic performance of young Vietnamese. Passing this standardized test is a requirement for graduation from Louisiana public high schools; therefore, this data source contained information on all public high school students in the state. Until 1991, the GEE collected information on the socioeconomic characteristics of parents of those who took the test. For this reason, we used the 1990 data to provide an external check on the validity of our survey findings on Vietnamese students in Versailles Village.

*Archival Documents and Written Records* We supplemented our fieldwork with numerous government agency reports and newspaper reports on the Vietnam War and Vietnamese refugees, their families, their communities, and their adaptation experiences in the United States, dating back to 1975. These reports primarily came from the Bureau for Refugee Programs of the U.S. Department of State, the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (USHEW) and later the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (USHHS), and from major newspapers, such as the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, the *Houston Chronicle*, and the *Times Picayune* (New Orleans), and other major magazines such as *Time* and *Migrant World*.

### A Note on the Generalizability of Our Case Study

A case study makes it possible to examine continuity and change in the life patterns of a particular group and to make sense of the complexity of its social relations; it also makes it possible to take the social setting itself, on which these relations are based, as an object of study. Since individual behavior and mental states result from living in certain types of social settings, one cannot adequately interpret individual responses to survey or interview questions without understanding the setting and considering how a particular setting produces particular responses. In this study, we were especially interested in examining what gives Vietnamese children, whose families lack measurable human capital and economic resources and are trapped in poor neighborhoods, a competitive advantage to upward social mobility. We selected Versailles Village as our research site precisely because it is made up primarily of Vietnamese from agricultural backgrounds and low socioeconomic status. Thus, our case study has the advantage of providing us with built-in controls for the effect of social class.

Because of the unique refugee resettlement pattern, this community shares many characteristics with other Vietnamese communities dispersed throughout the United States; it is relatively homogeneous in socioeconomic backgrounds (characterized by low levels of educational attainment, high levels of poverty, and reliance on public assistance), its internal social structures are based on closely knit interpersonal ties and traditional organizations, and it is socially isolated from the American middle class. The similarities among Vietnamese communities ensure that our case study will shed light on the general process of Vietnamese adaptation to life in the United States.

We concede that Versailles Village differs from the much better known communities in Little Saigon (Orange County) and the community in San Jose, which are not only many times larger but also socioeconomically heterogeneous, containing a sizable ethnic middle class and a political elite. In recent years, many Vietnamese have moved to California through secondary migration, and most of them have perceived such a move as an upward step. Even so, striking similarities between Little Saigon and Versailles Village are evident in the development of ethnic institutions and patterns of intraethnic relationships, as revealed by the *Los Angeles Times* Poll of 1994 and a recent study of Vietnamese children in southern California (Rumbaut 1994a, 1995a, 1996).

The fact that Versailles Village is a predominantly Catholic commu-

nity may be another differentiating factor. Will our findings apply to Buddhist or Cao Dai Vietnamese communities? We believe they will. Previous studies have treated Vietnamese Catholicism as a form of “Confucianized Christianity,” because it has been deeply influenced by cultural traditions that are derived from centuries of Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucianist practices and that share a common cultural basis with many stylistic similarities (Nash 1992; Rutledge 1985). Moreover, while there are obviously major theological differences among these religions, our study has not been concerned with theology but rather with religion as a social institution that serves as a focal point for organizing relations and establishing identities among the Vietnamese. From our observations, Catholic churches and Buddhist pagodas share strikingly similar functions in refugee resettlement in both Versailles Village and Little Saigon.

Further, our study does not exclusively rely on the Versailles Village case. We have drawn on a variety of national data sources to identify the trends and issues and then used the case study to examine these trends and issues in depth. This multipronged approach, which links ethnographic case-study information with quantitative census data, survey data, and archival records, enables us to provide a unique perspective on Vietnamese American young people. Combining different types of data, as we have done, produces a mosaic in which the validity of any one piece of information may be checked by how it fits with all the other pieces, permitting us to gauge the degree to which our findings are representative of the broader population.

### **Values and Assumptions**

All theoretical approaches to social issues make value judgments and reflect built-in assumptions. Our approach is no exception. We believe, however, that we can approach objectivity by making implicit values explicit and by carefully examining our underlying assumptions. As thinkers who attempt to be intellectually honest, we make an effort to look at the evidence, whether or not it accords with any ideological preferences we may hold. The fundamental value judgment of this book lies in our choice of “adaptation” as a research question. To some extent, this question involves taking mainstream American society, with all its injustices and inequalities, as given, and focusing on the factors that enable the children of Vietnamese refugees to advance in that society. In this respect, then, our research may seem to have an inherently conservative strand.

Given our choice of the research question, moreover, we conceptualize anything that appears to contribute to adaptation as having a positive effect. If, for example, adherence to Vietnamese cultural values is associated with superior school performance, we perceive these values, as manifested in particular ways, as facilitating rather hindering adaptation. At the same time, we recognize that traditionalism can have many negative consequences, such as an unquestioning acceptance of the status quo or stifled individualism.

