

Cambodian-American college students: cultural values and multiple worlds

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### Abstract

Educational policy usually overlooks Cambodian American students as a unique ethnic group, attending instead to the positive statistics that aggregate Asian American students into a single group of successful students. Reflecting the reality of underachievement in this population, much of the existing research on Cambodian Americans has focused on their academic difficulties, high dropout rates, delinquency, and language barriers. The extant literature examining the relationship between traditional cultural values and academic success for Cambodian American students have yielded conflicting results. Through a Multiple Worlds lens, the present study explored how successful Cambodian American college students perceive traditional cultural values in relation to their past and present school experiences. In addition, this research investigated that support successful transition between Cambodian American students' incongruent family, school and peer cultures. Findings demonstrate that successful Cambodian American students regularly face a number of borders in moving through the different contexts of their daily lives. Family obligation emerged as a significant traditional value that acted as a paradoxical influence in these students' academic lives. Our data suggests that students' supportive school environments in high school and in college were significant for helping them resolve this contradiction and pursue academic success. Implications for practice are discussed.

### Cambodian-American college students: cultural values and multiple worlds

The aggregation of Asian-Americans into a single group often makes Cambodian-Americans an invisible, under-researched minority despite their rapid population growth (Barnes & Bennett, 2002) and ongoing educational challenges (Chang & Le, 2005; Wright, 2004; Um, 2003; Kim, 2002). According to the 2000 Census, there are 206,052 people of Cambodian descent residing in the U.S., a 42% increase since 1990 (Barnes & Bennett, 2002). In the population of Cambodians in America, 38.6 percent are under age 18 as compared to 25.6 percent of the U.S. population (Reeves & Bennett, 2004). Thus, Cambodian-Americans represent a growing segment of society whose social and economic success will rely on the successful schooling of its school-age youth.

Policymakers usually overlook Cambodian students as a unique ethnic group, attending instead to the positive statistics that aggregate Asian-American students into a single group of successful students (Teranishi, 2004; Yang, 2004; Reeves & Bennett, 2004; Barnes & Bennett, 2002; Um, 2000; Pang, 1998; Weinberg, 1997; Rong & Preissle, 1997; Lee, 1996). Asian-Americans as a group enjoy an impressive four-year college graduation rate, 42.7 percent, compared to the national average, 24.4 percent (Barnes & Bennett, 2002). However these numbers fail to reflect the acute under-representation of Cambodian-American students in higher education (Um, 2000). Cambodian-Americans' college graduation rate of 6.9 percent falls below that of African Americans (9.6%), Hispanics (7.4%) and Native Americans

(9.2%). Much of the research literature on Cambodian-Americans has focused on low academic achievement (Kim, 2002; Rumbaut & Ima, 1988), high dropout rates, delinquency (Chang & Le, 2005; Ima & Nidorf, 2000; Goldberg, 1999), and language barriers (Wright, 2004; Um, 2003). However, to address the absence of high achieving Cambodian-American students in the research literature, this study reports on the experiences of Cambodian-American college students at a selective public university and examines those values and beliefs that support their academic achievement.

#### *Asian Values Over-generalized*

While research on Cambodian-American students is limited, considerable attention has been paid to Asian values' influence on students' achievement motivation. A brief review of this research is necessary to better recognize its limitations. Studies suggest that Asian and Asian-American groups hold values that support academic striving. However, research on the influence of Asian values on academic achievement (Wang & Lin, 2005; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2004; Chen & Stevenson, 1995; Peng & Wright, 1994; Stevenson & Stigler, 1992; Rychkman & Mizokawa, 1988; Fry & Ghosh, 1980) typically examines Asian-Americans as a single, monolithic group or concentrates on East Asian populations. For example, Stevenson and Stigler (1992) argue that cross-national achievement differences can be partly explained by groups' cultural attitudes toward schooling. Their research suggests that Chinese and Japanese students tend to do better than their American peers in part because of their emphasis on working hard; American students tend to be guided by a

belief in innate abilities. Other cross-cultural comparisons support these claims (Stigler & Hiebert, 1999; Mau, 1997; Tuss, Zimmer & Ho, 1995; Stevenson, Chen & Lee, 1993; Hess & Azuma, 1991). Hess, Chih-Mei, & McDevitt (1987) surveyed and interviewed Chinese, Chinese-Americans and Caucasian-American mothers about what they believed accounted for their children's math performance. They found that Chinese and Chinese-American mothers attributed their children's high and low performances to effort more than Caucasian mothers did. Interestingly, mean scores of attribution beliefs for Chinese-American mothers in the sample fell between the scores of Caucasian mothers and Chinese mothers suggesting that the attitudes of Chinese-American mothers in the sample reflect influences from both cultures.

While these studies in East Asian nations (e.g., Japan, China and Taiwan) have certainly advanced understanding of achievement motivation from different cultural contexts, East Asian values and beliefs cannot fully represent *all* Asian cultures. Even research that has focused on the academic behaviors of specifically Southeast Asians (Bempechat, Graham, & Jimenez, 1999; Liu & Li, 1998) tend to not recognize the different cultures within this geographic group. For instance, Bempechat et al. (1999) examined the achievement attributions of Caucasian, Latino, African American and Southeast Asian students in the U.S. They found ethnic differences between how students were socialized about education at home and their beliefs about doing well in math. In particular, they found that both Southeast Asian and Latino students more often tied their low achievement to lack of effort than

their Caucasian and African American peers. Unfortunately, this study did not make clear which ethnicities comprise the Southeast Asian group and only referred to this sample as “Indochinese”. This oversight lends itself to gross over-generalizations of the relationship between certain Asian values and school achievement (Bempechat & Drago-Severson, 1999). In contrast to these over-generalizations, this study examines the influence of Cambodian cultural values on academic achievement.

