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Abstract

Qualitative methods such as McAdam's Life Story Interview offer a rich means of exploring how culture affects an individual's development. Such a method has seldom been used with Asian Americans. In the present study, 20 Cambodian American teenagers aged 15-18 (half female, half male) narrated the high, low, and turning points of their lives. Those narratives were transcribed and coded with respect to the predominant emotional valence and context of those key events. Half of high point narratives were painful events that the narrator had recast in a positive light, a hallmark of resilience and of a tendency to redeem positive outcomes from negative events. The most frequent context for high points was the family, indicative of the importance of family to these participants. Similarly, low points were dominated by narration of family conflict. Turning points most often involved peers, reflecting the prominence of peers in adolescent identity negotiation, as well as achievement. Throughout all these key events, narrators gave us a view of the complex, multifaceted way the historical events of their parents' background permeated their lives.

Keywords: Cambodian American youth, narrative, culture, immigration, family and peer influence



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Introduction

Asian Americans represent the fastest growing population in the United States, and among these, Southeast Asian Americans (SEAA), which include Cambodian Americans, comprise the fourth largest Asian American subgroup (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The cultural and immigration backgrounds of Asian Americans are diverse, but in the case of Cambodian Americans, as well as other SEAA's, the words *refugees*, *war*, and *trauma* are synonymous with these groups. Refugees from Cambodia were subjected to war and genocide in that country beginning in 1970 (Chan, 2004), followed by migration, resettlement, and cultural adjustment (Uy, 2015). Past work has documented a legacy of silence in Cambodian refugees about the violence they experienced during the Khmer Rouge and in the aftermath of war and migration, with that silence supposedly indicative of having overcome past trauma and leaving the past behind (Kidron, 2010). However, the effects of trauma are long-lasting (Marshall, Schell, Elliott, Berthold & Chun, 2005) and can impact subsequent generations of Cambodian Americans.

The overarching goal of the present study was to determine whether qualitative analysis of the narratives of Cambodian Americans adolescents would illuminate the challenges and struggles—but also the resilience—of this generation whose parents survived war and immigration trauma. The aim of the current project is to add to the limited research to date on this understudied and underserved population. Also, as existing research, which is largely quantitative, tends to focus on this population's trauma and mental health issues, resilience-based frameworks are needed that utilize qualitative approaches to describe Cambodian Americans' experiences in more depth using their own words. To this end, we adopted a grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) approach to discerning the context of key events in the lives of Cambodian American youth.

Past Research on SEAA/Cambodian American Youth

In recent years, research on SEAA youth, including Cambodian American youth, has increased, yet it remains limited in comparison to studies of other Asian American populations. Furthermore, most of the research on such youth has been quantitative in nature. Quantitative findings have highlighted significant issues faced by SEAA (Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, Vietnamese) youth. Specifically, such youth face challenges in navigating between their culture of origin and their host culture (Dinh, Sarason, & Sarason, 1994; Dinh & Nguyen, 2006; Dinh, Weinstein, Tein, & Roosa, 2013). Issues of acculturation have a potential negative impact on the quality of parent-child relationships; that is, the greater the conflict in cultural values between parents and children, the poorer the quality of parent-child relationships in terms of support and warmth (Dinh & Nguyen, 2006). In turn, such intergenerational conflict has been demonstrated to affect school performance and mental health outcomes (Dinh, Weinstein, Kim, & Ho, 2008; Dinh et al., 2013). Another salient set of issues is the intergenerational effects of war and migration trauma, including death of close family members, poor refugee living conditions, poverty, and family separations (Chan, 2004; Dinh, 2009). Not surprisingly, research demonstrates that these factors also have a major negative impact on adjustment outcomes and well-being (Hsu, Davies, & Hansen, 2004; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Zhou, 2001; Zhou & Bankston, 1998).

In addition to their family background of war, genocide, and migration trauma, aspects of their current life also have an impact on the well-being of Cambodian American youth. Specifically, they may face discrimination within academic settings from teachers and peers

(Rutledge, 1992). Furthermore, Cambodian Americans suffer from a high rate of poverty, which is estimated to be 43.72% (AAPI Quick Stats, 2016; Southeast Asian Resource Action Center, 2011), and in turn puts them at additional risk for suffering from the too-frequent components of economic disadvantage (e.g., living with violence, unmet basic needs).

Another important domain of functioning for adolescents is that of academic performance. As noted, Cambodian American youth are at elevated risk for academic problems, including high rates of dropout according to the U.S. Department of Education 2017 (Bigelow, Basford, & Smidt, 2008). This may result from family conflict, war and migration trauma, and discrimination, but it could in part also be due to the low level of educational attainment among adults. Specifically, 38.5% of Cambodian American individuals over the age of 25 do not have a high school diploma or equivalent (U.S. Department of Education 2010). In turn, high rates of dropout and poor academic performance are associated with other negative life outcomes, including mental health problems and economic disadvantages (Andrews & Wilding, 2004; Chang & Le, 2005; Ngo & Lee, 2007).

In addition to the above research findings, quantitative research also depicts the complexity of forces that affect the life experiences of Cambodian American youths. For instance, structural equation modeling methodologies reveal mediating effects of intergenerational conflict and school attachment in the relationships between cultural adaptation and mental health outcomes such as depression, substance abuse, and gang involvement (Dinh et al., 2013). Overall, findings from quantitative research have been helpful in pointing us to possible themes, such as familial relationships, peer relationships, legacy of trauma, and academic challenges, that call for complementary, open-ended qualitative investigation, which can yield much more in depth information about Cambodian American youth. As the use of qualitative methods to study Asian American populations is limited, especially with respect to SEAA youth, including Cambodian American adolescents, qualitative research is much needed to examine the complexities of their lives. For example, a qualitative study with Vietnamese American adolescents (Vo-Jutabha, Dinh, McHale, & Valsner, 2009) highlighted the importance of identity development as it is affected by living either within or outside Vietnamese ethnic enclaves. Specifically, that study revealed a surprisingly *elevated* insistence of parents of youth living outside an enclave that those adolescents be strongly connected to their language and culture of origin compared to parents of youth living in an enclave. With quantitative methods, we might not have been able to capture the within-enclave, outside-enclave difference in ethnic identity development. Hence, qualitative research with Cambodian American adolescents would provide a more nuanced understanding of their life experiences.

Resilience and Adaptive Development Among SEAA/Cambodian American Youth

Despite facing considerable difficulties and risks, as the past review of research on SEAA, in particular Cambodian American youth, has documented, some individuals may experience relatively positive outcomes compared to their peers. This is the definition of the interactive construct termed *resilience* (Rutter, 2013). Definitions of *resilience* differ slightly. Masten and Wright (2009) argue that “resilience is a broad concept that generally refers to positive adaptation in any kind of dynamic system that comes under challenge or threat” and that resilience is not a static trait of an individual. Expanding the definition to recognize that sometimes resilience is not so much achieving positive outcomes as it is avoiding unfortunate ones, Wyman, Sandler, Wolchik, & Nelson (2000, p. 133) define resilience “as a child’s achievement of positive

developmental outcomes and avoidance of maladaptive outcomes, under significantly adverse conditions.” A slightly different definition, even more circumspect regarding outcomes, is provided by Schoon and Bartley (2008, p. 24): “resilience refers to the process of avoiding adverse outcomes or *doing better than expected* (emphasis by authors) when confronted with major assaults on the developmental process.” Still others (e.g., Chong et al., 2009) argue that resilience should be considered from an individual’s point of view and may include adaptive strategies for coping with difficult lives that others would see as negative (e.g., use of violence) but that that individual values. We define resilience mindful of these variations as an ability to see the relatively positive impact of what others would judge negative events that have happened to them, with a clear understanding that some individuals experience greater degrees of trauma than others and, related only in part to this fact, some individuals display considerably greater resilience than others.

