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Involuntary migration, context of reception, and social mobility: the case of Vietnamese refugee resettlement in the United States

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ABSTRACT

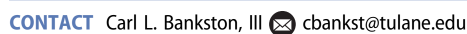
In this study, we examine the Vietnamese population of the United States as a case study in the integration of a refugee group. We first offer a brief review of Vietnamese refugee resettlement in the US and the making of a new ethnic community. We then provide a quantitative analysis of socioeconomic mobility among Vietnamese refugees using American Community Survey data from 1980 to 2015 and other national-level data. We examine how this ethnic population has changed over time by focusing on key socioeconomic indicators, such as levels of education, occupation, and income, as well as poverty rates. Third, we seek to explain what enables Vietnamese refugees and their children to overcome initial disadvantage and move up in society based on our own work over the span of 20 years with qualitative data. We consider how policies, institutions (government, civil society, and ethnic), and patterns of social relations in the Vietnamese American community have interacted with individual agency to shape mobility.

KEYWORDS

refugees; involuntary migration; mobility; immigrant adaptation; community studies; Vietnamese

1. Introduction

Vietnamese refugee flight into the US was a precursor in many respects to global refugee movements, and it can thus provide important insight into the conditions under which involuntary migration may or may not result in the formation and integration of a new ethnic group in its host country. As Gisselquist discusses in the introduction to this issue, understanding these conditions involves examining both national and subnational influences. In this paper, we first offer a brief overview of Vietnamese refugee resettlement and the making of a new ethnic Vietnamese community (see, also, in the present issue, Hou on Vietnamese resettlement in Canada, Barber in the UK, and Bosch & Su in Germany). We then provide a quantitative analysis of social mobility among Vietnamese refugees using IPUMS (American Community Survey) data from 1980 to 2015 and other national-level data. We examine how this refugee group has changed over time by focusing on key socioeconomic indicators, such as levels of education, occupation, and income, as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well as poverty rates. Third, we explain what enables Vietnamese refugees and their children to overcome initial disadvantage and move up in society based on our own work over the span of 20 years and the works of other researchers.

2. Conflict, involuntary migration, and resettlement

Armed conflict is the most common instigator of involuntary migration. This was as true of Viet Nam as it is of Afghanistan and Syria (see Stempel & Alemi 2020). Viet Nam's conflicts, like those of other refugee-origin countries, involved combinations of foreign intervention and civil war, which led to refugee flight (Bankston and Hidalgo 2007).

2.1. US involvement in Viet Nam

After a military defeat of French troops by Viet Minh forces in May 1954, an international conference on Viet Nam in Geneva temporarily divided the country into communist-dominated North Vietnam and South Viet Nam under the regime of Prime Minister Ngo Dinh Diem. In 1961 President Kennedy sent military advisors to South Viet Nam to assist the Diem government. In 1963 Diem was overthrown by a coup, apparently with the knowledge and consent of the American government. In 1965, with the South Vietnamese government on the verge of collapse, President Johnson sent in ground troops (Stewart 2012).

By the late 1960s, American public opinion had largely turned against the war and American political leaders sought a way out. The Paris peace talks in 1973 ended with the United States agreeing on a timetable for withdrawing its troops. The South Vietnamese government was no better prepared to defend itself than it had been in 1965. In April 1975, the South Vietnamese capital of Saigon fell into the hands of North Vietnamese forces (Veith 2012).

The withdrawal of most American troops from South East Asia also resulted in the assumption of power of communist governments in neighbouring Laos and Cambodia. Although the Khmer Rouge, as the Cambodian communist forces were known, had formerly been allied with North Viet Nam, their claims to the old lands of the Cambodian kingdom in southern Viet Nam led to border conflicts between Cambodia and Viet Nam. In January 1979 Vietnamese forces invaded and occupied Cambodia. China, an ally of Cambodia, in turn invaded Viet Nam from the north. Vietnamese forces drove the Chinese back, but the armed conflict between China and Viet Nam reawakened old ethnic antagonisms against ethnic Chinese in Viet Nam, leading the flight of a very large number of Sino-Vietnamese refugees in the late 1970s (Evans and Rowley 1984).

2.2. Involuntary migration

In late 1975, as North Vietnamese forces took power in Saigon, the United States evacuated about 65,000 'high-risk' individuals from Viet Nam by air and sea. Others began to flee as well, often by boat into the South China Sea. In response, the United States created Operation New Life, which moved refugees to US military bases to prepare them for temporary resettlement. This brought in 126,000 Vietnamese to permanent resettlement in the United States (Bankston and Hidalgo 2007; Zhou and Bankston 1998).

The term 'boat people' came into common use in the late 1970s and early 1980s. These involuntary migrants now seem like a prefiguration of the later seaborne refugees from the Mediterranean to Europe. The clash between Viet Nam and Cambodia, provoking additional fighting between Viet Nam and China, created a refugee crisis recognised around the world. In 1978, Viet Nam was home to 1.5 million people of Chinese descent, about 85% of whom lived in former South Viet Nam. During the military confrontation with China, the Vietnamese government came to see these Sino-Vietnamese as a potential fifth column (Duiker 1989). An estimated 250,000 people entered China and thousands of others fled by boat. Many died at sea, but others made it to destinations in Hong Kong, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, where refugee camps arose to accommodate the new arrivals.

In July 1979, at an international conference in Geneva, developed countries, including the United States, agreed to accept and resettle South East Asian refugees. Under the auspices of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), processing centres for Vietnamese and other South East Asian refugees bound for the United States or other countries were established in the Philippines, Indonesia, and Thailand (Zhou and Bankston 1998).