### *Cambodian Cultural Values*

A number of researchers view traditional Cambodian culture as an important aspect for understanding Cambodian American school achievement (Garcia Coll, Akiba, Palacios, Bailey, Silver, DiMartino & Chin, 2002; Caniff, 2000, 2001; Smith-Hefner, 1990, 1999; Mortland, 1994; Rumbaut & Ima, 1988). In this study, culture refers to acquired values and beliefs that guide people’s perspectives (Phelan, Davidson & Yu, 1998). Karmic law, the belief in the predetermination of one’s fate, is a central value of Cambodian culture as derived from Theravada Buddhist beliefs (Smith-Hefner, 1999; Chandler, 1996; Mortland, 1994). The Theravada variant of Buddhism is practiced by most Cambodians and serves as explanation for their individual happiness and suffering (Smith-Hefner, 1999; Chandler, 1996; Mortland, 1994). Cambodians generally view themselves as Buddhists, both culturally and spiritually. Smith-

Hefner (1994) notes that for Cambodians, “to be Khmer<sup>1</sup> is to be Buddhist” (p. 26).

Caniff (2000) studied the cultural beliefs of Cambodian families in the Northeast, specifically the group’s conceptions of success. Her ethnography found that success in these families was less determined by educational attainment and financial success and measured mostly by maintenance of the family bond. A follow-up study (Caniff, 2001) confirmed beliefs derived from a Theravada Buddhist epistemology centered upon karmic, uncontrollable forces. She found Cambodians tend to believe that success and failure in life is often guided by these forces. For example, financial success or disruptions within families are often attributed to karma. Nancy Smith-Hefner also observed the cultural beliefs of Cambodian-Americans and has conducted a number of studies that examine Cambodian families’ adjustment to U.S. society (Smith-Hefner, 1990, 1993, 1994, 1999). Her work consistently points out Cambodian-American families’ modest academic ambitions for their children. For example, her data reveal that Cambodian-American parents tend to not push their children toward specific educational paths because of their traditional beliefs about children’s inherent abilities and innate capacities for learning. Although Cambodian-American parents take pride in their children’s academic success, they may rationalize underachievement as inevitable based on one’s natural gifts and limitations. Smith-Hefner (1999) notes while

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<sup>1</sup> *Khmer* historically refers to the ethnic people that live within the political boundaries of modern-day Cambodia. Researchers have used *Khmer* and *Cambodian* interchangeably because Cambodia’s population is overwhelmingly *Khmer*. *Cambodian* and *Cambodian-American* will be used throughout this paper.

Cambodian-American families genuinely want their children to succeed in school, parents' beliefs seem to support otherwise. Specifically, parents in her studies discuss the notion of taking the "*middle road*" in life where families should not hold unrealistic expectations of their children.

As one parent explained, taking the middle road means not aiming too high or too low but maintaining the present balance, doing the average amount. Taking the middle road means not demanding too much of the child, not expecting more than the child can deliver- and, as always, protecting one's own face in the process (Smith Hefner, 1999, p.148).

Smith-Hefner's (1990, 1993, 1994, 1999) research also suggest that these cultural beliefs appear to have religious roots in Theravada Buddhism, as described by Caniff (2000, 2001). For example, cross-cultural data compared Cambodian cultural values with observed values from two other Southeast Asian refugee groups: Vietnamese and Chinese-Vietnamese. Findings indicate that Cambodian families hold more individualistic attitudes toward their children's school performance while Vietnamese and Chinese-Vietnamese families viewed a child's academic performance as a collective triumph or an entire family's shortcoming. Parental views of education were captured with 125 in-depth interviews with members of the Cambodian community in the Boston area over a two-year period (Smith-Hefner, 1993). Results found that Cambodian parents were mostly non-interventionist in their children's schooling despite expressed concerns for their children to do well. Generally, these parents were largely uninvolved in the schools, preferring to turn their child over to the teacher.



Through mixed methods, Garcia Coll et al. (2002) investigated levels of parent involvement and underlying values regarding involvement for second and fifth grade students from Cambodian, Portuguese and Dominican immigrant families. Quantitative analyses found Cambodian families scored the lowest on every measure. In addition, qualitative interviews supported previous findings that Cambodian-American parents rely exclusively on the school to educate their children and reveal inconsistencies between Cambodian-American families and other Asian groups' higher levels of parent involvement (Garcia Coll, et al., 2002; Chao, 2000; Braxton, 1999). This absence of involvement can be attributed to parents' low English proficiency and lack of familiarity with U.S. school practices as well as to cultural beliefs about respecting teachers' authority over children's educational lives (Garcia Coll, et al., 2002; Smith-Hefner, 1990, 1993, 1994, 1999). Some studies (Garcia Coll, et al., 2002; Smith-Hefner, 1990, 1993, 1994, 1999) seem to suggest Cambodian-American parents feel they have done their job when their children reach the schoolhouse door, based on traditional norms. However, parental beliefs about the limited role of the family in the educational lives of their children are not unique to Cambodian-American culture. Deference to school authorities is a common cultural value among many Asian cultures (Caplan, Whitmore & Choy, 1989).

Other work argues that the educational accomplishments of Vietnamese and Laotian refugee groups can be attributed to traditional cultural values that center upon family, respect and obligation (Caplan et al., 1989). Their study

praised the educational accomplishments of these “boat people” by discussing the scholastic achievements of their children. They examined Vietnamese and Laotian families’ causal attributions for academic success and found these groups believed luck, fate, and intelligence were less influential for academic achievement than controllable variables related to effort and perseverance. In addition, these groups reported low English skills was overwhelmingly their primary impediment to school progress. While English proficiency may not necessarily be a controllable variable, it was perceived as a temporary obstacle to eventually overcome. This research suggests these groups were largely successful because they viewed academic achievement as a controllable outcome, a belief supported by cultural values emphasizing hard work. However, Laotians-Americans in their sample, like Cambodian-Americans, subscribe to Theravada Buddhist traditions. So while Laotian-Americans’ academic success is said to be rooted in their cultural beliefs (Caplan et al., 1989), values from similar Buddhist traditions are often cited as conflicting with Cambodian-American students’ successful schooling (Caniff, 2000, 2001; Smith-Hefner, 1990, 1999; Mortland, 1994; Rumbaut & Ima, 1988).