A number of researchers (e.g., Exenberger & Juen, 2015; Rutter, 2013) strongly emphasize the critical need to investigate child and adolescent well-being and resilience in the particular cultural context of those individuals. In fact, resilience has been previously investigated to some extent with this population; bicultural SEAA youth were more resilient in response to having witnessed domestic violence than were their peers who were either highly westernized or highly affiliated with their SEAA culture (Sirikantraporn, 2013). Also, SEAA male youth have been found to use both violence and community-based organizations in an effort to be resilient (in the sense of adaptive) in the climate of alienation and discrimination that they face (Chong et al., 2009). In the present study, we were interested in indications of resilience that were suggested by participants themselves. In addition, we regarded the use of qualitative methods with Cambodian American adolescents, a subgroup of SEAA youth, as an opportunity to offset a number of quantitative articles addressing the many difficulties (i.e., deficit-focused approach) this population faces by providing evidence of adaptive youth development alongside of struggle (Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006). Moreover, resilience may be particularly salient in the lives of Cambodian Americans and other SEAA youth, given the historical resilience of their parents and family members who survived war atrocities, genocide, and migration trauma.

The Present Study

As mentioned earlier, Cambodian American youths have complicated contextual and historical family backgrounds that include war, genocide, immigration, and acculturative challenges beyond the contrast of their Asian and American influences. In this study, we focus on narratives of Cambodian American adolescents to better understand how aspects of their contextual and family backgrounds affect their sense of the most important events in their lives so far. Using an adaptation of McAdams’ (1988, 2001, 2006) life story interview to tailor it to teenagers, we explored Cambodian American youth’s narratives and used an inductive coding approach, which is consistent with the framework of grounded theory and allows for themes to emerge from their life stories. The primary research questions of the present study include: (a) Emotional quality: Given our interest in possible resiliency displayed by Cambodian American youth, we examined the particular emotional evaluation they presented narrating the events of their lives, especially as that compared to the type of emotions we asked them to talk about. That is, although we specifically prompted for emotionally positive events (high points) and emotionally negative events (low points), what in fact are the emotions expressed by Cambodian American youth? Do

they report emotions or events exactly consistent with what was requested? For example, do such youth report positive emotions/events in response to a request to describe the most positive event (i.e., high point) in their lives? When asked to discuss turning points, what is the dominant emotional quality of these events referenced by Cambodian American youths? (b) What contexts are prominent for each key event? (c) What references do Cambodian American youths make regarding the historical and cultural context of their parents? (d) Do Cambodian American youths spontaneously discuss specific traumatic experiences, and, if so, how are they described? (e) How do Cambodian American youths describe their relationships with their parents?

Method

Participants

Twenty students in grades 9 through 12, aged 15-18 years ($M = 16.5$), who were enrolled in a public high school in a mid-sized city in the Northeastern United States participated in the present project. The city in which the study was conducted has the second-largest Cambodian American population in the United States (Grigg-Saito et al., 2010). Of the participants, half were male and half female because past research on language measures has found gender differences, albeit with small effect sizes (Hyde & Linn, 1988). All were Cambodian Americans; 17 were exclusively Cambodian, while three were primarily Cambodian (first-mentioned in self-identification of ethnicity). Specifically, one participant identified as Cambodian and Laotian, one as Cambodian, Chinese, and Indian, and one as Cambodian, Chinese, and Vietnamese. Fifteen participants were born in the mainland U.S., while five were born in Cambodia. In response to a request by researchers, high school personnel selected approximately half from high-achieving (defined in terms of Grade Point Average, GPA equal to or greater than 3.0) and half from low-achieving students (GPA equal to or less than 2.0). Past research (Dinh et al., 2008; McCabe & Dinh, 2016) found that achievement, including academic accomplishments, did correlate with other measures of interest such as agency (individual assertiveness), so we attended to narratives of achievement in this study among high-achieving and low-achieving students.

Procedure

Posters and flyers were displayed in various places throughout the high school to recruit participants to a study that was interested in hearing about their life stories. In addition, a head teacher announced the study in homerooms to help recruit participants. Each participant was paid \$25 for participating in an interview that lasted approximately two hours. Interviews were in English, as participants were more proficient in English than in their language-of-origin; interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription company.

Narrative analysis and philosophical approach. We subscribe to a qualified version of the Social Constructionist school of thought, which highlights the impact of communal exchanges in shaping what we hear from others (Gergen, 1985; Nightingale & Cromby, 1999). In particular, we believe that participants in an interview should speak for themselves and that they have much valuable information to impart to us. We seek to minimize any assumptions we might have, to ask open-ended questions, to listen carefully to what participants say, and then to summarize what

participants say. Following Labov (1972), we also assumed that like all personal narratives studied by the first author for over forty years (Peterson & McCabe, 1983; McCabe & Bliss, 2003; McCabe & Peterson, 1991) participants' narratives would contain information involving the setting of experiences and component actions of those experiences, along with evaluation that tells the meaning those experiences had for the participants themselves. Because of the history of genocide, war, and relocation of Cambodians, we did also assume that we would encounter some allusion to this background.

The life-story interview. We used the first three prompts from McAdams' (1993) life-story interview, a structured procedure in which an interviewer (a graduate student trained by the authors) asks a series of questions designed to probe for the most important episodes in a person's life story. A general prompt was offered to participants and they were encouraged to narrate without interruption. After the participants paused, indicating conclusion of what they offered without prompting, specific prompting questions regarding exactly who or what was involved, and when and where an experience occurred were reviewed by the interviewer with the participant to "let [interviewer] make sure [she] got this right." Germane to the present project, the interviewer inquired about (a) the most positive experience the participant had had so far (High Point), (b) the most negative or upsetting experience (Low Point), and (c) the experience that marked the biggest change in the participant's life so far (Turning Point). The exact prompts are as follows, closely following McAdams' (2012) interview:

A key scene would be an event or a specific incident that took place at a particular time and place. Consider a key scene to be a moment in your life story that stands out for particular reasons perhaps because it was especially good or bad, particularly vivid, important, or memorable. For each of the key events we will consider, I would ask you to describe in detail what happened, when and where it happened, who was involved and what you were thinking and feeling in the event. In addition, I ask that you tell me why you think this particular scene is important or significant in your life, what does the scene say about you as a person, and please be specific. Now, I'm going to ask you about a high point in your life. Please describe a scene, episode or a moment in your life that stands out as an *especially positive experience. This might be the high point in your life or else an especially happy, joyous, exciting or wonderful moment in the story.* It should be something that stands out in your memory as one of the best, most wonderful scenes or moments in your life story, and it can be from any time in your life. Please describe this high-point scene in detail about what happened.