2.3. Resettlement

Figure 1 gives numbers of people with Vietnamese nationality admitted to the United States as refugees from 1975 to 2015. In April 1975, responding to the impending fall of Saigon, President Gerald Ford authorised the entry of 130,000 refugees from the three countries of Indochina (Cambodia, Laos, and Viet Nam) into the United States, 125,000 of whom were Vietnamese. This first large group of Vietnamese in the United States typically had close ties with the American military. According to data collected by the US Department of State in 1975, more than 30% of the heads of households in

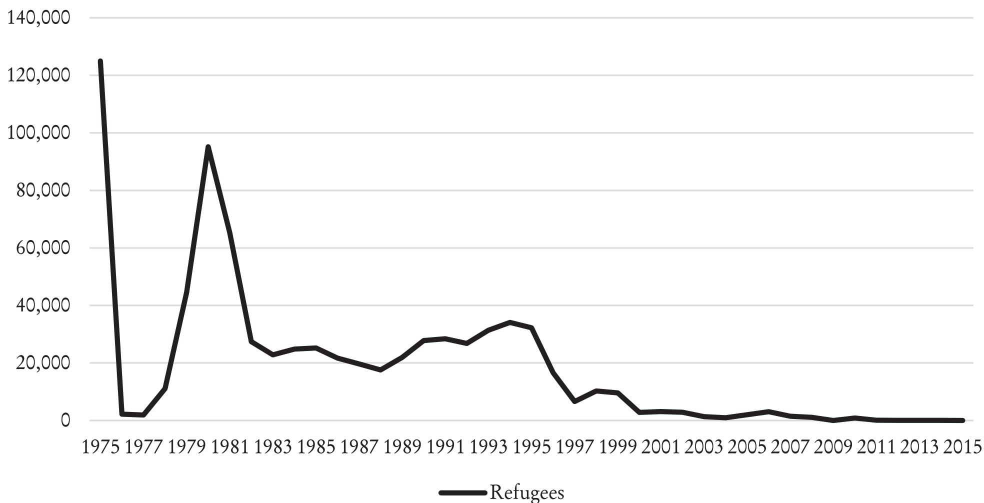

Figure 1. Vietnamese refugee admissions to the United States, 1975–2015. Source: Authors' illustration based on data from Office of Refugee Resettlement 1982–2001; Office of Immigration Statistics 2000–2015; Rumbaut 2000, 182.

the first large group of arrivals were trained in the medical professions or in technical or managerial occupations, 16.9% were in transportation occupations, and 11.7% were in clerical and sales occupations. Only 4.9% were fishermen or farmers, occupations held by the majority of the adult population in Viet Nam. More than 70% of the first-wave refugees came from urban areas.

Upon arrival, the first-wave Vietnamese refugees were received in refugee camps. After they were interviewed and given medical examinations, they were assigned to living quarters in camps for a short period of time. Then they were sent to voluntary agencies, or VOLAGs. These VOLAGs assumed the task of finding sponsors, individuals, or groups who would assume financial and personal responsibility for refugee families for up to two years (Zhou and Bankston 1998). American refugee agencies initially attempted to scatter the new arrivals around the country, so that this new Asian population would not be too visible in any one place and so that no one city or state would be burdened with caring for a large number of new arrivals. However, from the beginning, California took the lion's share of Vietnamese refugee resettlement, concentrating 21.6% of all the South East Asians in the United States (Zhou and Bankston 1998).

As shown in Figure 1, numbers of Vietnamese refugees admitted dropped sharply after 1975. The numbers began to surge in 1978 as a result of an enlarged resettlement programme developed in response to the lobbying of concerned American citizens and organisations. The conflicts between Cambodia and Viet Nam and Viet Nam and China also resulted in another sharp spike in refugee arrivals from Viet Nam. After the 1980 peak, the influx of Vietnamese refugees continued as a steady stream, at 20,000 per year throughout the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s.

In lat|e May 1979, an agreement between the United Nations High Commission for Refugees and the government of Viet Nam created the Orderly Departure Program (ODP). This programme was aimed primarily at bringing former South Vietnamese soldiers and others with close ties to the Americans, along with their families, to the United States. By 1989, 165,000 Vietnamese had been admitted to the United States under this programme, and the number grew to over 200,000 by the mid-1990s.

The South East Asian refugee crisis also led the US Congress to pass the most comprehensive piece of refugee legislation in American history, the Refugee Act of 1980. In place of the 'seventh preference category' established in 1965, which admitted refugees as part of the total number of immigrants allowed into the US, the Refugee Act provided for an annual number of admissions for refugees.

The Amerasian Homecoming Act of 1988 granted Vietnamese-born children of US servicemen and their families special status, allowing mixed-ancestry Vietnamese and their close relatives to enter the United States. In 1989, the United States and the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam agreed that current and former detainees in Vietnamese re-education camps would be allowed to leave for the United States. Following the Humanitarian Operation Program of 1989, political prisoners, most of whom had been civilian and military officials in South Viet Nam, along with their families, made up the largest group of Vietnamese entering the United States. By the late 1990s, over 70,000 people had been resettled under this programme.

Within the United States, the work of integrating refugees fell mainly to VOLAGs, which were usually private charitable organisations charged with finding sponsors who would take personal and financial responsibility for the new arrivals for up to two

years. Local groups received funding from the government to provide housing, tutoring in English, vocational training and employment, and legal services (Lanphier 1983).

After the United States and Viet Nam re-established formal diplomatic relations the refugee flow from Viet Nam dropped sharply, and it mostly came to an end by the twenty-first century (see Figure 1). Although the US had been home to very few people of Vietnamese background in 1970, by 2015 there were nearly 2 million American citizens and residents of Vietnamese descent.

3. Social mobility of Vietnamese in the United States

Two decades ago, in *Growing Up American*, we described Vietnamese young adults in 1980 as 'not just foreign-born, but "fresh off the boat", suffering from many of the problems confronted by other refugees in flight from a poor country like Viet Nam … Given the low starting point, [by 1990, their] progress was substantial' (Zhou and Bankston 1998, 61). Building on our previous studies, which were about an early stage of incorporation, we focus on examining the mobility outcomes of Vietnamese in succeeding years.

3.1. English language proficiency

In *Growing Up American*, we noted that many newly arrived Vietnamese did not speak English or did not speak it well, and that by 1990, the self-reported English proficiency of the Vietnamese exceeded that of the US foreign-born population as a whole (Zhou and Bankston 1998). Table 1 updates this observation with census data from the American Community Survey (ACS).

In 1980, nearly 40% of Vietnamese spoke no English or spoke it 'not well', despite generally good English language skills among first-wave Vietnamese refugees. That percentage dropped to about 28% in 2015. In 1980, about a third reported speaking English 'very well' or 'English only'; that percentage increased to nearly half in 2015. The English monolinguals also increased from 5.8% thirty years earlier to 14.2%.

