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# Differentiated embedding among the Vietnamese refugees in London and the UK: fragmentation, complexity, and 'in/visibility'

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**KEYWORDS** First- and second-generation; intra-ethnic divisions; differentiated embedding; Vietnamese communities in London

## Introduction

Integration has become an increasingly topical and important issue both in terms of a key policy objective relating to the resettlement of refugees and migrants, and in popular public debate – with renewed interest in the concept following the recent ‘refugee crisis’ sparked by the Syrian civil war, and in the UK, led by Brexit. While the concept of integration has served an important policy concept for measuring outcomes of refugee and migrant incorporation, it has also been a controversial and a hotly debated issue (Castles et al. 2003). Grzymala-Kazłowska and Phillimore (2018) note that within official policy discourse in the UK, and other European countries, it has become increasingly normative and dominated by an assimilationist stance. This has problematic connotations for theorising and understanding different forms of incorporation and belonging. Critics have identified a tendency to treat integration as a one-way process rather than a two-way one, involving shifts in the host society as well as among refugees and migrant populations (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992); to equate integration with assimilation of the migrant (Berry 1992); and for being based on the outdated assumption that host societies are homogenous and cohesive in the first place, rather than complex and diverse (Phillimore 2012). A further tension exists between a focus on the functional versus social aspects of integration: while policymakers have generally focused on the more easily measurable ‘functional’ aspects (such as employment, education, health), important social aspects such as identity, security and belonging/wellbeing have been overlooked (Ager and Strang 2008, Grzymala-Kazłowska 2017). However, for theoretical and empirical purposes, paying attention to the complexities and nuances of social processes involved in the resettlement and incorporation of refugees and migrants is increasingly advocated by social scientists (e.g. Castles et al. 2003; Urry 2000). A key intervention by Ager and Strang (2008) in their ‘indicators of integration’ model attempts to capture the full complexity of processes of integration by including both functional and social features of integration. Gisselquist (2020) builds upon these approaches by drawing attention to the unique profile of groups within both specific local, and national contexts as playing a key role in structuring integration outcomes and inequalities.

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As key social factors in the processes of refugee and migrant adaptation and settlement, features of identity and belonging have been accounted for through the development of alternative concepts such as; attachment (Grzymala-Moszczynska and Trabka 2014), belonging (Fortier 2000), embedding (Ryan and Mulholland 2015), and anchoring (Grzymala-Kazłowska 2017) which highlight the processual character of identity and social ties involved in adaptation and settlement, mitigating the more fixed or narrow accounts of integration. This has also developed alongside a recent call to rethink integration by taking into account superdiversity, new migration and new migratory practices (Grzymala-Kazłowska and Phillimore 2018). Ryan's (2018) concept of 'differentiated embedding' is of value for capturing both aspects of identity/belonging and diversification in different degrees of attachments and belonging across different social sectors. Differentiated embedding prioritises the dynamic processes through which migrants negotiate attachments and belonging to different social and structural settings, in varying degrees. Ryan's (2018) focus also attempts to overcome 'simplistic', one-dimensional, 'all or nothing' views of migrant 'integration' (p237) like those mentioned above. In order to capture differentiation of adaptation and settlement experiences across the London Vietnamese communities, this article will draw upon a differentiated embedding approach to highlight the complex and messy experience of in-group diversity and social attachments across different social sectors in a more nuanced way – and move beyond polarised accounts of refugee experience, such as the common 'success' vs. 'failure' binaries (Bankston and Zhou 1997). I explore factors that have impacted upon the experience of the Vietnamese refugees and their children in the UK, both in terms of distinctive forms of disadvantage, inequality, and exclusion, as well as the strategies and forms of agency developed. It is argued that the distinct context of reception in combination with different social backgrounds of the UK Vietnamese and their emerging social networks and have formed the key basis for both their success and disadvantage in British society. Using Ryan's (2018) differential embedding as an alternative approach to integration, I suggest, can better capture the complexities and nuances of the Vietnamese experience. In the following sections, I briefly outline the policy context for the resettlement of Vietnamese refugees in Britain and their contemporary demographic position, I then turn to an analysis of their social and labour market insertion in London focussing on the role of community structures and divisions, and broader social status and racialisation in mainstream society. I conclude by arguing that whilst the UK Vietnamese have developed niche forms of advantage in the labour market, this 'success' must be understood in the context of structural constraints which have also constructed a racialised images of an in/visible and 'silent' population in public life. This demonstrates the iterative nature of both social and structural-functional elements in so-called integration processes.