The second scene is the opposite of the first. Thinking back over your life, please identify a scene that stands out as the low point in your life story. Try to remember *a specific experience in which you felt really negative emotions such as extreme sadness, anger, loneliness, fear, despair, or guilt.* Even though this event is unpleasant, I would appreciate you providing as much detail as you can about it and what happened.

In looking back over your life, it may be possible to identify certain key moments that stand out *as turning points, episodes that marked an important change in you*—in you or your life story. It could be something from any area of your life, your relationships with other people, your work or school, your outside interests and so forth. Please identify a particular

episode in your life story that you now see as a turning point in what your life is like or what you are like as a person.

Coding emotional quality. Following McCabe, Capron, & Peterson (1991), the narratives were coded for emotional quality, or whether the experience seemed (a) purely positive, (b) bittersweet (i.e., a mix of positive and negative feelings represented), (c) purely negative, or (d) neutral in nature. Because no memory was scored as neutral, we dropped this category. Our coding manual did not change after coding three interviews for emotional quality.

Coding context. Results were coded for context into categories induced from the data: (a) family/home, (b) peers, (c) achievement, (d) trauma outside the home. Coding for context did not involve mutually exclusive categories; for example, some students mentioned events that involved both family and peers. Our coding manual for context did not change after coding eight interviews for context.

The first author coded all of the data. As is recommended for coding of linguistic data (e.g., Mackey & Gass, 2005), fifteen percent (9) of the 60 key event narratives considered in the present study were randomly selected using a random numbers table and independently coded by the second author for context and emotional quality. We estimated reliability (using the number of agreements divided by total decisions multiplied by 100%) to be 100% for context and 77.8% for emotional quality. Disagreements were discussed to consensus. We also examined the transcripts for mentions of Cambodian culture, experiences of trauma, and miscommunication/conflict with parents, and noted the subject matter of all narratives, but there was no subdivision of these items.

Data saturation is a key concern for qualitative researchers. Guest, Bunce, & Johnson (2006, p. 65) operationalize data saturation as “the point in data collection and analysis when new information produces little or no change to the codebook.” We interviewed 20 Cambodian Americans youths and collected three narratives each. The interview procedure we used was a structured one, a point that also facilitates data saturation with a modest number of participants (Guest et al., 2006). As noted above, data saturation for emotional quality (emotional tone) and context (e.g., family, peers) together was reached after coding eight interviews, meaning that no additional categories of emotional quality or context emerged from the narratives after those eight were coded.

Results

Our primary goal was to determine whether qualitative analysis of narratives of Cambodian American youth would reveal challenges and resilience in their lives. We address our five guiding research questions in order.

Emotional Quality of Memories in High Points, Low Points, and Turning Points

The predominant emotional quality for all three combined memories (high point, low point, turning point) was negative, followed by positive, then bittersweet (see Table 1). However, when examining each of the three memories separately the dominant emotional quality of low points was purely negative, and of turning points was positive. Surprisingly, the most common emotional

quality of high points was bittersweet. Ten participants told memories with as much negative as positive emotion.

Table 1. Emotional Quality of Key Scenes in the Narratives of Cambodian American Adolescents.

	Positive	Bittersweet	Negative
High Points	9	10	1
Low Points	0	2	18
Turning points	12	3	5
Totals	21	15	24

Bittersweet memories. The emotional quality of bittersweet was most commonly reported for memories that reflected high points. For example, one low-achieving female told the following:

I would say the best, highest scene in my life that stands out the most was, I was in the seventh grade. My brothers they were separated from me for 12 years ... because they were taken away [to] foster care. In seventh grade, my mom surprised me and she brought me to Texas ... I finally got to spend a full Christmas with my brothers, which was a really great memory.

Children were taken from family because their grandmother locked them outside in the cold and a neighbor reported them. She reported that her father “had to pay \$10,000 per kid” to get them out of foster care and that he only had money for her. A high-achieving male provided another bittersweet example:

You know at the time that I moved to the United States from Cambodia, that’s the high point. That time I really upset because I like come here to live with my dad and my stepmom and then my real mom [died] over in Cambodia, so at the time it’s really sad for me ... At the time “I said, okay, goodbye Grandma.” It’s a sad moment.

When asked again for a *positive* experience, he reiterates, “The time that I came here ... it’s good for me.”

Positive memories. The emotional quality of positive was most commonly reported for memories associated with turning points, followed by high points. One purely positive memory by a high-achieving male was, “One of my definite high points especially coming to school at M. High was during junior year when I won the National Honors Society elections. I was elected as President.” In all, there were nine participants who in fact mentioned purely positive events as high points, distributed fairly evenly over the contexts of family, peers, and achievements.

Negative memories. The emotional quality of negative was most commonly reported for low points, as one would expect. For example, one low-achieving male said:

My low point was when I got taken away from my family when I was four. I was at the DSS and I got really sad because I wasn’t going to be with my biological family for a long

time. And I don't really see them as much. So I guess I didn't have my childhood memories with them ... I guess sometimes at DSS I'll see my family like a couple times a year, like three or four times. And when I see them I get really happy, but then when I had to leave, I get really sad afterwards.

Another low-achieving male said:

I'd been going through a lot of bad luck during that time. Like I failed my road test and I was extremely disappointed ... and my brother told me to practice more and like, so I did and I went to Market Basket with my dad and I was backing up and I bumped into a car and it was like a bad scratch and like dent and stuff ... my dad is like barely at home now because he's with someone else ... so like nobody's really home besides me and [my brother] and then I found out that I might not be able to have a home because my brother wants to sell the house.

Contexts of Memories in High Points, Low Points, and Turning Points

As is shown in Table 2, the most common context of key scenes was the family, followed closely by peers and achievement (both in and out of school). Some participants also made mentions of trauma experienced outside of the family context. (See also Appendix for more examples of quotes of Cambodian American adolescents across key themes.)

Table 2. Themes/Contexts of High Points, Low Points, and Turning Points in the Narratives of Cambodian American Adolescents.

	Family	Peers	Achievement	Trauma Outside Family
High Points	9	6	6	
Low Points	11	6	5	2
Turning Points	4	9	9	
Total	24	21	20	2

Note: Themes are not mutually exclusive, so that same memory may be counted as involving, for example, both family and peers.

Context of high points. Overall, the most common context of high points was the family followed by peers, and achievements. High points with family included the family's only vacation, helping a grandparent learn English, an outing to a zoo with a brother who later died, seeing father for the first time in two years, getting adopted, and mother taking narrator to kindergarten. High points with peers involved meeting a girlfriend/boyfriend (2 participants mentioned this), getting a gift from a friend, attending a Cambodian religious camp, a 17th birthday party, and a pep rally. High points in achievement contexts involved becoming Military Ball Queen for ROTC, serving as the emcee for youth-led city council candidates' forum, becoming a better student after moving to America from Cambodia, and the first day of kindergarten. Consider the following narration of the contrast between parents and peers for one high-achieving Cambodian American youth: "During middle school we have these cliques ... and then like I happened to be the outcast because I was that Cambodian Asian boy. My parents were like Cambodian ... they were strict traditional ... but in middle school I was ... bullied a lot" but then he meets an African American boy "from a very well-known, I'd say wealthy

family and ... they're descendants of the Civil Rights Movement." That boy becomes his friend and informs him of that movement. "And that's what changed me from being someone who's shy and meek into someone who can actually speak to other people ... from a follower to a leader's point of view."