Other research argues that traditional Cambodian cultural values provide students with a *positive* coping mechanism for the various challenges they face in school (Sin, 1991). Sin’s dissertation study qualitatively focused upon the psychological, linguistic and socio-cultural influences on academic achievement for 15 Cambodian refugee students living in the U.S.. She used in-depth ethnographic interviews to build individual life histories of Cambodian

adolescents from different socio-economic backgrounds. What other scholars consider a *passive* disposition is actually a Cambodian belief in *patience*, an important Buddhist virtue (Sin, 1991). Her findings suggest that maintaining a patient attitude facilitates the personal drive necessary for these Cambodians to overcome the many social, financial and educational challenges they encounter. Moreover, she disagrees with the characterization of Cambodian students' "cultural pattern of uncomplaining passive acceptance" (Sin, 1991, p. 240). Her study viewed Cambodian-American students' patient demeanor as a temporary coping style, and over time students learned English, became more outspoken, and pushed forward toward educational goals. In contrast to much of Caniff and Smith-Hefner's work on Cambodian-American families, Sin's analyses cite traditional culture as supportive of Cambodian families' academic persistence. She viewed the patient, non-competitive attitudes of her informants as a characteristic that promote individual resilience. Hence, patience as a cultural norm help families cope with poverty, language barriers, and other adjustment issues.

A recurring theme of this literature is the inconsistency in the research about culture's influence on academic achievement. Scholars contend that Cambodian culture tends to emphasize the belief in karma and satisfaction with the status quo, values aligned with Theravada Buddhist traditions, may negatively affect academic striving and parent involvement (Garcia-Coll et al., 2002; Caniff, 2000, 2001; Smith-Hefner, 1990, 1991; Mortland, 1994; Rumbaut & Ima, 1988). These studies argue Cambodian-American parents'

views toward schooling seem to emphasize the natural limitations of their children's abilities thus discourage the attitude necessary for academic success (Garcia Coll et al., 2002; Caniff, 2000, 2001; Smith-Hefner, 1990, 1999; Mortland, 1994; Rumbaut & Ima, 1988). In addition, Cambodian-American families' low parent involvement may be shaped by cultural influences that stress a non-participatory role for parents in their children's education. How might adherence to traditional Cambodian values conflict with achievement in U.S. schooling? Research suggests a misalignment of a minority group's beliefs and values with that of the dominant culture and its schools will likely jeopardize academic success (Ogbu & Simmons, 1998; Ogbu, 1990; Gibson, 1988). However, similar cultural traditions identified by scholars as possibly incompatible with Cambodian-American students' school success are credited to Laotian-American children's academic achievement (Caplan et al., 1989). How could these values and beliefs derived from Theravada Buddhist traditions contribute to Laotian-Americans' successful schooling while negatively influencing Cambodian-American students' academic behavior? Other research suggests that Cambodian-American students' underachievement is not due to a mismatch between traditional values and U.S. school culture but rather related to families' adjustment problems and psychological trauma (Sin, 1991). In contrast to other work, traditional Cambodian values may actually support achievement by helping students cope with poverty and language barriers (Sin, 1991). As evidenced by the literature, research on the influence of Cambodian values on academic achievement has not been consistently

supported on either side of this issue. Alternatively, the next section discusses non-cultural explanations such as low SES, residential segregation, and school quality for Cambodian-American academic performance.

### *Immigration, Poverty and Language Challenges*

While students' cultural values may have some influence on their approach to schooling, structural variables relating to SES are significant determinants of academic achievement (White, 1982; Coleman et al., 1966). A dis-aggregation of the most recent census data reveal that Cambodian-Americans tend to fare worse than most other ethnic groups. For example, 29.3 percent of Cambodian Americans live below the federal poverty level with individuals earning a per capita income of 10,215 dollars (Niedzwiecki & Duong, 2004)<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, a study of Cambodians living in the San Diego area found that less than half of households were headed by two parents (Rumbaut & Ima, 1988).

Other quantitative research (Kim, 2002) has used regression models to understand whether cultural beliefs or structural variables such as residence pattern and SES better accounted for Cambodian-American students' lower levels of reading and mathematics achievement relative to their Vietnamese-American peers. In contrast to Cambodian Theravada Buddhist traditions, the Vietnamese historically have been more influenced by Chinese traditions that recognize a Confucian form of Buddhism stressing individual efforts in the name of collectivity (Kim, 2002; Smith-Hefner, 1990). Therefore, cultural

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<sup>2</sup> Niedzwiecki & Duong (2004) also reported that the poverty rate for Asian Americans is 12.6% and 12.4% for the total population.

variables included items relating to a sense of individuality and beliefs about family responsibility. Regression analyses found structural variables relating to educational level, socio-economic status (SES), school type (urban or suburban), and immigration patterns better predicted Cambodian and Vietnamese students' reading and mathematics achievement than did cultural values. Findings suggest that cultural variables are less influential than are structural factors such as family's SES, parents' education level, and residence in urban communities. However, the distinction between cultural and structural factors is unclear. For example, one of the study's structural variables "received help from relatives" appears associated with cultural values. In addition, cultural items concerning students' value of good grades may be linked to the type of schools they attend. This quantitative research seems to not effectively address the correlational nature of its cultural and structural constructs.

What is clear is that Cambodian-American students often attend schools in high-poverty, urban communities (Ong & Umemoto, 2000; Weinberg, 1997). Poch (2003) reported Southeast Asians' residing in urban neighborhoods compared to those living in suburban communities experienced significantly less educational attainment. The study also found that educational levels for first and second generation Southeast Asians living in ethnically concentrated communities tend to be lower than those living in mixed ethnic communities. In Long Beach, California, the largest Cambodian community in the U.S., over 50 percent of Cambodian-Americans live below the federal poverty line (Ong &

Umamoto, 2000). *New Phnom Penh*, as this area is dubbed, is situated in an impoverished, minority-majority<sup>3</sup> section of Los Angeles County (Teranishi, 2004). Unfortunately, schools in such areas tend to be less funded, have older facilities and less qualified teachers than schools in suburban communities (Kozol, 1991).