3.2. Labour market participation

In *Growing Up American*, we also noted that many indicators of Vietnamese socioeconomic position were fairly dismal in the early years, but that these had brightened considerably by 1990 (Zhou and Bankston 1998). In Table 2, we present the mean Duncan Socioeconomic Index (SEI) scores and employment status of working-age Vietnamese in the United States for selected years of the ACS. The table clearly reflects a trend of

Table 1. English-speaking abilities of Vietnamese in the US, 1980 and 2015.

	1980 (%)	2015 (%)
Speaks no English	9.2	6.5
Speaks not well	29.8	21.6
Speaks well	35.4	22.5
Speaks very well	29.7	35.1
Speaks only English	5.8	14.2

Source: Authors' illustration based on American Community Survey data.

Table 2. Mean socioeconomic index scores of Vietnamese in the US labour force and employment status (in percentages) of US Vietnamese aged 25–64, 1980–2015.

	1980	1990	2000	2010	2015
Mean SEI	34.08	36.7	37.58	39.68	39.38
Employment status					
Not in labour force	36.2	25.6	30.8	19.7	19.8
Unemployed	4.9	6.2	2.7	7.6	3.4
Employed	58.9	68.2	66.5	72.7	76.8

Source: Authors' illustration based on American Community Survey data.

measurable upward mobility, although the SEI scores of the Vietnamese were still somewhat below those of the general American labour force (39.38 versus 43.59 in 2015).

In *Growing Up American*, we found that labour force participation rates among working-age Vietnamese had increased in the ten-year period after 1980 (Zhou and Bankston 1998). While unemployment fluctuated, as seen in Table 2, it remained fairly low. By 2015, 77% of working-age Vietnamese were employed. This rate was higher than that of working-age Americans in general (73%).

3.3. A mixed-niche strategy

Understanding this history of mobility involves considering how ethnicity adapts to and interacts with structural circumstances. The Vietnamese have incorporated into the American labour market via a mixed-niche strategy. Bankston (2014) described the mixed pattern of engaging in small-scale self-employment, personal services, and labour as a consequence of ethnic network utilisation to develop effective mobility strategies. Comparing the employment distribution of Vietnamese, Koreans, and Chinese using the 1980 census data, we found that the Vietnamese were spread across a wider range of industries and that they showed a lower rate of self-employment (Zhou and Bankston 1992). Just as ethnic networks created residential communities through secondary migration, though, those networks also shifted economic activities during the 1980s. For example, in our examination of Vietnamese employment in Louisiana, we found that the Vietnamese there had largely moved out of manufacturing jobs and into fishing and food-related industries from 1980 to 1990, and that self-employment in fishing, small groceries, and eating and drinking places had increased sharply (Bankston and Zhou 1996). Unlike groceries and restaurants, work in fishing is regional in character, concentrated along the coasts. Still, the means by which the Vietnamese became concentrated in fishing are illustrative of broader network processes. Our Vietnamese informants told us that they went into fishing because of a lack of opportunities in the wider economy. 'Like agriculture, another extractive industry that employs a disproportionate share of minority workers', we reported, 'the fishing industry has a demand for low wage manual labor' (Bankston and Zhou 1996, 48). Thus, the Vietnamese in fishing represented one tendency within the new American globalised work setting: a low-wage immigrant labour force (Bankston 2012).

The reconcentration of the Vietnamese into fairly dense ethnic clusters around the United States also made possible upward mobility through ethnic entrepreneurship. In our study of Vietnamese in fishing, our informants reported that they had been able to purchase fishing boats by pooling incomes and assisting each other (Bankston and

Zhou 1996). The same network assets that enabled them to buy boats (and hire other Vietnamese to work on the boats) also enabled them to go into other businesses, notably in the service sector, at the interstices of the contemporary American economy.

Within the personal-service-oriented American consumer economy, the Vietnamese beauty and nail salon became almost a stereotypical occupation. Indeed, the 2010–2015 ACS data show that 'hairdressers and beauticians' made up over 13% of all Vietnamese Americans in the labour force – more than any other occupational concentration (Ruggles et al. 2017). As Sharma et al. (2018) have documented, since the 1970s nail salons have been a particular area of entrepreneurship for Vietnamese Americans and of employment for new immigrants from Vietnam, with Vietnamese workers making up more than half the U.S. nail salon workforce, mainly working for co-ethnic entrepreneurs. Bankston (2014) has taken a close look at manicures and pedicures as a special occupational niche for the Vietnamese. He found that this particular niche is made possible by the expansion of demand for personal services in the American economy. The way the Vietnamese moved into this specialisation, however, entailed interpersonal connections within families looking for opportunities within underserved markets. (see Lazo 2012).

The re-clustering of the Vietnamese into ethnic communities enabled them to move into small-scale entrepreneurial activities. Just as ethnic networks formed within the context of their resettlement in the new country, though, these networks could only give them access to positions available. When the Vietnamese were able to use ethnic ties to raise funds, these funds sometimes went into opening small corner grocery stores in locations that were underserved by the big chains. Even more often, though, the funds went into opening service-oriented businesses such as ethnic restaurants, especially Vietnamese noodle places, and beauty or nail shops.

Table 3 suggests that this mixed-niche strategy has paid off for the Vietnamese by enabling them to move into better jobs within the occupational mainstream. In 1980, only 13% of Vietnamese in the labour force held managerial and professional specialty occupations. By 2015, though, over one-quarter (26%) were in jobs in this category. Service occupations constituted another area of growth for members of this refugee-origin group, increasing from 17% in 1980 to 29% in 2015.

Table 4 looks at the top fifteen occupations the Vietnamese held in 2015. The finding is consistent with the idea that the economic identification was combined with a clear trend of moving into service-oriented occupations. By far the largest concentration was in personal appearance work, indicating the significance of pedicures and manicures as an

Table 3. Distribution of US Vietnamese (in percentages) in the labour force across major occupational categories, 1980–2015.