Not surprisingly, achievement contexts were common for high-achieving students, but low-achieving students also attended to such contexts. For example, consider this quote from a low-achieving female:

I would just say like sophomore year, like I realized, oh my God, how bad I did in freshman year ... seeing like my first report card for sophomore year, it made me look so bad because I do so good now ... And I guess seeing your failure makes you like want to improve.

Context of low points. The most common context of low points was also the family. Low points included the following: arguments between parents and the narrator (3 participants), arguments between family members (2 participants), a brother who robbed the family home for drug money, death of a grandmother, loss of a valuable present from a father followed by father refusing to speak to narrator for a month, and drinking and smoking weed because mother was "really, really sick in a hospital."

Low points involving peers included being looked down on by Cambodian American peers who had been in the U.S. longer than the narrator, as noted by one high-achieving female:

I was in the ESL (English as a Second Language) class and the other Cambodians, they came here before me and they know a little more English than me so they just looked down on me, saying that I don't dress proper like them, I don't have good thing like them, and I don't speak English, I don't make friend, they don't like me.

Low points also included a time when a boyfriend's parents yelled at a female narrator. Another low point was being ostracized by middle school girlfriends. There were three mentions of how peers compromised the narrator's grades and one mention of how getting bad grades broke mother's heart. One narrator mentioned getting bad grades junior year. Two narrators mentioned trauma outside of the family—one hearing gunshots outside the family's home, the other getting raped as a child in Cambodia.

Context of turning points. In contrast to the predominance of family as a context for high and low points, turning points in the lives of our participants most often involved peers and/or achievement, as is shown in Table 2. Meeting a boyfriend, making new friends, losing friends (3 participants), feeling disliked by peers, having "strict traditional" Cambodian parents' values being supplemented by the influence of a new friend, or deciding not to be part of a gang were the turning points of eight of the twenty participants. One narrator told of how her boyfriend helped her improve her grades, a blend of peer and achievement contexts. Achievements were the other focus; six narrators dealt with improvements in grades in addition to one each with getting a job and joining a swim team. Three turning points did pertain solely to family: death of a grandfather, adoption, and abandonment by a father and brother.

References to Historical and Cultural Contexts

As predicted by past research on SEAA individuals, mentions of historical and cultural contexts were common. In all, 14 Cambodian American students made some explicit mention of their cultural and family background even though none were explicitly asked to do so in any way. Asking participants to narrate their life-stories as opposed to simply responding to questionnaires allowed us to glimpse the complicated ways in which participants' family histories and cultural backgrounds affected them. One female participant recalled a reunion with her brothers from whom she was separated for twelve years (noted above); the brothers had been taken away to foster care on account of a grandmother deliberately locking the children outside of their house; "She (grandmother) came from Khmer Rouge ... her way of discipline is very, very violent." Five of the twenty students specifically mentioned the historical trauma of Cambodia affecting their current lives, as indicated in the following examples: "Cambodia was like a war-torn country and we were in constant war.", "In Cambodia, [Dad] used to be the interrogator." and "Mom lost her parents because of the Khmer Rouge."

Additional aspects of Cambodian culture were specifically mentioned by six students as demonstrated by the following examples: "Cambodian New Year celebration.", "I guess I really disagreed [with adoptive Cambodian parents] about [trying to talk narrator into an] arranged marriage [with a girl still in Cambodia].", "I got lost in a Cambodian temple and ... at that time the people just kidnapped kids and sell it to the house where they do sexual.", and "Cambodian, like we was teach (sic) not to talk back, but I always do have that feeling of I need to talk back to my parents ... [in America] we are being taught to like freedom of speech." There were also one mention of parents consulting with a Cambodian Buddhist priest and one mention of Cambodian cultural dancing. The way that Cambodian culture influences such arguments was poignantly and insightfully articulated by one of our high-achieving male participants:

My parents were alive from the Khmer Rouge era and I was born in America and there is always that generation gap between parents ... I know who I am now and my mom wants me to be the son she wants me to be ... We were driving in the car and my mom loves to yell really, really loud ... and in East Asian and Southeast Asian cultures they promote like a self-effacing type of personality like you should ... give yourself up for the better of the collective, the whole ... but I cussed her out.

Narrator argued extensively with his mother and gets out of the car in the snow. His mother follows. He worries about her asthma and diabetes and says, "You shouldn't be out in the cold." And she was like, "I'd rather die than lose my son." They make up. He reflects:

That's one thing that I can't forgive myself of because during the Khmer Rouge things were different ... A child isn't supposed to talk back. And the Khmer Rouge happened because children went against their parents for the wrong reasons. Children killed their parents during the Khmer Rouge and I felt it was just history repeating itself.

References to Trauma

Most (14) Cambodian American students mentioned trauma at some point during their interviews, with some noting multiple traumatic events. Such trauma included separation from parents (6),

parental divorce (6), the death of a close relative (4), rape as a child (2), motorcycle accidents (2), parental mental illness, parental illness (2), experience of prejudice, robbery of home, neighborhood gunshots, and stress about coming out. One low-achieving male (who told the only high point memory that was completely negative) said, “I don’t remember having a good point ... my real mom she left us so then we had our stepmother take care of us and our religious.” Narrator reveals that two siblings died of medical causes and that the monk his family consulted gave them a statue and told parents that they had to “take care of it like it was your son and daughter” and that they had to stay together in order to protect their surviving children. Nevertheless, his mother went “whacko on us” and returned to Cambodia. He and his two surviving siblings thought “the consequences of (mother’s) leaving is that me, my brother and sister they are going to like pass away like literally flash death ... I don’t know how it is going to happen ... I just had lows but I never had highs.”

Relationship with Parents

Sixteen participants mentioned difficulty communicating with their parents without being specifically prompted to do so, and nine students mentioned their traditional, strict Asian/Cambodian parents. Examples of difficulties with parents reported by the participants included: “(an incidence of punishment for breaking curfew) made me more scared of my parents than I was before”; “My mother said, ‘my daughter is a disgrace’”; and “I’m not close to my mom at all.” As one high-achieving male student put it,

You know how, um, like traditional, old Cambodian parents, they’re like, “Oh, you have to hit your kid for them to be disciplined?” And like I was one of those kids that always got hit for like a hanger or like a belt. And like now like people like joke about it. Like “Oh, you better watch out or I’m gonna—I’m gonna go get I’m gonna get a hanger or I’m gonna get, um, a belt.” And then like, to me, I think that’s like one of the worst memories ever ‘cause I hated it like if he [Dad] would do that, and it was just like I—like every time he goes to the closet, I would run and go upstairs or go somewhere else and I’d just be scared.

One low-achieving female noted her turning point as follows: “When my grandpa passed away like my whole family changed. Like we barely gathered together on the holidays and I felt less close to my family ... Because my family has separated.”

Not all mentions of parents were of difficulties. One high-achieving male noted the support his father provided:

I was riding the motorcycle (in Cambodia) with my dad to go to school and I was in the back and my brother was in the front ... there was another motorcycle that come out and like hit ... I just fall on the curb and like hurting ... Dad, he always like with me and like holding my hand and telling me that it’s going to be okay.