## Context and background

In 1975, the fall of Saigon marked the end of the America–Vietnam War and led thousands of refugees from Vietnam to flee to countries all over the world. Initially, these were South Vietnamese refugees fleeing in small boats and rescued by naval ships in the area (the majority of these refugees went to the U.S.A., Canada, Australia, and France). However, the refugees arriving in Britain came mainly from the former North Vietnam; the majority of which were ethnic Chinese fleeing the ethnic cleansing that took place after the Chinese invasion of North Vietnam in 1979. These refugees left in

large boats and were hosted in 'holding camps' in Hong Kong and other countries in South-east Asia before coming to the West. Their social composition and experience were distinct from the majority of refugees arriving in other Western nations as they tended to come from rural and poor areas of northern Vietnam (62 per cent) and were mainly ethnic Chinese (77 per cent) living in Vietnam (Duke and Marshall 1995). The UK was slow in joining the international community to relieve the Vietnamese refugee crisis and it was not until 1979 that it began receiving the first 'quota' of refugees. By the early 1990s a total of about 24,000 refugees were accepted for resettlement (Refugee Council 1991). The Vietnamese refugees constituted a 'special group' in the eyes of UK policy makers because they were accepted for asylum *before* their arrival and many came as part of a quota programme specifically designed for them by the international community (Duke and Marshall 1995). While 'quota' refugees were provided with systematic arrangements for reception (including housing and social welfare support) organised at the state level, non-quota refugees (who made up more than half the population) were left in the care of local authorities, meaning they were largely unsupported. This had an important impact, as these refugees came from underprivileged socioeconomic backgrounds and were more likely to have spent periods of time in refugee holding camps in Hong Kong, which had damaging psychological and health effects (Hitchcox 1988). The combination of these factors had a detrimental effect on how well this group was able to adjust to their new lives in Britain (Refugee Action 2003). The refugees were also generally poorly prepared for life in the UK due to a lack of transferable skills; low levels of education; limited prior contact with Western civilisation; the UK not being their chosen destination; the absence of an established Vietnamese community to support new arrivals (Dalglish 1989).

Two host-country factors further impacted upon the early settlement and future integration of Vietnamese refugees in the UK. The first was their arrival during a period of economic recession and high unemployment during the 1970s; this had a number of implications for the financial assistance available for resettling refugees, as well as the conditions for integrating them into the UK labour market and their future prospects for integration in the UK. The second was the UK government reception policies to deal with refugees – notably the 1979 'dispersal policy' that was intended to spread the burden of housing the refugees across the country and to enable better integration within British communities by avoiding 'ghettoization' (Robinson and Hale 1989). These factors, in addition to a lack of familiarity/colonial contact between the British and the Vietnamese (and the fact the UK was not the first country of choice for most of the refugees) led to a difficult readjustment period. Their reception and later 'integration' into the UK was also strongly influenced by the multicultural model of Britain, which was based at the time upon the Commonwealth model privileging groups from the ex-colonies over newcomers (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992). Under the dispersal policy, the refugees were scattered widely across rural areas of Britain. As many of the Vietnamese refugees were themselves from rural towns and villages in Vietnam, there was a misplaced assumption that they would adapt more easily to a rural context in the UK. These areas were harder hit by the UK recession, making finding employment (and thus integration) even more difficult (Lam and Martin 1997). As the Vietnamese refugees were so sparsely dispersed (with fewer than 300 refugees in the most densely populated areas of London), the provision of specialised and tailored services was rendered virtually impossible (Dalglish 1989). This context and the analysis of the experiences of the UK Vietnamese below, neatly reflects the importance

of what Gisselquist's (2020) identifies as the five key factors influencing migrants' 'context of reception'; (1) governmental policies and institutions; (2) labour markets reception; (3) existing co-ethnic communities (4) human capital and socioeconomic characteristics and (5) social cohesion or 'groupness'. This article will show how these factors interact and combine to shape processes of mixed embedding in the UK.

