Vietnamese Refugees and Their U.S.-Born Vietnamese Counterparts: Biculturalism, Self-Determination, and Perceived Discrimination

Much research has been done on biculturalism, self-determination, and perceived discrimination, but researchers have not examined all 3 constructs in relation to each other. Moreover, researchers have rarely compared Vietnamese refugees and U.S.-born Vietnamese people. We compared Vietnamese refugees to their U.S.-born counterparts, ages 18–25, on biculturalism, self-determination, and perceived discrimination. Two hundred twenty-four Vietnamese Americans residing in Southern California completed the Young Adults of Vietnamese Ancestry Questionnaire. Independent samples t tests showed that the 2 groups of Vietnamese Americans differed significantly on level of biculturalism, but not on self-determination or perceived discrimination. There were no sex or age differences on any of the variables, and biculturalism, self-determination, and perceived discrimination were not significantly correlated. Some results from this study were consistent with past findings, and some were conflicting. Investigators should conduct further research to improve the questionnaire and to expand our knowledge and understanding of Vietnamese Americans.

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Biculturalism

Researchers generally consider biculturalism a type of acculturation, which is a close relative of enculturation. Enculturation is “the process by which youngsters learn and adopt the ways and manners of their culture” (Matsumoto, 2000, p. 174), whereas acculturation refers to the “process of adapting to . . . a different culture from the one in which a person was enculturated” (p. 175).

According to Berry, Trimble, and Olmedo (1986), there are four types of acculturation: (1) assimilation, which is adaptation to the majority culture and distancing from the native culture; (2) integration, which is adaptation to the majority culture while retaining the native culture; (3) separation, which is rejecting the majority culture and reaffirming the native culture; and (4) marginalization, which is rejection of both cultures. Another term for integration is biculturalism. According to Buriel, Calzada, and Vasquez (1982) and Suinn, Rickard-Figueroa, Lew, and Vigil (1987), biculturalism is the ideal type of acculturation. In our view, high biculturalism reflects considerable integration of majority and native cultures, whereas low biculturalism reflects the separated or assimilated categories. Other researchers have defined acculturation solely as biculturalism, so acculturation is one’s success in integrating both cultures (Celano & Tyler, 1991; Duan & Vu, 2000).

Because acculturation, including biculturalism, is such an abstract concept, researchers have approached its measurement in different ways, such as demographic, behavioral, and psychological. The demographic approach measures biculturalism by measuring its predictors. Such predictors include age (Duan & Vu, 2000; Liebkind, 1996; Marino, Stuart, & Minas, 2000; Smither & Rodriguez-Giegling, 1982; Sodowsky, Lai, & Plake, 1991), sex (Liebkind, 1996; Marino et al., 2000), country of birth (Sodowsky et al., 1991), education level (Celano & Tyler, 1991; Marino et al., 2000; Smither & Rodriguez-Giegling, 1982; Sodowsky et al., 1991), family and socioeconomic status (Celano & Tyler, 1991), years of life in the host country (Duan & Vu, 2000; Marino et al., 2000; Matsuoka, 1990; Smither & Rodriguez-Giegling, 1982; Sodowsky et al., 1991), social relations (Berry et al., 1986), occupation (Celano & Tyler, 1991), ethnic density of the community (Duan & Vu, 2000; Marino et al., 2000; Smither & Rodriguez-Giegling, 1982; Sodowsky et al., 1991), preparation for arrival (Do, 1999; Sodowsky et al., 1991; Ying & Akutsu, 1997), and personality (Marino et al., 2000; Smither & Rodriguez-Giegling, 1982).