A low-achieving male mentioned that his high point was:

I guess when I was four years old, I got adopted. I got adopted cause the state took me away from my family ... From there the family I'm living with taught me many good lessons in life. So they brought in a good path, so I won't get in trouble.

Discussion

In our analysis of the high points, low points, and turning points of Cambodian American youth's life stories, we found evidence of resilience in the face of struggle, even trauma. Our participants made frequent and nuanced reference to their family legacy of Cambodia, as well as their acculturative experiences of living within and navigating between two cultural contexts, meaning that of their family's Cambodian background and the broader U.S. society. Our assumption that the stories of these immigrant youth would be compelling was borne out. There are many implications of what we found for future research (e.g., investigating parental strategies for fostering resilience and intergenerational post-traumatic growth in their children) and intervention programs (e.g., promoting positive relationships between newly arrived and more established peers at school).

Emotional Quality of Memories in High Points, Low Points, and Turning Points

High points. Perhaps the most important finding from this study is that half of the Cambodian American adolescents found a way of reframing what many might see as negative, even traumatic, life events as high points. That is, the high point of the participants' lives—the most positive, “happy, joyous, exciting, or wonderful moment” of their lives—was one that often emerged from a painful set of circumstances. A couple of times the interviewer even went so far as to repeat that she was asking for a *positive* experience, which in both cases resulted in an affirmation that the event was ultimately perceived as positive by the participant. The ability to reframe potentially overwhelming events, such as being taken from a family of origin and adopted, being separated from parents and siblings and put into foster care, or losing a mother and saying goodbye to a beloved grandmother in Cambodia, as high points might well be considered a hallmark of resilience, the ability to adaptively respond to risk (Rutter, 1987; 2013). Cambodian parents—survivors of trauma themselves—may well instill strategies of resilience in their children, although we arrive at this conclusion based on our inspection of our data rather than based on prior research. In the future, we would like to further pursue this line of inquiry to examine the process of intergenerational transfer of resilience in Cambodian American as well as other SEAA families.

Although measuring the frequency of resilience is difficult (Infurna & Luthar, 2016) and there are notable differences in the magnitude of trauma that individual participants report having experienced (e.g., a rape versus a failed driving test), this finding that half of our participants portrayed vignettes of resilience as the high points of their lives is worth noting. These are also excellent examples of what McAdams (1988, 2001 & 2006) calls a human tendency to seek redemption, to transform bad scenes into good outcomes. Not all our participants displayed resilience, although this may be due to the extent and severity of their trauma history. Nonetheless, this finding of resilience among many of our participants indicates the importance for future research to also focus on the determinants and contexts of positive youth development (Benson et al., 2006); that is, we do not in this article simply document difficulties faced by Cambodian American youths, but also the strengths they display in living and interpreting their lives.

Low points. G. Stanley Hall (1904)—widely known as the father of adolescent psychology—argued that the period of twelve to twenty-five years was one of “Storm and stress.” Low points of our participants were all at least somewhat negative events. Mention is made of the participants’ cultural background at points, but for the most part the most upsetting experiences they had were typical of teenagers in Western societies (Dasen, 2000): fights with parents, peers, and others, family arguments, divorces, and deaths, and academic struggles. Dasen (2000) makes the additional point that adolescence need not be a period of storm and stress in non-Westernized, non-urbanized, non-industrialized societies where there is little social change. However, our participants spoke prominently and frequently about the clash of cultures they experienced since arriving in the Westernized, urban, industrial city in which they now live, a factor that probably influenced the low points they experienced to some extent.

Turning points. Turning points were most commonly purely positive reports, suggestive of the notion that for many Cambodian American teenagers, life seems to be getting better. In fact, more positive turning points were reported than in response to purely positive high points. Past explorations of turning point narratives involve women who have been sexually abused using such narratives as a way of reframing their abusive past in the process of constructing more positive, hopeful life stories in the future (Harvey, Mishler, Koenen, & Harney, 2000). Similarly, at-risk youth have also been observed to use turning point narratives to envision moving on from trauma to hope (Matsuba, Elder, Petrucci, & Reimer, 2010). Our Cambodian American adolescents are also moving from struggle, even trauma, to project brighter futures for themselves.

Contexts of Memories in High Points, Low Points, and Turning Points

High points. The fact that the most common context of high points was family life speaks to the primary importance of this aspect of their lives. That such key scenes were often bittersweet ones is to some extent to be expected given the history of war, relocation, and trauma faced by Cambodian American families that was reviewed at the outset of this paper.

Low points. As with high points, the most common context of low points was the family. Over half of the low points concerned family in some way, most of which involved family conflict although this was not in any way prompted. The arguments between parents and children of many ethnicities in adolescence have been well-documented in meta-analyses (Laursen, Coy, & Collins, 1998; Oswald, Weymouth, Buehler, Zhou, & Henson, 2016). In particular, arguments and conflicts between CA youth and their parents have also been documented by quantitative research (Dinh et al., 2013).

Family is of course important to all adolescents, but the legacy of separation from and loss of family members that has previously been documented for Cambodian refugees (Chan, 2004; Dinh, 2009) means that surviving and present family members are even more key to these individuals than their peers whose parents have not endured migration and war trauma because immigrant families have relatively limited social networks in their new country. Thus, arguments among immigrant family members are particularly threatening, and many of our participants noted this in their life stories. Previously, quantitative research showed that parent-child conflict predicts problems in school achievement (Dinh et al., 2013). However, at least one narrator revealed his perception that his problems in school achievement may have led to parent-child conflict, suggesting bi-directional effects.

Although research tends to focus on cultural conflicts between immigrant parents and children, little has been noted regarding cultural conflicts with peers. The mention by one high-achieving female of difficulties with her Cambodian American peers who had been in the U.S. longer (see results) begs the question of how common such divisiveness among ethnically similar peers is and curiosity about whether, if common, interventions could be implemented to prevent such rejections by cultivating peer mentors to newly arrived immigrant students.

Turning points. Unlike the prominence of family in high point and low point narratives, achievement and peers were the two most common contexts for turning point experiences. The relative de-emphasis of family in turning point narratives contrasts with past research that found most personal turning point stories told by a sample of 17-year-old Caucasian Canadian teenagers focused on family relationships (Mackey, Arnold, & Pratt, 2001; Pratt, Norris, Lawford, & Arnold, 2010). However, in that study, teenagers were specifically asked to describe family decision-making episodes, whereas our prompt was neutral with respect to family, peer, or achievement contexts.

Achievement was the context for a few of the higher-achieving students' turning points. But surprisingly, several low-achieving students were also focused on their (relatively unsuccessful) schoolwork. That peers were the context of many turning points is not surprising in that during adolescence peers begin dating and that considerable change has been documented for peer groups this age (Cairns, Xie & Leung, 1998). Adolescents spend approximately equal amounts of time with parents and peers (Montemayor, 1982), which contrasts with the primacy of the family in the lives of younger individuals.