	1980	1990	2000	2010	2015
Managerial and professional specialty	12.6	16.7	20.5	23.3	26.1
Technical, sales, and admin. support	26.8	30.4	25.4	22.2	21.8
Service	16.6	14.9	18.5	29.1	29.2
Farming, forestry, fishing	0.9	1.3	1.1	1.2	1.0
Precision production, craft, and repair	10.9	11.0	10.5	8.1	7.6
Operators, fabricators, and labourers	32.1	25.2	23.4	15.9	14.1
Military	0.2	0.5	0.2	0.3	0.2

Source: Authors' illustration based on American Community Survey data.

Table 4. Fifteen most common occupations of US Vietnamese, 2015.

Occupation	% Vietnamese workers
Personal appearance workers	13.69
Assemblers and fabricators	2.62
Cashiers	2.39
Waiters and waitresses	2.08
Chefs and cooks	2.07
Accountants and auditors	2.05
Retail salespersons	1.89
First-line supervisors of sales workers	1.79
Managers	1.74
Other production workers	1.66
Hairdressers, hairstylists, and cosmetologists	1.63
Software developers, applications, and systems software	1.45
Computer scientists and systems analysts	1.37
Customer service representatives	1.29
Registered nurses	1.27
Cumulative %	*38.98*

Source: Authors' illustration based on American Community Survey data.

ethnic niche providing a basis for mobility. Another occupation in the top fifteen list was in the related field of hairdressers, hairstylists, and cosmetologists.

Jobs as cashiers, waiters and waitresses, hairdressers and manicurists, and cooks and chefs were also common, a fact consistent with restaurants as one of the ethnic niches of the Vietnamese in the US. However, it is also notable that some of the most common occupations were in high-tech fields, such as software developers, computer scientists, and systems analysts.

3.4. Upward social mobility

The Vietnamese in the US showed a general trend of improving economic and educational situation. Table 5 gives poverty rates, inflation-adjusted median household incomes, and home-ownership rates of the Vietnamese. In 1980, the Vietnamese had a median household income of US$47,338 (calculated in 2017 dollars). By contrast, the equivalent inflation-adjusted median income for all US households in that year was $52,397. In 2015, Vietnamese median household incomes reached $72,000. This figure was substantially above the median household income for all American households ($58,000 in 2017 dollars).

Further, Table 5 shows dropping poverty rates. In *Growing Up American*, we noted that persistently high rates of unemployment and poverty continued to be problem areas for the Vietnamese in 1990. (Zhou and Bankston 1998). At the century's turn, however, poverty rates among the Vietnamese continued to drop and then levelled off at around 16% between 2000 and 2015. In terms of financial situations, the Vietnamese had come to look very much like the general US population by the 2000s.

Table 5. Poverty rate, median household income (in 2017 dollars), and home ownership rate among US Vietnamese, 1980–2015.

	1980	1990	2000	2010	2015
Poverty (%)	35.8	26.0	16.5	15.5	16.6
Median household income ($)	47,338	64,002	76,166	72,078	72.034
Own home (%)	34.7	47.9	58.2	68.5	70.8

Source: Authors' illustration based on American Community Survey data.

We will examine in the next section to discussing the role of social networks and interpersonal processes in refugee integration and what these may mean for policies intended to promote integration and mobility. For now, we can observe that home-ownership rates among Vietnamese in the United States went up steadily over the decades. In 2015, over 70% of Vietnamese lived in their own housing, doubling their own home-ownership rate of 1980 and also surpassing the 2015 US average (65%).

Two decades ago, we observed that many Vietnamese children and young adults showed remarkable levels of educational achievement and attainment, despite the often limited educational backgrounds of parents and the fact that parents were generally newcomers to American society (Zhou and Bankston 1998). We made this observation with two major caveats, though. First, we pointed out that the generally high scholastic performance of young Vietnamese could lead to overlooking a substantial number of alienated young people who were integrated neither in their own ethnic communities nor in the American mainstream. Second, we raised the possibility of a generational decline affected by rapid acculturation and family socioeconomic disadvantages.

In a 2006 follow-up on the question of generational decline, we did find that many Vietnamese young people had become less integrated into their communities, that there were signs of increases in delinquency, and that scholastic performance had decreased among part of the American-born and American-reared second generation (Zhou and Bankston 2006). We attributed this in part to the loss of the immigrant drive through rapid acculturation and in part to the fact that some Vietnamese young people from low-income families were integrating into the less advantageous segments of American society.

A spike in upward mobility should not always be expected among those who have already found places within the host society's mainstream. While the children of immigrants tend to fare better than their immigrant parents on average, such intergenerational comparison is one-sided and can be misleading. One should be comparing not only native-born children with their immigrant parents, but also native-born children of a particular national-origin group with the general native-born population in the host society, as well as children of immigrants with close connections to their ethnic communities with their counterparts without those ethnic connections. One should also be considering how outcomes for each grouping vary depending on the opportunities provided by socioeconomic situation (Zhou and Bankston 2016, 119).

Figure 2 contrasts the college completion rates of Vietnamese American young adults aged 25–40 with those of white Americans in the same age group. In 1980, only 14% of Vietnamese young adults had finished four years of college, compared with 24% of whites. Two decades later, the gap had narrowed to 25% of Vietnamese and 28% of whites. By 2005, Vietnamese American young adults were more likely to have completed four years of college than whites were, and by 2010, 45% of Vietnamese in the relevant age cohort had attained this level of education, compared with only 31% of whites.

College-educated Vietnamese seem to be poised for continuing upward mobility into the future. Table 6 gives the twenty most common fields of study among Vietnamese