Within immigrant families, poverty and urban residency tends to be associated with higher levels of cultural conflicts (Portes & Zhou, 1993). Sin (1991) suggests that Cambodian-American academic achievement can be largely explained by how families adjust to U.S. society. Balance between home values and mainstream U.S. culture contributes to students' optimal levels of academic achievement (Sin, 1991). School achievement is negatively affected by cultural clashes between parents' traditional Cambodian values and their children's rapid adoption of American norms (Um, 1999; Portes & Zhou, 1993; Sin, 1991). Such clashes are likely when immigrant children learn the new culture and language more quickly than their parents often leading to a role reversal in Cambodian families' parent-child relationships as children may assume a cultural broker position and use this leverage to reject parental authority (Um, 1999; Portes & Zhou, 1993). Refugees generally have significantly more problems with such acculturation issues than other immigrants (Berry, Kim, Minde, & Mok, 1987). High achieving Cambodian-American students are able to transition from homes where some aspects of American norms and values are selectively embraced, including academic

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<sup>3</sup> This phrase refers to a situation where the minority population of an area exceeds the non-Hispanic White population.

achievement, while core traditional values and beliefs are retained (Sin, 1991). For such families, open communication with their parents helped children more smoothly transition between home and school, thus alleviating potential for cultural conflicts.

### *Cambodian Students' Multiple Worlds*

This study contributes to the literature by accounting for *successful* Cambodian-American students' beliefs, attitudes and values toward schooling. Here, success is operationalized as these students' ability to negotiate the school system and matriculate at a selective university. Phelan et al.'s (1998) Multiple World Model helps to illuminate how Cambodian-American college students successfully move from one context to another and what strategies these young people use to achieve this. This model is particularly valuable because it argues that academic success depends upon students' successful transition through their different everyday contexts: their worlds of family, school and peers. This framework uses the term *world* as a metaphor for the cultural knowledge and norms within particular spheres of students' lives. Hence, the model regards each world as maintaining values, norms and expectations which are "familiar to insiders" (Phelan, et al., 1998, p. 7). Ostensibly, all students at some point face incongruent values between their home, school, and peer cultures. However, minority students and immigrant and second-generation children often face especially difficult transitions between these settings. According to the model, students whose worlds are congruent tend to be emotionally and psychologically healthier and more likely



to be successful academically than those whose worlds are incongruent. Incongruent characteristics of students' different worlds manifest as *borders*. Some students are more successful in *border crossing* than others. Phelan et al. (1998) describe these borders as socio-cultural, socioeconomic, psychosocial, linguistic, gender, and structural. These borders often overlap with one another but maintain theoretically distinct characteristics.

In addition, the Multiple Worlds Model includes a typology which discusses six distinct patterns of students' movements through their multiple contexts. The first pattern (Type I), *congruent world and smooth transitions*, describes those students whose values are similar across their home, school and peer cultures. Here, students receive similar messages about success in their multiple worlds by their teachers, families and peer groups. This pattern is typically exemplified by white American students from middle to upper class backgrounds attending suburban schools. Minority students may also fit this description but many belong to the second pattern, *different worlds and border crossing managed*. Here, students adopt strategies to help cope with and negotiate the values of their different worlds. The students in this study mostly fall into this group (Type II). In contrast, students who find difficulty in managing conflicting values of their different worlds belong to a *different worlds and border crossing difficult* category (Type III). They often succeed in one context but struggle in others. For example, these students may be on the margin academically but doing well at home, or vice-versa. The next pattern, *different worlds and border crossing resisted* (Type IV), refer to students who

find the values of their many worlds so conflicting that they do not see logic in trying to overcome their borders. They perceive success as unlikely because the challenges they face appear so insurmountable. On the other hand, *congruent worlds and border crossings resisted* (Type V) describe students who appear to have the potential to do well, as evidenced by high standardized test scores and adult observation, but are simply unmotivated to achieve. These students are often viewed as not lacking skills but only the will to succeed in school. The last pattern, *different worlds and smooth transitions*, describe students whose worlds have distinctly different values but feel supported and appreciated as they transition between these worlds. Although his or her worlds are different, Type VI students perceive family, teachers, and friends as genuinely supportive of these differences.

### The Current Study

The present study explores how Cambodian-American college students navigate between their multiple worlds by investigating the factors that support Cambodian-American students' successful transition between their family, school and peer cultures. This research is particularly interested in how Cambodian-American students interpret values from their multiple worlds in relation to their paths into the university. This study represents a shift from much of the literature by focusing on the values and perceptions of academically successful Cambodian-American students in an effort to understand why their border crossings were successful. Specifically, this research asks:

1. How do Cambodian-American college students perceive traditional cultural values in relation to their past and present school experiences?
2. How do Cambodian-American college students interpret and negotiate the perceived values and expectations of their family, peer and school worlds to academically achieve?

### Methods

A qualitative approach most appropriately addresses the goals of this study because this research focuses on participants' subjective experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Therefore, this design uses semi-structured individual interviews (Marshall & Rossman, 1995; Patton, 1990) for in-depth understanding of participants' values and attitudes in different settings. These methods lend themselves to rich descriptions of how students managed their various borders and illuminate students' perceptions of values within their different worlds.