References to Historical and Cultural Contexts

Most (14) students mentioned their cultural background at some point during the interview, and, as noted above, those influences were varied. Two individuals mentioned positive cultural events: Cambodian dancing and celebration of Cambodian New Year. However, most pertained to their strict Cambodian/Asian parents, while five mentioned historical trauma in Cambodia. The city in which this project was conducted has the second largest Cambodian American population in the U.S. (Grigg-Saito, et al., 2010) and celebrates Cambodian culture (e.g., Cambodian New Year, the Khmer Water Festival, museum exhibits, statues, and a well-known Khmer dance troupe), as is noted by the Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association of Lowell. These students' attention to cultural events may speak to the salience of living within a Cambodian American ethnic enclave as was observed in a previous study of Vietnamese American adolescents (Vo-Jutabha et al., 2009). Also salient in the lives of Cambodian American youth are the challenges of living within two cultural contexts and the shared historical trauma of Cambodian refugees. These themes continue to play a prominent role in their lives and suggest the need to further examine the intergenerational dynamics of cultural congruence/incongruence between parents and children and the intergenerational transfer of trauma and resilience beyond the first generation of refugees.

References to Trauma

Extending from the above discussion on historical trauma faced by Cambodian refugees and their families, the interviews were also laced with past and current struggles and trauma faced by

students in our study. The findings from our qualitative analysis specify and complement the findings of increased trauma in this population documented previously, both from intergenerational effects and current life circumstances (Chan, 2004; Dinh, 2009). That traumas were so severe and varied—rape as a child, being taken by authorities from family of origin—reveal the lasting legacy of war and relocation as well as acculturative challenges in the lives of Cambodian American youths. That seventy-five percent of the sample were born in the U.S. especially speaks to the fact that trauma gets passed from the previous generation (who were directly affected) to their offspring in complex and myriad ways. Despite the legacy of silence previously noted for the Cambodian diaspora (Kidron, 2010), memories of violence and even that violent past itself do in fact permeate the life stories even of offspring who did not actually experience it.

References to Parents

Most students mentioned at some point severe difficulties communicating and frequent conflicts with their parents. This finding of compromised communication between immigrant parents and their teenagers complements prior work done on SEAA families (Dinh & Nguyen, 2006; Dinh et al., 2013), as well as general findings of the frequency of conflict between adolescents and their parents from many backgrounds (Laursen et al., 1998; Oswald et al., 2016). The conflict noted by our participants should be understood as only one aspect of their family life. Past research (McCabe & Dinh, 2016) has demonstrated that there are also many mentions of positive communication between immigrant parents and their children, and positive dynamics of parent-child relationships need more attention in future research to further elucidate the strengths and resilience of Cambodian American youths and their families in the context of historical trauma and cultural conflicts.

Lack of Gender and Achievement-Level Differences

Although we carefully sought an even number of males and females, we did not find any outstanding gender differences in reported memories. Past meta-analysis (Hyde & Linn, 1988) revealed a small but significant gender difference (in favor of females) in various verbal abilities, though that analysis also noted that studies published after 1973 showed greater attenuation of such gender differences. The lack of gender differences in this particular study does not mean that future research should not attend to this important demographic variable, as the literature has indicated gender differences in family roles and adjustment (Dinh et al., 1994; Dinh et al., 2013; Himes, Lee, Foster, & Woods, 1995). We also did not find strikingly different patterns from high-versus low-achieving students, though past research had in fact found such a difference in terms of agency or individual assertiveness (e.g., see McAdams, 1993).

Study Limitations

The primary limitation of this study is small sample size, though it must also be acknowledged that small sample size allows for deep analysis and greater contextualization of responses. Furthermore, our sample did display data saturation for coding well before we reached the limit of the narratives we collected. A second limitation is that despite our request for equal numbers of

high-achieving versus low-achieving students, this was not the case. In the future, perhaps researchers should rely less on school personnel to help recruit participants to the study, although it is important to note that researchers must and should involve school administrators and personnel in their research collaboration to ensure a positive university-community research partnership. Researchers who are not focused on narrative might find that our inductive coding method for context of memories could be a limitation, as could the life story interview method itself (e.g., it did not probe for specific experiences). However, consistent with narrative methodology (Peterson & McCabe, 1983; Riessman, 2008), the inductive approach and the open-ended format of the life story interview itself are considered strengths of the grounded narrative theory approach, a complement to more focused and a priori methods.

Implications for Future Qualitative Research on Cambodian American and Other SEAA Youth

This study demonstrates that narrative methodology can yield rich data about the life experiences of Cambodian American youths. In the future, we would like to extend such research to other SEAA and Asian American populations. The fact that we found no gender differences could be due to the questions we asked; in the future we would probe more specifically for likely gendered content. We would also like to expand our inquiry to different age groups (e.g., younger children, young adults, and older adults) in a cross-sectional way to assess cohort differences in cultural representations in individual and family lives. We would, as mentioned earlier, like to pursue questions regarding specific cultural ways in which Cambodian American parents facilitate the development of resiliency in their offspring. Furthermore, we would like to use our methodology in conjunction with other qualitative (e.g., ethnography) and quantitative methodologies with larger sample sizes (e.g., structural equation modeling would enable us to detect more complex patterns of family and peer relationships). Finally, we would like to extend this methodology in a longitudinal fashion to examine changes and similarities in high point, low point, and turning point narratives over the lifespan.

Implications for Interventions with Cambodian American Youth

Findings from this study have important implications for intervention with Cambodian American youth and their families. Clearly, these students face considerable challenges in their young lives. Many of these challenges involve family conflicts due to conflicting cultural values and adjustments that they explicitly acknowledge. Peers are another source of conflict, but also of support; that is, Cambodian American peers were the context of one narrator's high point but another narrator's low point. Any intervention with Cambodian American adolescents and other SEAA youth needs to attend to both family and peer contexts and to pay particular attention to migration and trauma histories, as well as intergenerational strengths and positive aspects of Cambodian American families and heritage.

Conclusion

In conclusion, use of a qualitative, open-ended interviewing technique with Cambodian American adolescents has allowed us to paint a complex portrait of them and their circumstances. Our use of qualitative methods allowed us to offset quantitative research that has largely emphasized the multiple traumas and difficulties faced by this immigrant group. The Cambodian American youth we interviewed displayed resilience, according to our stated definition of that term; they saw the relatively positive impact of what many would judge negative life events. Of course, some mentioned more severe trauma than others, so we observed marked differences in the degree of resiliency displayed by our participants. Taken together, then, researchers need to carefully examine historical and family cultural context in studies of resilience, and qualitative methods are one critical means of meeting this research challenge (e.g., Exenberger & Juen, 2015; Rutter, 2013).

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Appendix

Responses to Each Prompt by Participant Gender and Achievement Group

High Point Memories of Southeast Asian American Youth

High-Achieving Females

- a. Serving as emcee for youth-led city council candidates' forum
- b. Coming to America seven years earlier and changing from being a "bad student back there" [in Cambodia] to a good student in America despite language struggles
- c. "The highest point was sophomore year when I became Military Ball Queen so like for ROTC, whoever raised the most money ... they get to wear the crown."