Whereas the demographic approach to measuring acculturation tries to identify characteristics that would lead to acculturation, the behavioral approach examines manifestations of acculturation. For example, Marino et al. (2000) defined acculturation as “cultural learning.” They studied the adoption of external aspects of the majority culture, including language acquisition, the ability to “fit in,” and social skills adjustment. Furthermore, they asserted that the level of exposure to the majority culture is important in adopting dominant cultural behaviors. Therefore, a person’s background, such as one’s percentage of life in the United States, age of arrival, education level, and income, all influence the level of acculturation, or the extent to which a person has adopted the behaviors of the dominant culture. Similarly, Celano and Tyler (1991) also studied acculturation in terms of customs, habits, language usage, and lifestyle, which are all behavioral manifestations of acculturation.

The third approach to measuring acculturation is from a psychological perspective. Marino et al. (2000) distinguished this perspective from the behavioral approach and made the two independent of each other. In other words, one can adopt the behaviors of the dominant culture (behavioral acculturation), but one does not necessarily have to agree with the values and attitudes behind those behaviors (psychological acculturation). According to Marino et al., these are distinct, yet related dimensions of acculturation, so a scale measuring both aspects provides a more complete picture of acculturation than a scale using only one approach. Other researchers, such as Smither and Rodriguez-Giegling (1982), also emphasized the distinction between measuring psychological and other forms of acculturation. They believed that achievement motivation, sociability, anxiety, assertiveness, and intelligence are psychological factors that contribute to acculturation. We chose to use both the demographic and behavioral approaches, but not the psychological approach.

Self-Determination

Several researchers have defined self-determination as expectations and aspirations (Buriel et al., 1982; Leong & Chou, 1994). Expectations are realistic, anticipated outcomes, while aspirations are more idealistic, desired goals. Other researchers have thought of self-determination in terms of its effect on autonomy and independence (Chirkov & Ryan, 2001, Knee, Neighbors, & Vietor, 2001), intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Chirkov & Ryan, 2001; Eisenberger & Rhoades, 2001), life satisfaction (Chirkov & Ryan, 2001; Deci & Ryan, 2000), job performance (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Eisenberger & Rhoades, 2001), and academic performance (Schiller & Muller, 2000).
These researchers adhered to the framework of the self-determination theory (SDT), which asserts that across all cultures, individuals must meet “innate psychological needs” to be satisfied with life (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Once met, these psychological needs are related to well-being, mental health, high-quality performance, and positive affective experiences as well as aspirations in life (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Thus, the level of need-fulfillment relates to setting life goals and dictates the level of one’s self-determination, which in turn influences one’s level of satisfaction and performance in life.

**Perceived Discrimination**

Whereas acculturation is the degree to which the minority group member accepts the majority group’s culture, discrimination is an indicator of the degree to which the majority group accepts the minority group member. Perceived discrimination, on the other hand, is the degree to which one feels victim to prejudice, without regard to the actual discrimination received (Sodowsky et al., 1991). We focused on perceived discrimination, independent of actual discrimination.

**Relevance of Dependent Variables to Participants**

Vietnamese refugees and U.S.-born Vietnamese people differ in their experiences, and thus in their philosophies and views of each other. However, all Vietnamese people in the United States must face cultural changes and adapt. The degree to which both groups are able to adapt, or acculturate, and the ways in which they respond to the new culture influence their lives in the United States.

In seeking political and economic asylum in the United States, Vietnamese people develop and foster their sense of self-determination. The journey to the United States is difficult, and Vietnamese refugees have to rebuild their lives, careers, status, and in some cases, families once they arrive in the United States. Moreover, in order to succeed they must learn English, adapt to the new culture, and understand its values, all of which require self-determination. The fact that Vietnamese people are refugees shows they are determined, because all immigrants and refugees need to be in order to survive the migration process and succeed in the new environment (Do, 1999). Therefore, the factor of self-determination plays an important role in the Vietnamese experience in the United States.