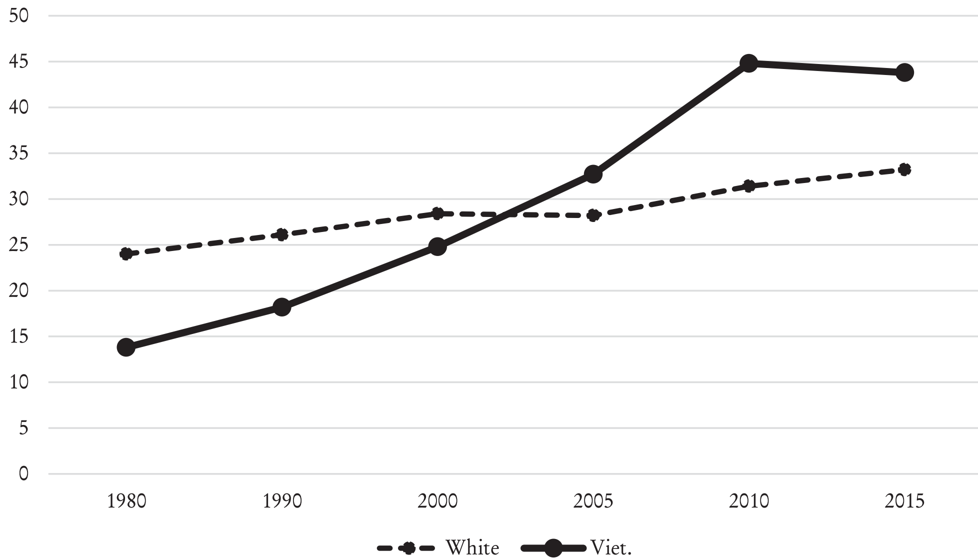

Figure 2. Percentages of white and Vietnamese young adults (25–40) with four or more years of college, 1980–2015. Source: Authors' illustration based on American Community Survey data.

college graduates in 2015. As shown, the most common degree fields were biology and accounting, followed by computer science, electrical engineering, and business management. Almost all of the concentration areas of Vietnamese college graduates, in fact, were in fields of high labour market demand.

Table 6. Twenty most common fields of study among US Vietnamese college graduates, 2015.

Field of study	% Vietnamese college graduates
1. Biology	6.9
2. Accounting	6.9
3. Computer science	6.4
4. Electrical engineering	6.3
5. Business management and administration	4.6
6. General business	3.8
7. Nursing	3.1
8. Psychology	2.9
9. Finance	2.8
10. Economics	2.8
11. General education	2.4
12. General engineering	2.3
13. Marketing and marketing research	2.1
14. Chemistry	2.1
15. Mechanical engineering	1.9
16. Pharmacy and pharmaceutical sciences	1.8
17. Biochemical sciences	1.6
18. Computer and information systems	1.4
19. Mathematics	1.4
20. Management information systems and statistics	1.3
Cumulative %	*64.4*

Source: Authors' illustration based on American Community Survey data.

4. Explaining upward mobility of an involuntary migrant group

4.1. Influences on adaptation and upward mobility

While we want to avoid suggesting that Vietnamese Americans are free from problems, we believe that the central question is how the general socioeconomic success shown above has been achieved. Answering this question may provide some insight into processes and lessons for policy in refugee resettlement in general.

In *Growing Up American*, we found that the Vietnamese community of New Orleans, Louisiana, had been able to adapt economically and socially to an environment radically different from their South East Asian homeland through building a dense network of social relations based on ethnic identity, kinship ties, and mutual obligation. This ethnic network was anchored in a religious institution (a church) at its centre (Zhou and Bankston 1998).

Other researchers, following our line of reasoning, and our own follow-up work have elaborated on the specific mechanisms and functions of the Vietnamese community in New Orleans (Bankston 2014; Vanlandingham 2017; Zhou and Bankston 2006). Our own research has led us to conclude that answers may lie in the interaction between cultural factors and meso-level community organisations and resettlement agencies (Bankston 2014; Zhou and Bankston 1998). The effectiveness of national policies depends heavily on how broader national policies promote and co-ordinate this interaction. Some may object that cultural explanations of group adaptation do not readily lend themselves to social policies. It may be argued that adaptation is simply a matter of whether group members have cultural resources that do or do not function to affect outcomes efficiently. To this type of objection, we offer two responses. First, if refugee agencies or policymakers intend to help new arrivals, they must try to understand what resources those new arrivals possess, including cultural resources. Second, culture does not come out of a vacuum, and it changes and develops continually.

The cultural resources work together with non-cultural aspects of resilience. These include immigrants' own human and social capital. Immigrants, even those that migrate involuntarily, may have specific skills or forms of education. They may also have insider knowledge from other group members. Along these lines, Bankston (2014) observes that even immigrant groups at the bottom of the American socioeconomic ladder often have and share information about jobs within occupational niches. The Vietnamese also have had some specific group advantages, such as generally positive stereotypes among the wider population. The Vietnamese in New Orleans, the community studied by Vanlandingham (2017) and by us, also enjoyed some local advantages, such as resettlement in a single location of people largely from the same location in Viet Nam. The local nature of immigrant adaptation means, of course, that there will be variation within a broad pattern of mobility.

This observation has been supported by the interesting work of Dao (2015), who compared the New Orleans Vietnamese community with two others along the Gulf Coast (one in Biloxi, Mississippi, and the other in Bayou La Batre, Alabama) to explain the variations in the capacities of Vietnamese communities to rebuild themselves in disaster recovery. During the aftermath of the hurricane, in particular, Dao focused on analysing the role of social organisations to address the question of why the Vietnamese community in New Orleans seemed to mobilise so quickly while others were less able to do so.

The Vietnamese of Bayou La Batre first arrived in 1977 but their numbers did not increase in earnest until 1981, and then, almost immediately, the new arrivals began occupying seafood processing jobs, deck work, and trawling (Herndon 1988). Within a few short years, many began buying their own boats or retrofitting leisure craft for commercial fishing purposes at such a pace that by the mid-1980s nearly one in three licenses in Bayou La Batre were registered by Vietnamese. Arriving from circumstances of severe hardship, most of the Vietnamese families did not belong to the more privileged and educated first-wave co-ethnics who were evacuated immediately after the 1976 fall of Saigon (Rutledge 1992).

The Vietnamese of Bayou La Batre worked together often in family-based groups, but largely worked independently of one another. Without a strong ethnic community centre, their social organisation was relatively 'flat', and they did not have the same degree of what Vanlandingham calls 'hierarchy'. They were also concentrated in an economically volatile industry, given to ups and downs in demand in the larger economy. They were able to re-establish themselves following the hurricane, but limited social and economic resources meant that they struggled to adapt in a changing environment.