Studies conducted 30 years after the arrival of the Vietnamese refugees in Britain enable a rudimentary outline of the contemporary Vietnamese population demographic. While at an official level there is no 'Vietnamese' category for the purposes of ethnic monitoring, statistics on the Vietnamese are available by country of birth, which enables data on the first-generation. An imprecise but rough indication of the size of the entire Vietnamese population (including British-born Vietnamese) is available through data based upon ethnicity 'write-ins'. At the last Census, in 2011, the Vietnamese population was counted at 60,635 in England and Wales (ONS 2011), confirming previous estimates from community leaders who placed the population at 55,000–65,000 in Britain (IOM 2006). More recent estimates by the UK Vietnamese website VietHome place the community at around 90,000 (including the undocumented population). While current ethnic monitoring procedures preclude counting the exact number of British-born (second- or third-generation) Vietnamese, community organisations have placed estimates at 22,000 in 2005 (IOM 2006). The Vietnamese population is thus a numerically small population in the UK representing only about 0.1 per cent of the overall UK population of 65,648,100 (ONS 2017). This compares to the UK's larger minorities such as the 'Asian' category (Indian, Bangladeshi, and Pakistani) at 8 per cent, and Black/African/Caribbean category at 3 per cent of the overall population (ONS 2011).

Data on geographical distribution indicates that the Vietnamese population has continued to re-concentrate in well-defined urban hubs in line with trends of secondary migration (after their initial dispersal in the late 1970s). Of the 29,459 Vietnam-born population living in England and Wales, over half (15,337) are living in London, followed by Birmingham (1,479), Manchester (865), Nottingham (405), Leeds (374), Northampton (322), Cambridge (259), Newcastle-upon-Tyne (245), Bristol (220), and Leicester (202) (ONS 2011). While these numbers only reflect UK residents born in Vietnam, an educated guess would be double the amount to take into account the second-generation Vietnamese and increase the figure by a further one-third to take into account the number of undocumented Vietnamese presently in the UK. As will be discussed later, this may be partly due to the recent success of Vietnamese businesses including restaurants and nail salons, in addition to shadow-economy industries such as cannabis farming, which has caught the attention of the British media and is perceived as a 'big draw' for Vietnamese migrants since the early 2000s. Within London, the most current statistics and estimates show that over one-third of the population live in the boroughs of Lewisham, Southwark, and Hackney (IOM 2006).

## Methodology

This article draws upon insights from qualitative data to explore experiences, networks and affiliations according to social backgrounds and ties. It focuses upon communities within London to explore how these various layers have worked together to produce divergent outcomes. London, as home to the most established Vietnamese communities in the

UK, forms the focus of this article. London also provides a useful microcosm of the different groups of Vietnamese, business endeavours, community group organisations. The material used in this article is largely drawn from qualitative in-depth interviews collected with first- and second-generation Vietnamese in London during the period 2005–09 in addition to ongoing research insights and involvement since then (see Author 2015). This includes 30 in-depth biographical interviews with second-generation Vietnamese and semi-structured interviews with community leaders and workers, as well as participant observation, informal conversations, and attendance at a range of community events based around East and Southeast London. This research focuses on both first-generation and second-generation Vietnamese with a stronger emphasis on the later. Although the study does not claim a representative or generalisable sample, a range of perspectives from participants from northern and southern Vietnamese backgrounds, ethnic Chinese and ethnic Vietnamese, a balance of male and female participants and those from difference social class backgrounds, from different parts of London are included. It should be emphasised that this study does not claim to offer a holistic understanding of the Vietnamese community and the claims made on the basis of this data can only suggest a partial explanation.