Low-Achieving Females

- d. "the time I met my current boyfriend ... I guess I became like an actual happy person."
- e. "When I went to Florida with my family, it was just a family vacation. And like my dad's always at work and it was finally all of us together. And like my mom goes to work ... I just like to have vacation with all of us together. That was the only family vacation we had too."
- f. helped her grandma learn English ... my grandma means so much to me and like I love her a lot."
- g. friend gives her a gift for her birthday
- h. "The high point in my life is ... it's around when I came back from California. I finally realized how important school is and then I finally tried to focus ... on school. And so I've been trying really hard and hoping I pass, and then I hope that one day like I can actually graduate."
- i. "This is with my oldest brother when he was still alive and I was ... spending time with his family at the zoo and my little sister ... just seeing like all the animals and stuff." That brother took father's place when father left narrator and her family.
- j. "I would say the best, highest scene in my life that stands out the most was, I was in the seventh grade. My brothers they were separated from me for 12 years ... because they were take away [to] foster care. In seventh grade, my mom surprised me and she brought me to Texas ... I finally got to spend a full Christmas with my brothers, which was a really great memory." Children were taken from family because their grandmother locked them outside in the cold and a neighbor reported them. Narrator reports that father "had to pay \$10,000 per kid" to get them out of foster care and that he only had money for her. Describes grandmother: "She came from Khmer Rouge ... her way of discipline is very, very violent."

High-Achieving Males

- k. "Freshman year when I first came into school, my current girlfriend right now that I have, she, when I met her, I thought she was the creepiest person ever."
- l. When I got to America and like the first time I meet my dad for like two years ... It was excited but like it was sad at the same time because we leaving like my aunt, my uncle, my grandma ... all my relative in Cambodia ... I was only twelve years old."

m. suffered an identity crisis after freshman year (I honestly deep inside I felt lost, like not knowing who I am ... that feeling of darkness, feeling of emptiness ... like a depression state”) but then attended a Cambodian religious camp “in Philadelphia on this mountain” which helped him because he “was struggling with expectations from different people, expectations from my my dad mostly, my mom, just family and from friends and society and pop culture.”

n. “You know at the time that I moved to the United States from Cambodia, that’s the high point. That time I really upset because I like come here to live with my dad and my stepmom and then my real mom [died] over in Cambodia, so at that time it’s really sad for me ... At that time, “I said, okay, good-bye grandmom.” It’s a sad moment.” When asked again for a positive experience, he reiterates, “The time that I came here ... It’s good for me.”

o. “One of my definite high points especially coming to school at M. High was during junior year when I won the National Honors Society election. I was elected as President.”

Low-Achieving Males

p. “I guess when I was four years old, I got adopted. I got adopted cause the state took me away from my family ... From there the family I’m living with taught me many good lessons in life. So they brought in a good path, so I won’t get in trouble.”

q. “I don’t remember having a good point ... my real mom she left us so then we had our stepmother take care of us and our religious.” Narrator reveals that two siblings died of medical causes. Reveals that the Monk his family consulted gave them a statue and told parents that they had to “take care of it like it was your son and daughter” and that they had to stay together in order to protect their surviving children. Nevertheless, his mother went “whacko on us” and returned to Cambodia and that he and his two surviving siblings thought “the consequences of leaving is that me, my brother and sister they are going to like pass away like literally flash death ... I don’t know how it is going to happen ... I just had lows but I never had highs.”

r. “The highest point in my life? It’s probably during my 17th birthday party where I just had like a lot of friends over and it was just like such a blast hanging out with everybody because at the time I was like struggling with school.”

s. “My highest point was probably last year’s pep rally because it was the first year that me and my friends all got together and we like made pep rally shirts for our junior class and yeah, it was fun.”

t. “I remember when I went to my first day in kindergarten. My mom bring me. She checked the list to see if my name was there. The first thing I did, I just ran to the white board, grabbed a marker, and I started drawing. And the teacher was like, “You’re not supposed to be drawing.”

Low Point Memories of Southeast Asian American Youth

High-Achieving Females

a. “I have very strict parents and like they don’t let me go out all the time.” Conflict about being out of cell phone reach with friends at a lake led to father saying “You’re not my daughter.” She did not “speak to parents for a whole week.”

b. “I was in the ESL (English as a Second Language) class and the other Cambodians, they came here before me and they know a little more English than me so they just looked down on me,

saying that I don't dress proper like them, I don't have good thing like them, and I don't speak English, I don't make friend, they don't like me."

c. "The lowest point of my life was when my boyfriend's parents yelled at me ... this year."

Low-Achieving Females

d. middle school girlfriends don't like narrator partying with others and turn on her, "badmouthed about me behind my back."

e. "The first thing that came to mind was when my house got robbed. It was by Brother. And he did it for a reason, though ... Because he got caught up in marijuana. He didn't have the money to pay back, so he stole the stuff and then sold it."

f. "In the middle of the night ... I was sleeping and all of a sudden I heard these, like, gunshots and I was pretty scared cause it was ... right across the street from our house."

g. "When I was three I was sexually raped. My family knows about it. It is all in the open. But I was living in Cambodia. My grandmother took him in because his mom died. I was three and he was in already in his twenties ... I never told anyone until I was 12 ... I actually know a good amount of girls who have been molested ... like seven or eight girls in my life."

h. boyfriend breaks up with her for her cousin and she stopped going to school.

i. "When I first went to high school, I just didn't really do good in school. Didn't really know anyone, so I followed the wrong crowd ... did some things that I regret, like I tried drinking and smoking weed but at that time I was stressing so much because my mom ... was really really sick in a hospital."

j. describes going into freshman year as a "very, very good student," meeting her first boyfriend, and starting to slack off in school."

High-Achieving Males

k. "I think the lowest point in my life was ... in a span of two years—two or three years—where my grandma, she passed away on the day before Valentine's Day ... and then I felt really bad cause I knew she was in the hospital but no one told me that it was that bad and I was gonna visit her the day of Valentine's Day."

l. "I was riding the motorcycle with my dad to go to school and I was in the back and my brother was in the front ... there was another motorcycle that come out and like hit ... I just fall on the curb and like hurting ... Dad, he always like with me and like holding my hand and telling me that it's going to be okay."

m. "My parent were alive from the Khmer Rouge era and I was born in America and there is always that generation gap between parents ... and "I know who I am now and my mom wants me to be the son she wants ... me to be ... "and we were driving in the car and my mom loves to yell really, really loud ... and in East Asian and Southeast Asian cultures they promote like a self-effacing type of personality like you should ... give yourself up for the better of the collective, the whole ... but I cussed her out." Narrator argues extensively with her and gets out of the car in the snow and mother follows. He worries about her asthma and diabetes and says, "You shouldn't be out in the cold." And she was like, "I'd rather die than lose my son." They make up. He reflects: "That's one thing that I can't forgive myself of because during the Khmer Rouge things were different ... A child isn't supposed to talk back. And the Khmer Rouge happened because children went

against their parents for the wrong reasons. Children killed their parents during the Khmer Rouge and I felt ... it was just history repeating itself.”

n. “I think when I was like five years old, I remember like my dad and my mom had an argument and then they separate. Like they not get divorced but they kind of live in different homes, something like that, and like that time is really bad for me because you know like family like is not along with each other. It’s really bad. I had to stay with my mom, and then my dad go away, and then I think like one year later, my dad come back. That time was really bad.”

o. “it is actually during around the time of the Presidency that was also a low point. I think junior year I mean a huge low point. I wasn’t getting the best grades. I was panicking because everyone told me that junior year was the most important year of your high school career actually. I was getting mediocre grades ... my parents were arguing.”