The Vietnamese of Biloxi are much less concentrated residentially than their co-ethnics in either Bayou La Batre or New Orleans. They were drawn to the area by jobs initially in seafood processing during the 1980s and later, at the turn of the twenty-first century, in gaming as a major Gulf Coast industry. Employment and housing availability has distributed them in varying neighbourhoods. Although many Vietnamese on the Mississippi Gulf Coast were drawn to the area by ethnic networks, spreading news first of seafood employment and later of jobs in casinos, they were much less tightly interconnected and bounded by ethnic networks than those who settled in New Orleans. Moreover, casinos drove up the cost of housing, which pushed the Vietnamese out to neighbourhoods close to their employment and dispersed them all around Biloxi. The loosely interconnected Vietnamese of the Mississippi Gulf Coast had access to economic resources, in the form of jobs, but their ethnic social resources were relatively limited. In turn, the relatively loosely interconnected Vietnamese of Biloxi were not able to create formal organisations before the devastating hurricane hit in 2005.

While Dao's Biloxi informants struggled, with some success, to create organisations for recovery and adaptation, the lack of a pre-existing ethnic community constituted a serious challenge. By contrast, the Vietnamese in New Orleans were able to rely on dense ethnic networks, centred on a Catholic church, to form a multiplicity of formal organisations in response to Katrina. Moreover, the secondary migration draw of New Orleans's Vietnamese community was not chiefly external economic resources, such as employment opportunities, but the social resources provided by ethnic networks (Bankston 2014; Dao 2015; Zhou and Bankston 1998).

Dao's study can be used as a local-level examination of why some Vietnamese communities in the US have been more adaptable than others. If one accepts the community organisation account of the adaptation and mobility of the Vietnamese, and by extension other involuntary migrant groups, this implies that an important role for agencies serving refugees is to identify the social and cultural resources of those groups and foster community assets. Refugee agencies, in other words, should go beyond simply providing housing, connections to employment, and information about the host society and develop a clear understanding of how the internal dynamics of refugee groups interact with local receiving

contexts to make their resettlement work more effective. As we discuss below, this means analysing the kinds of jobs and residential spaces available in an area, how the social networks and organisations of a group may enable group members to connect to those jobs and spaces, how the jobs and spaces affect the development of networks and organisations, and how group structures may enable refugee communities to generate their own resources.

So far, the original contribution of the present study has consisted primarily of following our earlier work to the present. In the following section, we bring a new dimension to the question of how ethnicity interacts with structural circumstances to shape adaptation by a comparison of two specific Vietnamese American communities. We consideralso the malleability of ethnocultural factors within environments.

4.2. New Orleans and Biloxi: a comparison of two communities

We re-examine two Vietnamese communities – New Orleans (in Orleans Parish, which is identical with the city) and Biloxi (in Harrison County, which is made up of the Biloxi-Gulfport area) – that Dao studied, with data from the ACS. Using the 2001–2015 combined ACS data including both foreign-born and native born (see Ruggles et al. 2017 for details on data), we can see, in Table 7, that there were some similarities in employment between these two. In both, personal appearance worker was the most common type of occupation, making up 16% of Vietnamese workers in New Orleans and 6% of workers in Biloxi-Gulfport. Waiters and waitresses also made up a common occupational category in both places. The occupational concentrations of the Vietnamese in the US as a whole closely resembled those of these two communities.

The distinguishing characteristic of Vietnamese employment in Biloxi is clearly due to the importance of casinos in the region. One out of every twenty Vietnamese workers in this locality worked in the gaming industry as workers or supervisors. When we consider the fact that many of the cashiers, chefs and cooks, and waiters and waitresses would also be working in casinos, the major role of gambling as a source of employment for the Vietnamese in Biloxi becomes even more pronounced. As Table 8 shows, the biggest difference in industries between the two communities was the prominence of miscellaneous entertainment and recreational services, which employed one out of every ten workers in Biloxi-Gulfport. This also distinguishes the Vietnamese of Biloxi from the Vietnamese in the rest of the United States.

Taking the census data together with the more detailed information from our research and from the works of Vanlandingham and Dao, we can suggest that the influences on the

Table 7. Top five occupations of Vietnamese in Harrison County, Orleans Parish, and the US, 2001–2015.

Harrison County (Biloxi-Gulfport)	%	Orleans Parish (New Orleans)	%	US	%
1. Personal appearance workers	5.8	1. Personal appearance workers	15.7	1. Personal appearance workers	13.7
2. Gaming workers and supervisors	5.1	2. Cashiers	2.5	2. Assemblers and fabricators	2.6
3. Waiters and waitresses	4.6	3. Supervisors of sales workers	2.4	3. Cashiers	2.4
4. Cashiers	3.6	4. Waiters and waitresses	2.2	4. Waiters and waitresses	2.1
5. Chefs and cooks	3.0	5. Retail sales	1.9	5. Chefs and cooks	2.1

Source: Authors' illustration based on American Community Survey data.

Table 8. Top five industries of Vietnamese in Harrison County, Orleans Parish, and the US, 2001–2015.

Harrison County (Biloxi-Gulfport)	%	Orleans Parish (New Orleans)	%	US	%
1. Eating and drinking places	11.1	1. Misc. personal services	15.5	1. Misc. personal services	11.8
2. Misc. entertainment and recreation	9.9	2. Eating and drinking places	6.7	2. Eating and drinking places	7.1
3. Misc. personal services	6.6	3. Hospitals	5.5	3. Electrical equipment, machinery and supplies	4.7
4. Hospitals	3.8	4. Construction	4.0	4. Beauty shops	3.5
5. Misc. food preparation	3.3	5. Beauty shops	3.0	5. Construction	2.5

Source: Authors' illustration based on American Community Survey data.

mobility of Vietnamese come from two different kinds of assets: social assets, in the form of interpersonal connections and organisations generated by those connections, and economic assets, in the form of employment opportunities. The Vietnamese of New Orleans were initially resettled in one major neighbourhood, in which they established a strong ethnic community with rich social and economic resources. Others moved there to be with family members and friends. The Vietnamese of the Biloxi-Gulfport area moved there chiefly because there were jobs, and the jobs held them there. The social and economic assets are not mutually exclusive. Co-ethnics can create economic opportunities for group members through setting up ethnic minority businesses. Those who have or know about jobs can also pass information along to co-ethnics, as happened with Vietnamese who communicated with others about the availability of, first, seafood work and, later, casino employment. However, these two kinds of assets have varied in importance between the two communities.