Vietnamese Americans, like all minorities, encounter some degree of discrimination because of their physical appearance, background, language abilities, values, and personal guidelines for social interactions. Their perceptions of this discrimination may not relate to the actual degree of discrimination. However, because minorities belong in the out-group with respect to the majority, they must find their way into society, overcoming others’ preconceived ideas of them, fighting stereotypes, and establishing themselves as individuals who are not defined strictly by their ethnic groups. This process of learning and change makes minorities vulnerable to perceiving discrimination.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants (N = 224) were people of Vietnamese ancestry, ages 18 to 25 (M = 20.70 years), residing in Southern California. There were 118 females and 105 males (1 participant did not specify sex), of which 81 were U.S.-born, 141 were Vietnam-born, and 2 did not indicate country of birth. We contacted them through Vietnamese organizations (e.g., the Vietnamese Student Association) at several universities and colleges, the Southern California Union of Vietnamese Student Associations, and the Vietnamese Eucharistic Youth Society of Orange County. To eliminate confounding variables of mixed cultures and heritage, all participants were ethnic Vietnamese, of full Vietnamese ancestry. Working-level English was a requirement so that participants would have the language ability to complete the questionnaire. We set the age limit at a maximum of 25 years because mass migration of Vietnamese people began in 1975 after the fall of Saigon, and most U.S.-born Vietnamese people were 25 years old or younger at the time of the data collection. We set the lower age limit at 18 years so that all participants were legally adults. The same age restrictions applied for the Vietnam-born Vietnamese people to ensure comparable groups.

**Materials**

**Questionnaire.** We developed the 40-item Young Adults of Vietnamese Ancestry Questionnaire by evaluating previous literature and psychological measures. Nguyen (2002) detailed the psychometric characteristics of our questionnaire. The questionnaire consists of basic demographics (four items) and the biculturalism, self-determination, and perceived discrimination scales. The biculturalism scale contains three factors: education (three items), family status (four items), and social relations (seven items). The self-determination (six items) and perceived discrimination (seven items) factors are respectively the self-determination and perceived discrimination scales. Nine of the 40 items are filler items. All items are multiple choice except for three, which are fill-ins.
The basic demographics section asks for age, sex, country of birth, and age when the participant came to the United States (if applicable), which we used to calculate the percentage of life in the United States. Consistent with Marino et al. (2000), we believe that the percentage of life in the United States is a more accurate reflection of the influence of American culture on one’s life than years in the United States. The education factor includes the last completed level and/or current level of education. The family status factor contains questions regarding parents’ levels of education and socioeconomic status in Vietnam and in the United States. The social relations portion asks for language competency, preferred ethnic labels, food preference, and issues regarding friends, spouse, and children. The items regarding percentage of life in the United States, education level, family status, and social relations combine to form the overall score for the biculturalism scale. An example item from this scale is “With which culture and its traditions do you most identify? (please check one) (a) Vietnamese; (b) American; (c) I identify equally with both.”

Out of more than 10 possible choices, we chose education, family status, percentage of life, and social relations as predictors for several reasons. There are contradictory findings about the relationships between acculturation and age and between acculturation and sex. Country of birth is the participant variable; therefore, we could not use it to predict acculturation. Education level is one of our four predictors because it has been repeatedly correlated with acculturation. Family background, which includes family status and family values, is also important in calculating acculturation. Life in the United States is one of the greatest predictors of acculturation. We used percentage of life in the United States instead of years in the United States because it takes into account the variation in age of arrival and the subsequent period of life. Social relations is an important concept because it measures the degree of exposure to and preference for each of the two cultures. Occupation is not one of our predictors because the participants are young adults, most of whom are still pursuing an education and are not in the working world. Ethnic density is not an issue in this study because no matter where one lives in Southern California, the community is thickly populated with Vietnamese people. We did not measure preparation for arrival to the United States because the U.S.-born participants did not have to migrate or prepare for the journey. Also, we did not measure personality and individual differences for simplification purposes.

Our definition of self-determination includes the expectation versus aspiration aspect, response to challenges, work orientation and diligence, and peer comparisons regarding capabilities and achievement. The items in the self-determination scale address the many aspects listed above. For example:

Choose one that best describes you: (a) I shy away from challenges; (b) If I fail the first time, I am unlikely to try again; (c) I have a moderate amount of determination; (d) I know my limits, and I like achievable/realistic challenges; (e) I never give up.