Low-Achieving Males

p. “My low point was when I got taken away from my family when I was four. I was at the DSS and I got really sad because I wasn’t going to be with my biological family for a long time. And I don’t really see them as much. So I guess I didn’t have my childhood memories with them ... I guess sometimes at DSS I’ll see my family like a couple times a year, like three or four times. And when I see them I get really happy, but then when I had to leave, I get really sad afterwards.”

q. “Well there is another low point I had. I think my dad gave me this twenty-four carat gold [necklace] that was worth like two thousand dollars and he was giving me the pressure to not lose it.” The necklace is stolen when he was practicing for the basketball team, and “my dad, he just didn’t talk to me for that one month. He didn’t even look, even when he came home, he didn’t even look, he just went straight to his room.”

r. “Well I think the one thing that triggers my like anger and like my sadness would be mostly hearing my family argue, especially if it’s like about money or something like dumb and like if everyone is drinking and stuff.” He proceeds to talk about one fight where his brother “threw me off.”

s. “It was actually in my school year before the pep rally. That year was generally bad. My grades were low, and I skipped school a lot too. And I ended up getting kicked out of school and my parents didn’t know me as like someone who would like skip school, so they were shocked and like my mom got really mad and she was upset, and I broke her heart she said. So I felt really bad. And yeah that year was the worst” And that year I just kept so much to myself. Like I didn’t tell anyone I was gay or anything.”

t. “I was about seven years old. I was at my cousin’s house ... and a big dog comes and started barking at me. Everything just changed. I got really scared. I started crying and I didn’t know what to do ... it got me on my leg, and I managed to shake it off though ... I remember one of my cousins washed my leg because the dog bite and ... they went with me to walk with me and yeah the dog wasn’t there. It showed the connect of me and my cousins and just love.”

Turning Point Memories of Southeast Asian American Youth

High-Achieving Females

a. Started dating a boy who had stalked her and whom her friends thought was a “real creep.”

b. “I experienced all those struggle in seventh grade, that’s when I started studying harder. That’s the turning point. Because I used to be a bad student.”

c. Realizes that peers “don’t like me. They don’t like it how I talk [too loud] or they don’t like how I have too much attitude.”

Low-Achieving Females

d. “I would just say like sophomore year, like I realized, oh my God, how bad I did in freshman year ... seeing like my first report card for sophomore year, it made me look so bad because I do so good now.... And I guess seeing your failure makes you like want to improve.”

e. “When I lost my best friend ... Everyone hated her because of her attitude and stuff ... They would talk about me, too, and saying I’m her dog, I’m a follower.”

f. friends from middle school moved away; “I just felt like I lost all my friends.”

g. girlfriends prove untrustworthy

h. “When my grandpa passed away like my whole family changed. Like we barely gathered together on the holidays and I felt less close to my family ... Because my family has separated.”

i. “A turning point in my life is when I met my current boyfriend now ... and he ... made me want to like ... do better and like he support me because I don’t have that much like family that’s good ... Half of them dropped out.”

j. [Turning point] “would be this year ... right now my grades are phenomenal. They are straight A’s.”

High-Achieving Males

k. “I think my turning point would be the first time I got my job. I think that’s my turning point because it sets a whole new like rules for like responsibility and managing your money, which I’ve been doing poorly at right now.”

l. joined school swim team and lost weight (“I’m still like a chubby kid ... but like before my cholesterol level was high.”)

m. “During middle school we have these cliques ... and then like I happened to be the outcast because I was that Cambodian Asian boy. My parents were like Cambodian ... they were strict traditional ... but in middle school I was ... bullied a lot” but then he meets an African American boy “from a very well-known, I’d say wealthy family and ... they’re descendants of the Civil Rights Movement.” That boy becomes his friend and informs him of that movement. “And that’s what changed me from being someone who’s shy and meek into someone who can actually speak to other people ... from a follower to a leader’s point of view.”

n. “When I come from Cambodia to U.S., it turning like from studying like low student in school like the really bad student to the like good, like my GPA is 3.9 ... that turning my life.”

o. “Seventh grade that was the first turning point ... I had two friends that I could talk to and one was deathly afraid of people. It is the one ... that I talked about her dad dying ... I really developed a knack for listening and hearing people out and giving advice as best I could ... That was when I knew what I wanted to do. I wanted to become a psychologist.” This precipitated an argument with parents who wanted him to go into medicine.

Low-Achieving Males

p. “I guess you could say my dad adopted me, which is good, but some people in his family didn’t like me as much, so I kind of felt like really sad. But he was there for me, loved me. So he made me feel like I was his own child ... I guess my foster mom didn’t like me as much ‘cause I was a troublemaker and I would just talk back to her and everything.”

q. “I think when I was in Detroit, I think a gang member just came up to me and asked me to be part of his gang member, and I just—I thought—back then I thought gangs were cool, you know. And I decided to join, but then they asked me, the only way you can join a gang is to kill somebody. So then I was like, and my mind was going through, like, should I do it, should I not do it, ‘cause if I was in the gang I would probably get money, protection from other people. But I chose not to do it because I don’t have the guts to do it, is what it is and I would try to do it ‘cause at the moment I realized how life is important to other people and killing someone that’s precious to their own family is not going to solve it. And after that day I became like, I don’t know how to explain it like I need. Ever since that day I became more confident in myself on what’s to do and what’s not to do.”

r. “I’d been going through a lot of bad luck during that time. Like I failed my road test and I was extremely disappointed ... and my brother told me to practice more and like, so I did and I went to Market Basket with my dad and I was backing up and I bumped into a car and it was like a bad scratch and like dent and stuff ... my dad is like barely at home now because he’s with someone else ... so like nobody’s really home besides me and [my brother] and then I found out that I might not be able to have a home because my brother wants to sell the house.”

s. “I want to say [my turning point is] currently now because now is when I’m actually doing all my homework and like doing all my class work and finishing my quarterlies and everything ... getting straight As in history because history is not my favorite subject and like I’m glad I got all As on it and it showed me that I really can do ... I can pass in school as long as I do my work and I study and everything. So that was a turning point in my life.”

t. “last year I used to skip school a lot, and I skipped school until last semester until this year. And my house master, he is just like motivating me, like allowing me to go to school, ‘I want you to come.’”

Note: Letters of the alphabet refer to specific participants.

About the Authors



Allyssa McCabe, Ph.D., is Professor of Psychology at University of Massachusetts Lowell. She founded a journal, now called *Narrative Inquiry*, and researches how narrative develops with age, how parents encourage narration, cultural differences in narration, and interrelationships between development of narrative, vocabulary, and phonological awareness. Recent work concerns a theoretical approach to early literacy called the Comprehensive Language Approach, which looks at ways that various strands of oral and written language affect each other in acquiring full literacy. Her most recent book is: *Chinese Language Narration: Culture, Cognition & Emotion*, (A. McCabe & C. Chang, 2013, John Benjamins). A key concern is assessment of preschool-aged children, especially preventing misdiagnosis of cultural differences in language use as deficits.



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