In our theoretical framework, we emphasize the role of the ethnic community in promoting the adaptation of Vietnamese American young people. This emphasis does not stem from any desire on our part to glorify Vietnamese community life or to engage in ethnic boosterism. Neither of us is Vietnamese, and we have no commitment to promoting the intrinsic worth of Vietnamese communities. Rather, our observations and research have led us to believe that particular patterns of social relations embedded in the ethnic community can serve as sources of social capital and that these patterns may be the critical missing pieces in the puzzle of immigrant adaptation that begins at the margins of contemporary American society. Throughout the book, we attempt to present the key pieces of evidence from our case study as well as other sources of data that have led us to conclude that an ethnic social relations model, in which the ethnic community is the pivotal factor, interacting with other important factors, offers the best means of understanding the process of growing up American for socioeconomically disadvantaged immigrant children.

### **THE ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK**

Our study offers an in-depth examination of Vietnamese children growing to adulthood in the United States. Chapter 1 traces the historical process of Vietnamese resettlement in the United States, including the several waves of Vietnamese migration to the United States in the aftermath of the Vietnam War and the development of government programs of resettlement over the next two decades. It considers how the background of war, the organizational mechanisms of refugee resettlement, and popular opinion have continued to influence the lives of the Vietnamese and their children.

Chapter 2 offers a description of the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the Vietnamese population in the United States and the socioeconomic obstacles confronting this population. It provides a quali-

tative assessment of the effects of government policies and various resettlement programs on the settlement patterns, geographic distribution, and population growth of this new ethnic minority group. It then discusses how the Vietnamese have recently made the transition from a resettled refugee population to an integral part of the American mosaic, describing some of the larger societal structures and internal structures of the ethnic communities, such as household size and composition, residential concentration, occupation, inequality, and the rise of a new ethnic identity as a background against which young Vietnamese strive to become American.

Chapter 3 provides concrete examples of how the ethnic community and the family, as key institutions of an ethnic culture, can serve as sources of social capital. Families are seen to impart a cultural heritage and to adapt this heritage to new circumstances, and their traditionalism is shown to be related to distinctive values regarding social relations.

Chapter 4 describes the patterns of social and kinship relations in the ethnic social system in which Vietnamese families and their children are contained. Integration into these patterns of social relations is directed by the entire ethnic community and relies on the community's reinforcement. The major dimensions of social relations among individuals, families, and the community that make possible the development of social capital are examined, and it is argued that involvement in community relationships, as a social context for young Vietnamese Americans, is an important determinant of positive adaptation. Young people who function within the context of an ethnic community, rather than isolated from it, experience social controls and encouragement that direct them toward upward mobility.

Chapter 5 takes up the issue of parental native language and provides an empirical account of the effects of advanced minority language abilities on the adaptation of young Vietnamese. Minority language skills such as literacy are shown to enable young people to make greater use of their ethnic social capital and can actually foster upward mobility in an English-speaking society.

Chapter 6 begins with a general picture of school adaptation among Vietnamese children, exploring the root causes of success or failure in the American educational system. It discusses the questions of how the school environment influences students' performance, what factors produce various orientations toward the school environment among Vietnamese students, and whether students connected with support systems in the family and the community succeed in maintaining more positive

academic orientations than those who are alienated from ethnic families and communities.

Chapter 7 explains bicultural conflict and the issues of gender role changes and ethnic identification encountered by young Vietnamese. As the culture of origin is being reshaped into a specifically Vietnamese American culture, young people face many difficulties in balancing the demands of American culture with those of tradition-minded parents. The tensions between individual self-fulfillment and commitment to the ethnic community are considered with an emphasis on the impact of culture on the quality of life and on the psychological well-being of the young people.

Chapter 8 describes specific patterns of peer group association among Vietnamese children and examines how Vietnamese children may be affected by differential associations with peers of major American groups, with "Americanized" coethnic peers, and with the ethnic community. It examines the role of racial and bicultural conflicts and the effects of various levels of the social structures in encouraging the rise of delinquency and youth gangs. The concepts of being Vietnamese and being American are placed in the contexts of the different types of peer groups available to young people within the Vietnamese community and outside the ethnic community in the larger society. In keeping with the theme of the book, different types of peer group associations are seen to lead to variations in the meaning of "becoming American" for Vietnamese American young people.

Chapter 9 provides a summary of the main findings of the study and a discussion of the implications of these findings for young members of immigrant and native-born minority groups. Understanding the unequal positions of minority groups in American society depends on a consideration of both the social structures within the groups themselves and the opportunities provided or denied to them by the structure of the larger society. The American educational system can be among the most important of those opportunities. Therefore, a central issue in understanding and promoting the advancement of immigrant and other minorities is the fit between minority-group social structures and schools. The social structures of ethnic groups like the Vietnamese may change as young people move through the schools and into jobs and develop new views on becoming and being American. The success of immigrant or minority children in American schools and in the larger labor market depends not simply on the individual merits of these children or on the quality of schools they attend, but also on the social capital provided to

these children by the communities surrounding them. To the extent that these young people succeed in the American educational system, they can move into new positions in the American job structure and become structurally assimilated. Consequently, young Vietnamese in the United States can be expected to become an increasingly integral part of American society. In the process, being Vietnamese will become yet another way of becoming American.