The perceived discrimination scale contains items about opportunities for competition, Vietnamese accent when speaking English, sense of belonging in the United States, ethnicity-based discrimination experiences, and instances when hate words were used [e.g., “Have you ever experienced discrimination due to your Vietnamese ancestry? (a) yes; (b) no”].

**Scoring.** The possible score for the biculturalism scale ranges from 5 to 18. For the self-determination scale, the range is from 4 to 19, and from 6 to 21 for the perceived discrimination scale. A high score reflects a high level of the dependent variable. We did not include any incomplete scales (i.e., scales in which there are missing answers) in the analyses.

**Procedure**

We administered packets containing two consent forms (one to sign and return, one for the participants’ records) and the questionnaire to participants. Participation was voluntary, and there was no compensation. We informed participants that their help would broaden psychological knowledge of Vietnamese Americans. Researchers or volunteers distributed the packets at Vietnamese organizations’ meetings or events.

**Results**

We used an alpha level of .05 for all statistical tests. We analyzed each predictor’s relationship to the biculturalism score using the Pearson product–moment coefficient of correlation. We found positive correlations for all four predictors, although the correlations between biculturalism and education and between biculturalism and family status were modest (percentage of life in the U.S.: \( r(167) = .72, p < .01 \); education: \( r(167) = .26, p < .01 \); family status: \( r(167) = .35, p < .01 \); social relations: \( r(167) = .81, p < .01 \). Because most participants were undergraduate students, our range for education may be too narrow to exhibit a significant correlation with
biculturalism. We expected positive correlations between each predictor and biculturalism because the predictors contributed to the biculturalism score. Nevertheless, we completed these analyses to examine the ability of percentage of life in the United States, education, family status, and social relations to predict the overall biculturalism score.

The participant variable in this study was country of birth, and it had two values: United States and Vietnam. There were 81 participants born in the United States, 141 participants born in Vietnam, and 2 who did not specify country of birth. For further analysis, we divided the Vietnam-born group into those who arrived at or before the age of 5 and those who arrived after age 5. We chose this age because in the United States and in Vietnam, it is when a child must start formal schooling, a new type of socialization. Of the 141 Vietnam-born participants, 44 (28 females, 16 males) arrived in the U.S. at or before 5 years of age, 92 (42 females, 49 males, 1 did not identify a sex) arrived after the age of 5, and 5 did not report age of arrival. The mean age of arrival was 8.79 years.

From an analysis of variance, we found that biculturalism scores were significantly different for the three groups: Vietnamese people born in the United States, education, family status, and social relations subscores, $t(167) = .05, p < .01$, and social relations subscores, $t(212) = 3.86, p < .01$, than Vietnam-born participants. The Vietnam-born participants who arrived at or before age 5, as compared to the participants who arrived after age 5, had higher family status subscores that approached significance, $t(110) = 1.84, p = .069$, and significantly higher social relations subscores, $t(111) = 4.60, p < .01$. Although Liebkind (1996) found that males tend to be more bicultural than females, the absence of a relationship between biculturalism and sex, $t(165) = 0.42, ns$, in this study is in agreement with the findings of Sodowsky et al. (1991) and of Marino et al. (2000). We also found no relationship between biculturalism and age, $r(167) = .05, ns$, contrary to Liebkind’s finding that the more bicultural are younger in age. This may be due to our narrow participant age range.