### Labour market experiences among first- and second- generations

The labour market and socioeconomic position of the Vietnamese in Britain is difficult to assess in its entirety due to the lack of available and disaggregated statistics. Existing but incomplete data suggest a mixed picture across the generations with the first-generation experiencing persistently low levels of employment and high levels of inactivity, and the second-generation experiencing high levels of education and occupational mobility. For example, Labour Force Survey data on Vietnam-born residents (first-generation) in the UK showed that in 2003, 23.5 per cent of Vietnamese migrants between the ages of 16 and 64 years were unemployed (Spence 2005), with some estimates placing these rates as high as 60% in the London borough of Lewisham (Tu 2000). In the first quarter of 2016, only 42.5 per cent of the 31, 567 Vietnam-born residents in the UK were employed, 7.4 per cent unemployed, and 39.8 per cent inactive (ONS 2017), this compares to the 2011 UK national average of 70.4 per cent employed, 8.1 per cent unemployed, and 23.3 per cent inactive (ONS 2011). Among the second-generation, while employment figures are unavailable due to a lack of ethnic monitoring, educational trends are suggestive of positive rates of intergenerational mobility; while levels of higher-level qualifications among the first-generation or Vietnam-born population only rose from 18.7 per cent in 2001 (Spence 2005), to 22 per cent in 2017 (ONS 2017) (around 15 per cent below the national average), data from two London local authorities (Lambeth and Southwark) indicate that Vietnamese and Chinese children consistently outperformed all other ethnic groups (Rutter 2006), and around 47 per cent of Vietnamese pupils in Southwark gained five Grade A\*–C grades at GCSE in 2001, compared with 34 per cent of white pupils (Rutter 2006, 68). Scholars argue that the strong Vietnamese cultural values of prioritising education impacts upon attitudes to their education (Lam and Martin 1997), and this may partly explain this intergenerational success.

High levels of unemployment among the first-generation have been attributed to the legacy of labour market reception (Lam and Martin 1997), and the dispersal policy

(Robinson and Hale 1989), discussed above. Within the labour market, high levels of segregation (27.5 per cent) have been found in the hotel and catering industry (Spence 2005) rising to 31.9 per cent for Southeast Asians in 2012 (SOPEMI 2012). Self-employment has played a central role among the UK Vietnamese population in creating employment for all family members and enabling women to combine their work with household responsibilities and care of elderly or young family members Vuong (2006). This connection between ethnic labour market trajectories, gender roles and family employment strategies has long been identified as a common feature of migrant groups more generally (Ram, Theodorakopoulos, and Jones 2008). Employment has been identified as serving an important functional basis for the 'integration' of refugees into society, given its function in promoting 'economic independence, planning for the future, meeting members of the host society, development of language skills and restoring self-esteem (Ager and Strang 2008). However, in the self-employment and small business sector, some of these features may apply less than to employment in the mainstream labour market (Apitzsch and Kontos 2008). A distinctive area of self-employment among the UK Vietnamese has been the nail salon industry which developed from the late 1990s – emerging from hair salons (and developed through family links in the U.S.A., from where products and techniques are imported) – off licences, home-delivery catering, pubs, and snooker clubs (Vuong 2006). Between 2000 and 2005 the nail industry became the fastest-growing UK Vietnamese business sector, accounting for over half of all Vietnamese businesses in London (Bagwell 2006). In the early 2000s 284 Vietnamese businesses in Greater London were identified (Bagwell, Hitchcock, and Nguyen 2003), although those operating in the informal economy were believed to account for a further 300–400 businesses (Bagwell, Hitchcock, and Nguyen 2003), and in 2017 the Hair and Beauty Industry Authority counted 1,512 nail bars/technicians (HABIA 2017).