#### *Researchers' Perspective*

A fundamental issue throughout this work has been potential biases involved in the interpretation of data. The first author is a 1.5-generation Cambodian-American and member of the group under study. Hence, he acknowledged this research must take into account his position as a cultural insider (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995) and recognize some measure of subjectivity is inherently involved in the research process (Peshkin, 1988). In this study however, social subjectivity has contributed to this process; for

instance, the study's foci were shaped by his group membership. Although many of his cultural and educational experiences mirror those of participants in this study, he is as a scholar committed to presenting this research responsibly. Therefore, steps were taken to incorporate strategies to protect against biases that may affect this work (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). For example, the study's ethnically diverse research team helped to balance the interpretations of this research. This team included a male Cambodian-American, an African-American female and a Latina. Moreover, regular reflection by the lead author about his insider status helped guard against potential biases that may compromise research rigor. Member-checking procedures were also carried out to develop data trustworthiness. Interview transcripts were fed back to participants for accuracy of their meaning.

### *Setting*

All of the participants in this study were drawn from one campus in the University of California (UC) system. This setting as a research site is significant for two primary reasons. First, California is home to 41 percent of the total Cambodian-American population (Barnes & Bennett, 2002). Second, this campus belongs to the state's most selective higher education system. In California, high school seniors in the top 4 percent of their graduating class are eligible for admission to a UC campus (UCOP, 2006). Moreover, the average freshman grade point average (GPA) for freshman entering this campus in the fall of 2004 was 3.88 (UCOP, 2006). Cambodian-American students experience

under-representation in higher education statewide, but are particularly absent in this system (Um, 2003).

### *Participants*

A sample of ten Cambodian-American college students was purposefully selected from a Cambodian student organization on campus. Sampling from this organization better ensures participants identify with Cambodian culture. To recruit and learn further about potential participants, the first author attended the organization's regular on-campus meetings for approximately three months. Attendance at these meetings and other off campus social gatherings helped familiarize club members with his position as a researcher. Also during this period, the general goals of the study were explained to the group and participants were recruited for individual interviews. All participants were informed of the objectives of this work from initial contact to the study's conclusion.

This research sought a gender-balanced sample and a disproportionate number of students from urban communities with a Cambodian-American population. Eight students reported growing up in urban Cambodian-American communities. Two participants described their homes as suburban neighborhoods without other Cambodian-American families living nearby. In all, six females and four male undergraduate students between the ages of 19-23 participated in this study. Five seniors, three juniors and two sophomores comprised this sample. Only one participant in the study had a parent with a four-year college degree. This participant was the only student whose annual

family income exceeded 50,000 dollars. In fact, six of the ten participants reported a family income of less than 10,000 dollars a year. Participant questions were answered and consent forms signed prior to participation in this research (Seidman, 1991). Pseudonyms are used throughout this report to preserve the anonymities of participants.

### *Interviews*

Interview Guide. The interview protocol consisted of 32 open-ended questions relating to students' educational backgrounds, parental expectations, and adherence to cultural values. The interview protocol began with demographic questions about students' basic information including home community, year in school, course of study, parents' educational level and ethnic identity. Other questions center upon students' experiences, values and beliefs regarding their home, academic and peer contexts. The protocol began with brief paragraphs describing two different ways of living; the interviewer then asked participants to discuss their views on these differing orientations. This method was adapted from an earlier measure of value orientations (Braithwaite & Scott, 1991) and included to assist participants in thinking about their own values and beliefs. Since this protocol was designed to understand students' interpretations of their multiple worlds, the researcher avoided applying preconceived constructs onto students' words. For example, rather than impose upon students the researchers' meaning of traditional cultural values, questions asked "What are some traditional values to you?" and "In what ways do you think you are traditional?"

Interview Procedures. Each participant was at least somewhat familiar with the interviewer. In the interest of participants' convenience, all interviews were conducted on campus. Interviews were digitally audio-recorded and transcribed by the research team and a trained assistant. Interviews lasted approximately 1.5 hours per session. All participants volunteered their time without compensation.

### *Data Analysis*

Data from recorded interviews and corresponding field notes were transcribed, coded, and arranged to build themes to address the inquiry. Transcripts of these interviews were content analyzed (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to reveal similarities and variations across participants' experiences. At least two researchers were involved in each step of analysis. Data analysis followed an inductive method consistent with grounded theory (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss, 1987). This procedure is designed to better understand and value the perspectives of those under study. Hence, this phase of analysis was void of assumptions regarding students' specific values, expectations and beliefs.

Early analysis of transcripts provided room for ideas to emerge from the data. A start list (Miles & Huberman, 1994) included participants' perceptions of values and their adaptive strategies for navigating their multiple worlds to achieve school success. Because this research is interested in learning the particular perceived values, beliefs and expectations of students' different contexts, an open coding of individual interview transcripts was carried out to

allow for themes to emerge from the data (Emerson et al., 1995). Throughout our analysis, it was “not the words themselves but their meaning that matters” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.56). More specific domains were developed through frequently occurring codes. Next, domains were assembled to create core categories for each interview. Core categories were then examined for recurring themes emerged from the data. Subsequent cross-case analyses identified larger themes for discussion.

### Findings

Cross-case analyses suggest that most of the students in this study fit into a *different worlds and border crossing managed* pattern (Type II). Nine of the ten students perceived incongruence between their school, family and peer values in high school as well as in college. Two main themes emerged from an examination of these data. First, these nine participants reported family obligation sometimes as a source of difficulty in their navigation through their incongruent worlds but at other times a source of support that provides them the motivation to achieve academically. Another critical theme that emerged involved all ten participants’ perceptions of highly supportive school contexts as contributing to their academic success. Nine of the ten participants discussed the importance of supportive systems in their academic worlds for their border crossings.

#### *Family Obligation*



A recurring theme observed across all participants was an emphasis on achieving on behalf of the family. All ten students elaborated extensively on family obligation as shaping their academic experiences, albeit in different ways. Some ways participants described their family obligation were maintenance of family face, contributing to the family business and serving as a role-model to younger members of their family. For example, Veasna, a senior, describes his motivation to succeed as related to his sense of family obligation. He feels additional pressures in school because his older brother was unable to complete college. In addition, Veasna regularly drives home two hours away from campus on the weekend to work at the family liquor store, sometimes even against his parents' wishes. While his weekends could be useful for studying, he explained that he became consumed with guilt when he did not go home because his parents would work in his place.