There were no significant differences on self-determination and perceived discrimination scores between those born in the United States and in Vietnam [self-determination: $t(212) = 0.57, ns$; perceived discrimination: $t(218) = 0.04, ns$]; for the two Vietnam-born groups [self-determination: $t(129) = 0.60, ns$; perceived discrimination: $t(133) = 0.70, ns$]; or for the U.S.-born group and the two Vietnam-born groups [self-determination: $F(2, 207) = 0.23, ns$; perceived discrimination: $F(2, 213) = 0.23, ns$]. Table 1 shows the mean biculturalism, self-determination, and

**TABLE 1**

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<th>U.S.-born</th>
<th>Vietnam-born at or before age 5</th>
<th>Vietnam-born, arrived at or before age 5</th>
<th>Vietnam-born, arrived after age 5</th>
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<td>Biculturalism</td>
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<td>12.43</td>
<td>14.16</td>
<td>11.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-determination</td>
<td>15.13</td>
<td>15.04</td>
<td>14.91</td>
<td>15.11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perceived discrimination</td>
<td>10.59</td>
<td>10.57</td>
<td>10.80</td>
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perceived discrimination scores for those born in the United States and in Vietnam, including scores for each of the two Vietnam-born groups. Despite the many proposed relationships among bicultralism, self-determination, and perceived discrimination made by previous researchers, we found no significant relationships between bicultralism and self-determination. $r(165) = .12$, ns; between bicultralism and perceived discrimination, $r(167) = .03$, ns; or between self-determination and perceived discrimination, $r(216) = -.07$, ns.

**Discussion**

Participants completed the Young Adults of Vietnamese Ancestry Questionnaire. Using the data from these questionnaires, tests showed that percentage of life in the United States, education, family status, and social relations can predict the total bicultralism score. We also found that Vietnamese people born in the United States are more bicultral than those born in Vietnam. Furthermore, U.S.-born participants and those who arrived at or before the age of 5 have higher bicultralism scores than those who arrived after 5 years of age. Participants born in the United States and those who arrived at or before age 5 have similar bicultralism levels. When compared on country of birth and age of arrival, participants do not differ significantly on either self-determination or perceived discrimination. Based on these results, we reject the null hypothesis regarding the groups’ difference on bicultralism, but we fail to reject the null hypotheses regarding their differences on self-determination and perceived discrimination. Finally, there are no significant relationships among bicultralism, self-determination, and perceived discrimination.

An issue influencing the difference in bicultralism may be that participants born in the United States had parents who arrived either in the late 1970s or the early 1980s. Refugees during this period, as compared to those who arrived later, were more educated, more urbanized, and more Westernized (Do, 1999). Education, urbanization, and exposure to Western culture are factors contributing to acculturation (Berry et al., 1986).

Because there are no differences among the groups on self-determination, one can draw several conclusions about the sample from this finding. First, these participants may hold similar values with regard to self-determination and expectations because of the cultural similarities of living in Southern California, which is very densely populated with Vietnamese people. Second, we must emphasize that there are differences among those in the sample on self-determination, but not significantly large differences.

For Vietnamese Americans, and ethnic minorities in general, being more bicultral leads to more success in life, and associating oneself with the native culture and taking on its values are desirable (Bankston & Zhou, 1997; Buriel et al., 1982). For some Vietnamese Americans, the high achievement motive/self-determination that is an integral part of the Vietnamese culture has led to high scholastic and career achievement. At the same time, it has produced more pressure on Vietnamese Americans to live up to sometimes unrealistic expectations. An example of this is the *model minority myth*.

Regardless of the lack of differences and relatively low scores on perceived discrimination, Vietnamese Americans overall may still perceive a considerable degree of discrimination. Discrimination may take the form of the model minority myth (Do, 1999). As perpetuated in the mainstream media and in American society, Asians, specifically Vietnamese Americans, are expected to be obedient, compliant, quiet, and high achievers. Although it can be argued that this is a positive stereotype, it is a stereotype nonetheless. First, important cultural values and differences have been turned into a stereotype, leading to the perception that Vietnamese Americans are a homogeneous group. Secondly, it trivializes some people’s accomplishments because they are expected to achieve scholastically, while penalizing those who do not achieve in expected ways or areas. In other words, a good Vietnamese student is good because he/she is Vietnamese, and a poor Vietnamese student is doing poorly because he/she is not determined enough. Moreover, a student performing poorly in academics may experience lowered teacher expectations, which may set the stage for a self-fulfilling prophecy. The stereotype is thus perpetuated.