Figure 3 contrasts the population growth in New Orleans and Biloxi-Gulfport. New Orleans, a bigger metropolitan area, was home to more Vietnamese people from the earliest year, 1980. Biloxi-Gulfport showed a rapid increase in population as news of jobs in

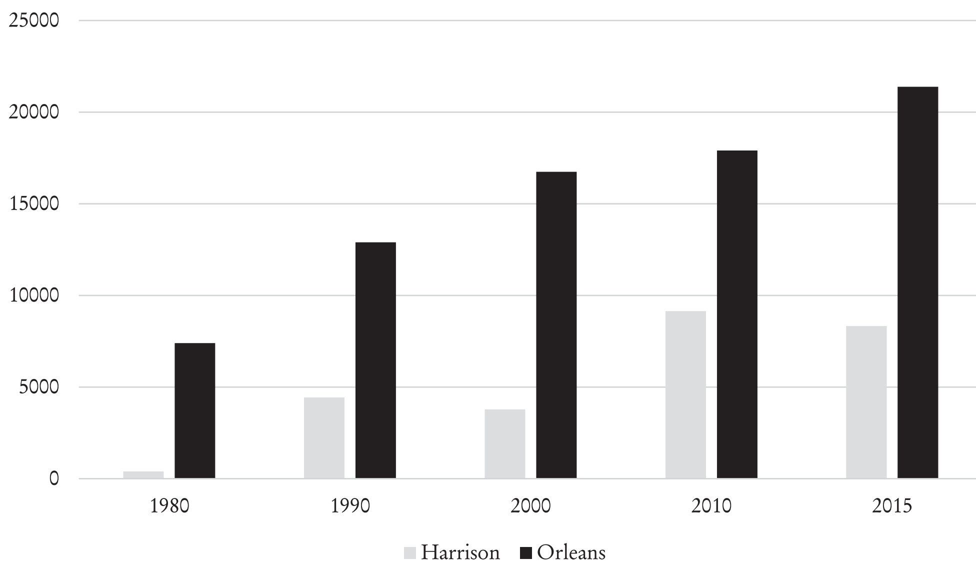

Figure 3. Vietnamese populations of Orleans Parish (New Orleans) and Harrison County (Biloxi-Gulfport), 1980–2015. Source: Authors' illustration based on American Community Survey data.

the area spread. However, while the Vietnamese population in New Orleans has grown steadily, even in the period of Hurricane Katrina, the population in Biloxi-Gulfport has fluctuated: it decreased somewhat from 1990 to 2000, grew again to reach a high point of over 9000 in 2010, and then had shrank by nearly 1000 people just five years later. Our suggestion is that the more volatile population of Biloxi-Gulfport is a consequence of the fact that it is based on the availability of jobs and tends to grow or shrink with the economy, while a community based on ethnic networks is more self-sustaining.

Table 9 shows that the Vietnamese of these two communities had Socioeconomic Index scores and employment rates similar to those of the Vietnamese elsewhere in the US. It is not surprising that the Vietnamese in Biloxi-Gulfport had higher rates of employment than those in New Orleans, considering that the availability of jobs was the main driver for the existence of the former community. From 2010 to 2015, though, employment in Biloxi-Gulfport dipped below that of New Orleans and below the national average level, probably because of downturns in employment in the gaming industry.

Although there are similarities between the two communities, there are also notable differences in the structure and organisation of ethnic communities. In *Growing Up American*, we observed that, since Louisiana's economic opportunities are limited compared with those of many other parts of the country, the existence of ethnic ties was the biggest draw for secondary migrants to New Orleans. Refugee communities have built up in areas primarily due to four factors – a good economy, an existing Vietnamese community, higher welfare benefits, and warm weather (Rhonda Cooperstein, researcher with the US refugee programme, personal interview, 14 June 1993). 'Since New Orleans doesn't have particularly high welfare benefits and its economy has been in a slump, if people are moving to Louisiana I'd say they are going for the community' (Ashton 1985, 12a).

In New Orleans, the main refugee resettlement organisation operated under Associated Catholic Charities. As elsewhere in the United States, federal authorities pressured local agencies to scatter refugees around the city. However, the local director of Resettlement and Immigration Services, Elise Cerniglia, decided to do just the opposite and place all of the newcomers together. Ms Cerniglia, having earlier been in charge of resettlement of Cuban refugees, believed that refugees should be concentrated so that they could help one another (Cerniglia, personal communication, 31 March 1994).

While refugee agencies can help seed a community based on ethnic social relations, secondary migration often takes place on the basis of interpersonal linkages. Once the Vietnamese community had been established, kinship and friendship brought other

Table 9. Mean Socioeconomic Index scores and employment rates of Vietnamese in Harrison County, Orleans Parish, and the US, 1990–2015.

	1990	2000	2010	2015
Mean SEI				
Harrison County (Biloxi-Gulfport)	36.8	29.5	36.2	40.4
Orleans Parish (New Orleans)	33.6	41.1	40.0	36.9
US	36.7	37.6	39.7	39.4
% employed				
Harrison County (Biloxi-Gulfport)	83.3	78.4	79.5	55.5
Orleans Parish (New Orleans)	62.8	59.5	75.1	74.4
US	68.2	66.5	72.7	76.8

Source: Authors' illustration based on American Community Survey data.

Vietnamese to New Orleans. As Ashton (1985) observed above, an existing Vietnamese community became the basis for its own growth and extension.

In contrast, the local economy was the main factor that drew Vietnamese to the Mississippi Gulf Coast. The settlement of Vietnamese in the Biloxi-Gulfport area may be traced to the effort of Richard Gollott, owner of the Golden Gulf Seafood processing factory. Gollott had reportedly heard that Vietnamese workers were shucking oysters in New Orleans. Seeking low-wage manual labourers, he began to recruit Vietnamese in New Orleans since seafood processing required little or no English. As word got out that Vietnamese could find jobs in seafood processing on the Gulf Coast, more and more Vietnamese began to arrive.

By the 1990s, casinos were becoming a major economic activity along the Gulf Coast. Following the acceptance of gambling by Biloxi in 1991, gambling became the most important industry of the region. Accordingly, jobs connected to the casinos became a new source of employment for the Vietnamese, and improving English abilities enabled many to work in higher-earning positions in the casinos. At the same time, though, the casinos encouraged the development of real estate and drove up housing costs, leading the Gulf Coast Vietnamese into more widely scattered residential patterns, inhibiting the establishment and maintenance of ethnic organisations (Bankston 2012).