*(Do your parents expect you to come home?)* Yeah, now they do. But it's me. I tell them every time don't worry about it. It's not a big deal. *(Is that the truth?)* Yeah because I don't care you know. I go work and I'm like "ehh" ask me three years ago and ill be like yeah I ... hate work like that...

In addition, his disinterest in his academic major also made it difficult to do well. He was majoring in business because he believed it would present the best economic returns and a way for him to financially contribute to his family. However, he was nearly placed on academic probation until his grades improved after switching to a major he enjoyed. Like Veasna, Navy also discusses family obligation as shaping her school experiences. However, she interprets her family obligation to succeed as related to the fact that she is the

first person to leave home for college. Navy feels added pressure to do well because her older brother dropped out of his vocational school and her older cousin did not finish college. Moreover, Navy believes she must succeed in order to provide opportunities for younger members of her family. She explains,

If I come back, and don't graduate and come back home, I would feel like I'm a bad role model for my younger cousins. Because I'm the first one to go away to college. And it's like they invested time and money into me or whatever. So, if I don't do well, the other parents are going to see, my aunts and uncles, and they're like, oh look what Navy did, she didn't succeed, so I'm not going to let you go, you know. So, I don't, I'm not going to fail.

Rotha is another student determined to graduate from college so that she can help her parents financially but is frustrated by other more routine family obligations. She initially wanted to attend college on the east coast but was worried about how her parents would manage day to day tasks without her. The campus she attends is three hours away from her parents' home, a manageable distance for Rotha to negotiate. Moreover, as the most academically successful of her siblings, Rotha's college attendance made her parents proud. However, as a result of her decision to stay relatively close to home, her parents continued to rely on her for many other responsibilities,

It's like your family obligation...like your on your own, but still...like, Caucasian students don't have to do this for their parents, you know. They're not going to do that (drive to Long Beach). I have to like...they can book their own flight, but I have to book my parent's flight...if they want to come here for my graduation, if they want to stay the night in a hotel...they don't know how to book hotels, you know. I have to do it. I have to find a good rate for them, you know. Stuff like that. It's the same with all my friends.

Rotha's obligation to her family leads to mixed reactions for her. While she feels a sense of obligation to her parents to help them function in their daily lives, she feels in some ways these obligations and pressures have supported her academic striving as well as allowed her to leave home,

*(Are there other things that helped you at home?)* Um... at home? Just like, I want to make my parents proud. I don't want them to be disappointed. You don't want to look them to look bad...*(Why was it important to make them proud?)* I thought...cause you don't want to see your parents upset.....And I think I always wanted to try hard because I got to get into college, a good college. Then they could be happy and.....I love them, but they were so hard to live with sometimes, and then I figure, if college isn't my way out, then what am I going to do? It made them happy, 'my daughter's going to college'. And it made me happy because I got to move away from home. We had different...at the end it was something that we both wanted. I wanted to go away from home. They wanted me to go to school. I think things worked out for the better.

Similarly, Daniel, an honors student in high school with a number of advanced placement credits, was still unsure about attending a university after graduation because of the financial burdens it would place on his family. He considered attending the local community college to moderate these costs. Although he believes his mother did not fully understand the differences in school quality, she insisted he attend the more prestigious school because it would look better for the family. However, he also shared a nuanced view of how family obligation has affected his educational experiences,

Yeah. Even like, I even approached the fact of going to a city college and like you know in two years transfer and save money. But she just opposed to it completely you know? Because she doesn't wanna say, "oh my son goes to city college." So its just like, I ended up coming here to a UC, I don't regret it at all but back then I wanted to guide my own life in a sense.

For Cambodian-American students in this study, family obligation creates both barriers and motivation to do well academically, as demonstrated through these participants' voices. Doing well for the sake of family helped drive these students to excel in high school and encourages them to persist at the university. However, some students report that family obligation may at times create pressures which create barriers to school success. All students discussed remaining close to family as a traditional Cambodian value. Students believe that their adherence to this value as well as perception of this value is something expected by their parents. This finding suggests that most of their choices related to school including achievement in high school, choice of college, choice of academic major, and persistence in higher education are associated with their sense of family obligation.

### *Schools as Bridges*

A second robust finding suggests that for these successful Cambodian-American students, highly supportive school environments are critical for their navigation through their incongruent worlds. For example, nine participants discuss their parents' lack of education and unfamiliarity with the school system as academic barriers. Navy describes her home context,

But I had to pressure myself to do good in school. Because my parents weren't telling me to do that and when I couldn't work on something, I didn't have help from home. I had to like find other help, like maybe friends or teachers. Or if I had questions, I couldn't ask them, they don't know anything about American history. They didn't have great math knowledge.

Heng, a junior, also discuss his parents' lack of formal education in his home world as a barrier to academic success,

Yeah, well just like school in Cambodia but she can't just go out here, she had to go to citizenship school. She learned stuff about America. But umm, but yeah, while she was in Cambodia, she didn't really... like to this day she really barely be able to read and write in Khmer. So like I would just sit down and listen to her read it. It's kinda weird, it's like listen[ing], it's like watching a segment of a first grader learn how to read for the first time. It's how she reads the letter, and it's just weird for me because...yeah, it's like, I was thinking the older you get, it's much easier to read. Everything would just flow, but it..it wasn't like that that's why. Like umm....coming to the whole education is important.

For Leakena, her older siblings' struggles in college shaped her parents' academic expectations of her which were different from her school and peer worlds. Here, she describes these expectations,

To graduate. (*To graduate?*) From high school. That's all they expected because of my siblings before. Like they would graduate high school and attempt to go to college and they didn't go through. And that's when what they expected of me changed.