Although we found no relationships among bicultralism, self-determination, and perceived discrimination, these issues are prevalent in the lives of every Vietnamese American. It may be that the relationships among these factors are not yet present for Vietnamese people living in the United States. Much research about Vietnamese Americans is still needed. The three variables may be related in the future or for other ethnic minorities; further research may be conducted to explore these issues. In order to determine whether it is appropriate to use our questionnaire in such future studies, we will need to establish validity first.

Other investigators have already shown that acculturation levels vary among individuals as well as ethnic groups. Sodowsky et al. (1991) found that Asian Americans perceive more prejudice than Hispanics. Within the broad group of Asian Ameri-
cans, Vietnamese people are less assimilated than both Japanese people and Koreans, and use less English than Japanese people, Koreans, and Asians from the Indian subcontinent. For all groups, first-generation minority members and political refugees perceive more prejudice, are less assimilated, and are less prone to using English. Many Vietnamese people living in the United States are both first-generation and political refugees. Ying and Akutsu (1997) examined the acculturation of Vietnamese, Chinese-Vietnamese, Laotians, Hmong, and Cambodians. They found that the Vietnamese have the youngest age of arrival to the United States, have the greatest English competency, and are most likely to be employed. The Vietnamese and the Chinese-Vietnamese have the highest level of education and are the least traditional culturally. However, it is important to reiterate individual differences in this context. One’s level of acculturation, no matter what ethnicity, can be influenced by psychological and personality factors (Smither & Rodriguez-Giegling, 1982), and opportunity to acculturate (Marino et al., 2000; Smither & Rodriguez-Giegling, 1982).

One limitation of this project is that we used only the demographic and behavioral approaches in measuring biculturalism. In future studies, researchers should use all three approaches—demographic, behavioral, and psychological—to obtain a more accurate depiction of biculturalism (Marino et al., 2000). Another limitation is the narrow age and education ranges of the participants in this sample. In addition, the data may be biased because we collected data through Vietnamese organizations. Thus, the participants may be systematically different from the rest of the Vietnamese American population.

Despite these limitations, the results of this project may assist school counselors and teachers in job training, job placement, and the motivation of students with Vietnamese ancestry and may help employees and employers better understand each other, thus improving the workplace environment. Previous investigators have discussed how biculturalism and perceived discrimination may be applied to work settings. Some of the predictors of biculturalism, such as age of arrival, years in the United States, education level, employment, and English competency can also predict an individual’s ability to resist hardship (Ying & Akutsu, 1997). Less bicultural employees may be more vulnerable to occupational stereotyping, segregation, discrimination, stress, and job dissatisfaction. They may also have less occupational prestige and less occupational mobility than more bicultural employees (Leong & Chou, 1994). Valentine, Silver, and Twigg (1999) found that perceived discrimination, job satisfaction, locus of control, and job complexity are all associated. Lowering employees’ perceived discrimination by participating in fair hiring and fair promotion may result in a higher sense of control, more satisfaction and motivation, and less frustration for the employees. Biculturalism, self-determination, and perceived discrimination are also important aspects of general life satisfaction. Ying and Akutsu (1997) found that acculturation contributes to a sense of coherence, which is linked to confidence, self-esteem, general well-being, physical health, and quality of life. According to Buriel et al. (1982), biculturalism level is correlated with success, and self-determination is correlated with deviant behavior. McKelvey and Webb (1997) found a relationship among self-determination, discrimination, and depression. Perceived discrimination and depression are linked in Noh, Beiser, Kaspar, Hou, and Rummens’s 1999 study, and perceived discrimination is also related to a sense of coherence (Ying, Lee, & Tsai, 2000). In short, the results of this project adds to our knowledge of Vietnamese Americans in terms of how they are adapting to their environment and their experiences living in the United States.

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