In their process of adaption to American society, the Vietnamese have confronted with the issue of race. As many first-generation immigrants, they have experienced some social distance from white and black Americans. The Vietnamese were channelled into ethnic niches, such as seafood, fishing, and nail salons, by popular perceptions that these jobs had ethnic identities, as well as by social networks. Particularly in fishing, some locals resented Vietnamese who were seen as taking away work. However, the Vietnamese in both communities also benefitted from being newcomers without a clearly established position in the structural inequalities of a largely black–white society.

The comparison of two communities at the local level enables us to look more deeply at Vietnamese mobility in the US by emphasising the role of ethnic community in adaptation process. Ethnic communities have different kinds of assets, one of which social capital. While one would normally think that the availability of jobs was the most important resource for new arrivals, this comparison suggests that often timesthe reliance on interpersonal relationships and ethnic institutions can serve as a more reliable foundation, on which tangible and intangible social capital is produced.

5. Discussion and recommendations

Our prior research and analysis of recent data on the Vietnamese in the US provide clear evidence that the Vietnamese who arrived primarily as involuntary refugees have largely integrated well into American society and achieved substantial upward mobility. Their success, however cannot simply be attributed to the characteristics specific to the Vietnamese. Rather, ethno-cultural characteristics at the level of the individual and that of the group interact with structural circumstances. We can draw some generalisations for refugee resettlement from this case. We suggest that a careful and well-organised plan for the reception of involuntary migrant groups – stages of integration – lies at the core of our recommendations.

5.1. Pre-resettlement

Receiving involuntary migrants and preparing for their success in the host country should begin before their resettlement. In the first section of the paper, we discussed the establishment of overseas processing centres at the end of 1979, followed by the Refugee Act of 1980. As we described in *Growing Up American*, the processing centres held classes for adult refugees to learn English and basic skills needed in American workplaces and replicated American primary and secondary schools for children (Zhou and Bankston 1998). However, different demographic groups hold different kinds of cultural assets and social resources. Thus, refugee camps need to move beyond acting only as holding places or training centres. The camps and voluntary organisations must recognise the potential for self-help among refugees and develop mechanisms to assist refugees to interact with each other and support each other.

Typically, involuntary migrants arrive in refugee camps as isolated individuals or broken family groups. This early atomisation makes it difficult to create or recreate interpersonal networks after resettlement. Agencies that work with refugees can begin to alleviate this situation by encouraging migrants to organise for self-government, to identify their own problems, and to provide representation to the outside world. It would be beneficial even to put the migrants themselves in charge of distributing aid. At this early stage, also, refugee agencies can begin to identify the social resources possessed by groups and help mobilise these resources. This brings in a role for social science even before resettlement. Researchers can attempt to identify the extent to which home country institutions and patterns of behaviour have been disrupted by war and exile. Concerted efforts at finding the cultural and social resources that may be useful in adapting to a new homeland can start well before resettlement.

5.2. Initial resettlement

The conditions of resettlement vary widely across countries and communities. This means that careful assessment of local community conditions is necessary. What kinds of housing and jobs are available and what level of acceptance of new arrivals exists in receiving locations? As the example we gave of the Vietnamese in New Orleans suggests, the importance of not simply placing new arrivals but enabling them to build and rebuild their own social networks can help them to adapt well to a new environment. Further, making the greatest use of the resources available in the place of resettlement depends on those very social networks, which link people to jobs and enable them to help one another in finding housing.

Secondary migration is essential to rebuilding social networks and building refugee communities. The government and voluntary agencies of receiving countries cannot completely control the process of this movement. In fact, it is desirable that they do not do so. Where involuntary migrants are first placed is not necessarily where they will end up. So resettlement agencies can best do their jobs by helping migrants cluster where the migrants themselves think best. Working with secondary, internal migrants and remaining flexible and open to the expansion of immigrant settlements, then, should be part of the office of settlement agencies.

5.3. Finding and supporting ethnic strategies for integration

As the contrast between the New Orleans and Gulf Coast communities illustrates, the mix of external and internal assets of refugee settlements can differ. Although ethnic networks contribute to the adaptation and mobility of group members, through connecting people to opportunities and enabling mutual support and co-ordination, some (such as New Orleans) rely more on cultural and interpersonal resources than others. In other locations, an ethnic community may be defined more by the kinds of employment that create or maintain the community, such as seafood processing, casinos, and fishing/shrimping in the Gulf Coast locations. The work of resettlement agencies should involve identifying the kinds of internal and external assets available to newcomers in particular places, helping them recognise their own strengths and challenges, and working on ways to increase different kinds of assets.

Policymakers and agencies should see integration and upward mobility, and not simply placement and survival, as goals of resettlement. This means that developing community organisations, identifying available employment niches, and working with settlers to design flexible strategic plans for social and economic mobility should be central to the resettlement work. We are not suggesting that resettlement agencies can pick and choose what kinds of community structures are available to involuntary migrants. We do recommend, however, that governmental and nongovernmental agencies involved with resettlement should work together with migrant group leaders to identify the kinds of cultural, economic, and social resources available to new arrivals and consider how to help develop or mobilise those resources to enable mobility in a new location.

5.4. A second-generation focus

In *Growing Up American*, we looked at the adaptation of the Vietnamese in the United States by examining how the children of a refugee group were doing in their parents' new homeland, and at the determinants of the relative success of the Vietnamese second generation (Zhou and Bankston 1998). In our later work, we argue that the mobility of the second generation is the measure for defining the adaptation of any immigrant group to life in a destination country (Bankston 2014; Zhou and Bankston 2016). The upward social mobility of the children of refugees in a host society depends on how their parents' national-origin groups are organised, how these national-origin group organisations connect to the larger society, and how national-origin group resources can be capitalised by the children. In the longer term, then, the focus of mobility studies of involuntary migrants must be on how the interpersonal, institutional, and cultural assets of immigrant groups can co-ordinate with resources available to them from the host society to encourage the progress of the generations coming after migration.

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