Nine of the ten students reported their parents as having less than a high school education, hence unable to discuss specific facets of their academic lives with their children. However, these Cambodian-American students' participation in special, college-bound tracks in high school and belonging to college-minded peer groups from their classes helped them manage these border crossings in high school. All students in this study described their high school experiences as engaging and supportive of their college goals. In college, supportive university and peers systems assisted them in persisting toward graduation.

Six students, Rotha, Daniel, Navy, Veasna, Heng and Leakena exemplify these themes. For example, Rotha and Daniel grew up in a Cambodian

community in Long Beach and attended the same neighborhood high school. Unlike most Cambodian-American students at their school, they participated in a highly selective program for gifted and talented students. While their high school is located in a poor urban community, their program attracted middle and upper income students from many neighboring areas. Daniel described his program as very competitive and “though it was located right in the ghetto they had the best academic program”. While Daniel lived in the school’s community, most of his friends commuted from other communities to participate in the program. Their program represented a stark contrast from much of the rest of their school. Rotha discusses her school and the program she and Daniel belonged to,

Everyone was Cambodian...everywhere you turned. But then the program I was in...the funny thing is...basically. Probably 6.9 of the 7% of the Caucasians were in the program I was in. all the white kids were in the (Gifted Program). Basically, (Gifted Program) had all the Caucasians. It was a really good...it was a college bound program...like, we started honors in sophomore year and then AP classes in junior and senior year.

In high school, Daniel received his academic support from caring teachers at his school and friends from his program. To help him do well in college, he takes advantage of a number of resources available through the university such as campus tutoring and the office of Educational Opportunity Programs (EOP), an outreach service designed to assist first generation college students with career and academic counseling. He elaborates on this resource,

*(What’s EOP?)* There certain specifications I guess first kid to go to college or you’re a minority and things like that. *(So not everybody can go to EOP?)* I don’t think so cause I remember in the college application you either checked it or not for EOP

student you know but I mean I didn't really like know my way around campus when I first came here I didn't know so it took time to email him he was a personal counselor that you can see.

Now a junior in college, Daniel also discusses his participation in the Cambodian student organization on campus as a major source of support. Daniel believes that maintaining "bonds" with other Cambodian-American students help him navigate pressures between his home and school worlds. Likewise, Rotha reported that she is doing well academically, earning A's and B's and plans to attend graduate school in a year. She does not use many formal campus support services but explains that she is able to earn good grades by taking courses she enjoys and finds that passionate, engaging professors help her do well in her classes. Both Rotha and Daniel have developed close friendships with many members of the Cambodian student organization on campus. A year ahead of Daniel in school, Rotha helped found the Cambodian Student organization three years ago. Both describe the friendships developed through the club as important resources that encourage them to succeed because of members' similar values.

Navy, a sophomore, also belongs to this Cambodian student organization. Like Daniel and Rotha, Navy was part of an exclusive academic college preparatory program when she was in high school. Her "academy" targeted underprivileged students and provided them with individual mentors from the medical field,

Yeah, I think the purpose of it was to bring kids from backgrounds, disadvantaged background to go to university and become a doctor and eventually go back to Fresno and help the community, underprivileged community. That's what it was. The

purpose of it. But, you know, in the doctor's academy, they also concentrate on academics you know. We went to a lot of field trips, a lot of guest speakers, I volunteer at the hospital. I did a summer internship, we did a research project.

She believes the highly supportive contexts of her school and peer worlds were especially critical because of the lack of academic support in her home world.

She describes her home expectations in the following excerpt,

I didn't have people helping me when I was home...This is what I noticed about American people. They have their parents tell them, you better do good, better get an A, you get a B, I'm not going to, you can't go out or whatever. And so, my parents didn't say you have to get an A or B. As long, to them, as long as they don't get a call home, don't see an F or a D on the report card, then I'm okay.

Navy shared that upon arriving at the university "academically I was behind a lot of people" because her parents were unable to support her schooling the same way other students' parents were. As a result, her early academic college experiences were challenging. She struggled in classes but found help in the campus's tutoring services. Moreover, a close friend from her high school who attends the same university helps her manage the various borders she faces in college. Navy shares that she and her friend, who is also Cambodian-American, experienced similar academic struggles early on but through tutoring and peer support they receive from members of the Cambodian student organization, they now do well. Similarly, Leakena described her participation in the Cambodian student organization as a pivotal experience which helped her navigate her incongruent worlds at the university. She did not do well in her classes in her first year and discussed adjustment issues



such as feeling “secluded” from her college peers as significant barriers to doing well academically,

Cause everything was so different. Like freshman, I tried extremely hard to fit in with the white groups. (*In the dorms?*) Yeah usually I felt awkward. I didn’t want to drink and they drank.

Leakena also found tutoring services and EOP as positive support systems at the university. However, she cites her involvement in the Cambodian student organization as an important turning point for her social and academic adjustment to the university,

Um at the beginning I had a hard time opening up to people so um whom to trust and how to trust for me to learn things um I guess I had trust issues especially because I had a best friend and she went to (another campus) and we kind of like split and it feels so heartless such a close friend um yeah after I got over that joining the Cambodian club (*who did you know in there?*) I started being more comfortable and at one point I well I was on um Academic Probation which was really difficult and then after club and I don’t really know that really happened by helping me but and I...(How did they help you academically?) I was able to confine in me and they told me stories, sometimes they had issues like I did. It was just helpful to know that someone there who had that problem and they talked to me and talked me through it and help me (*Did you guys study together?*) uh huh.

Another student, Heng, was also highly engaged in his high school community as evidenced by his enrollment in honors classes, participation in a youth leadership group and his internship at a computer lab. These activities earned him recognition for “being smart” among his various peer groups. Since Heng’s parents were unable to help him with his college search, he took advantage of resources offered at school. He also recalls the positive impact of teachers who left their “door open” regularly so that he and his friends would have a place to study as well as an adult to confide in,

Yeah. And then there was other teachers that left their door open and allowed you to come in and talk to them during lunch time, even if it wasn't about school, even if it was about things going on in your life, they would take out the time and help you.

Heng recalls a particularly influential English teacher who asked him about questions about his background which sparked his own interest in Cambodian culture. This seemed to also please his mother because Heng checked out books on Cambodia from the library. He explains,

My English teacher, she was really into different cultures. She would ask me about Cambodian culture, she actually helped me to go deeper into understanding who I am as a Cambodian person. I would say there were about 5 or 6 teachers that were there.

Similarly, Veasna found his high school context as positive and filled with opportunities he perceived helped him "grow as a person". He explains,

And then high school, I think it was a pivotal point in my life cause it changed everything, my attitude changed, everything. You know how like high school is pretty bad for some people? Well I love my high school, it was great. Like, I was stepped up and had a leading role. I had a voice in High School.

Unlike other students in this study, Veasna did not belong to a special program at a large school but attended an alternative public school in Los Angeles. He describes his high school,

It was a small high school, k-12, I was there since third grade so it's not your traditional high school, everyone knows your name. Everybody. My class was like....I wanna say 42 students...my graduating class. So it's a small group of kids.

In addition, he speaks about his high school experiences very positively because he perceived the school as a diverse setting where students and adults respected one another. He cites his high school friends as the most significant factor for him doing well and he remains close to them today. He earned very

high grades in high school but struggled initially in college, as discussed earlier. However, Veasna is now doing well in his classes after changing majors and perceives the various support services at the university as important resources for his academic improvement. He explains,

I've used all the resources that I think. Majority. I've used EOP, counselors you know...the health center counselors, social workers, everything. (*And they've been helpful?*) Yeah definitely. They showed me the white, black and grey side of the class.

As suggested by these experiences, positive school contexts play pivotal roles for Cambodian-American students' successful navigation through their multiple worlds to academically achieve. Unfortunately, participants also share that even in schools with large Cambodian-American student populations, other Cambodian-American students tend to not be enrolled in their honors, advanced placement and gifted classes. Eight of these ten students reported that they grew up in Cambodian-American communities but described other Cambodian-American students as mostly absent in their college preparatory courses. The data supports that all ten students recognized that the positive support and resources they benefited from were often unavailable to many other students in the same schools.

### Discussion

The goal of this study is to address how Cambodian-American college students perceive their school experiences in relation to traditional cultural values and how they negotiate their school, family and peer worlds to academically achieve. Findings suggest that these ten students perceive family obligation as an important cultural value shaping their educational

experiences. All participants cite family obligation as a motivation for doing well in school. However, six of these participants at times found family obligation to be a barrier to school success. For example, Rotha discussed that driving to Long Beach to assist her parents in carrying out routine tasks such as making hotel reservations and completing government forms often becomes burdensome and interruptive of her college studies. Children from immigrant families often act as mediators between parents and unfamiliar daily tasks as they adjust to American society (Zhou & Bankston, 1998).

Another aim of this research is to understand how these students succeed academically while negotiating home and school values. Nine of these students describe their home and school worlds as incongruent and discuss how their supportive school contexts in high school and now in college have shaped their academic experiences. In striving for college, nine of ten of these successful students perceive their parent's lack of formal education as significant barriers in their home worlds. They feel their parents are unable to help with academic work and college preparation. They do however believe their parents want them to do well in school. On the other hand, participants perceive their school environments as engaging and significant for their college goals. They suggest supportive academic experiences during high school were critical for their positive school outcomes because it helped them cope with parents' low expectations, lack of education and unfamiliarity with U.S. schooling. Furthermore, participants describe that caring teachers, "open doors," high academic expectations, supportive mentors, and positive peer

groups ease their transition through their differing worlds during high school. As evidenced by these findings, Cambodian-American students who have successfully negotiated the K-12 system perceive positive school contexts as significant factors in their daily school experiences.

Likewise in college, students' use of the university's academic support systems represents adaptive strategies that help them navigate through their multiple worlds. For example, a number of participants (seven) discussed how EOP has helped them improve in their courses and continues to support them academically as well as assist them in learning how to navigate university resources. Nine of the ten students elaborated on another campus resource they found to be supportive in their college experience. They cite the Cambodian student organization as an important social and academic network. For some, meeting other Cambodian-American students was especially critical for doing well because they were able to create peer groups with students of similar experiences and values.

How might schools create these supportive contexts for all students, in particular, students whose worlds are incongruent? School level administrators should take into account the daily experiences of their students in planning and developing programs so that schools can better engage ethnic minority communities. This focus on success demonstrates that schools can serve as powerful bridges in helping Cambodian-American students' navigate their incongruent worlds.

An additional finding has been the significant role of the Cambodian student organization for Cambodian-American college students' academic success. Students report their participation in the Cambodian student organization has been valuable for their social and academic adjustment to the university environment. This finding supports that campus ethnic organizations are important academic resources for minority students. Student's involvement in these organizations helps to create peer groups where students perceive peers of similar backgrounds and experiences genuinely care and support them.

The Students' Multiple Worlds Model has been useful for understanding how successful Cambodian-American students perceive high school and college. More specifically, this model has provided a framework from which to understand the interaction of Cambodian-American students' home and school experiences. Through this lens, this research demonstrates that even these successful students regularly face a number of borders in moving through the different contexts of their daily lives. For example, these participants at times viewed their sense of family obligation as an incentive to do well while at other times perceived it as a barrier to success. Their highly engaging school contexts however operate as a critical resource for their successful border crossings. Unfortunately, rich academic contexts are unavailable to many of their peers as suggested by these participants themselves. As a consequence, many Cambodian-American students perceive themselves as unsupported at home and school, thus find difficulty transitioning between their incongruent

worlds. Additionally, the model minority stereotype helps make Cambodian-American students' struggles invisible in both K-12 and in higher education. However, through studying the academic experiences of those Cambodian-American students who not only persist in high school, but enjoy high levels of academic success to enter the university, this research suggests to policy makers, administrators and school systems that quality school environments, similar to those described here, are critical for the academic success of immigrant minority populations.

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