### *Labour market experiences among the second-generation*

Given the context set out above, a general understanding of the trend for employment among the second-generation is that they have outperformed their parents. A shared view among community informants is that while the younger generation are seen to be 'high achievers', their confidence is often undermined by a combination of both their own lack of awareness of their culture and 'homeland', and a lack of awareness in British society, leading them to be less 'vocal' than other minorities. This was evidenced by the fact that many second-generation Vietnamese were perceived to be entering more conventional occupations such as business, accountancy, and information technology rather than branching out to 'riskier' and creative career paths. Nearly all of the second-generation participants in this study had gone into 'mainstream' traditional occupations and only a minority continued in the family business; Of those who did work in the family business, there was a reluctance to remain there due to a range of factors including, connotations associated with working in the niche economy, a perceived lack of occupational mobility, and the power dynamics at play both within the community and in relation to mainstream society, as articulated below:

I am a nail technician as most Vietnamese are [laughs]. I fall under that bracket you know, 'the job for the Vietnamese' sort of thing but I want to get out of that. I am not proud of it, and I think if you want to ask a lot of Chinese people who are in Chinese takeaways you know



they probably won't be proud of it either. It is just like the majority of what you find is that the workers in nail bars are like new immigrants ... so I am not particularly proud of myself falling into this bracket because I actually feel like I could do more [...] instead of leaving a good mark we are already branded as weed growers! I mean they even make some songs about this you know, about the Vietnamese over here. It is quite shocking!

(Kim Ly, 25, northern Vietnamese, nail worker, Southeast London)

London is quite rough and there's lots and lots of competition from other salons, there is a lot of violence and abusive behaviour, I'm not up to that. So, I like to work outside of London, you know where there is no competition and you ... respect your ... there is no abusive behaviour. You are paid to work, you are not paid to listen to abuse.

(Mary, 27, northern Vietnamese, nail worker, East London)

Attributing nail salon work as a devalued sector for the second-generation, as 'job(s) for new immigrants', both Mary and Kim Ly also indicate elsewhere in their accounts the role of hierarchy and patriarchy in the industry and the need to navigate this by having to accept first-generation male authority and 'cut-throat' competition in the industry, which they observe as sometimes leading to 'abusive behaviour'. Other research has found that second-generation business owners tend to hold more individualistic values and often struggle to work with older first-generation family members due to the obligation to treat them with greater respect (Bagwell 2006). However, Kim Ly and Mary described how as second-generation nail salon workers, their privileged access to mainstream society and English-language skills, gave them more leverage and power in the workplace by comparison to first-generation and new migrant workers. The concerns indicated by these participants about working in the nail salons also have some broader foundation, as argued by Bagwell (2006): while second-generation Vietnamese have access to a wider range of networks than the first-generation or new arrivals, a sense of obligation towards the family, often coupled with the need for family support with the business, mean the second-generation are still strongly embedded in family and community networks. Other research has noted the long hours worked (10–12 h a day, seven days per week), leaving little time to develop other contacts outside the existing family and social networks (Wilkins 2016). These issues related specifically to the children of entrepreneurs from northern Vietnamese backgrounds rather than those from Southern Vietnamese backgrounds, whom, by contrast, tended to feel 'cut adrift' from a sense of community and Vietnamese networks.

### *Professional experience among second-generation southern Vietnamese*

Among children of the southern Vietnamese refugees, a different set of concerns relating to issues of cultural identity were foregrounded instead. Here, a perceived 'erosion' of cultural identities was expressed as feeling 'caught in a bind' between, a lack of a sense of belonging to a Vietnamese community versus a lack of openness in mainstream institutions to expression of ethnic difference. Southern Vietnamese participants frequently referred to the 'strong' or 'trusted' networks' (see Hitchcock and Wesner 2009) among the northern Vietnamese from which they were excluded and formed the more dominant social networks in the London communities. This is illustrated by Hoa, a Vietnamese community organisation worker:



They [North Vietnamese] have friends, relatives, it is their business they have a lot of friends, relatives and a lot of friends helping around. But in the South, hardly any ... They [North Vietnamese] know people through people and 'cos like they have a lot of relatives here, a lot of cousins and the cousin knows friends of friends, of friends and more friends so ... they are very good in communication. That is why they will have a good network! You know you are helping around each other, and they will stand up for each other ... but we [southerners] don't have that.

(Hoa, 25, southern Vietnamese, community worker, Southeast London)

The role of social bonds in the extended family and other non-kin networks enjoyed by the northern Vietnamese become essential for mutual support in both business, employment and in social and emotional matters. By contrast, being of southern Vietnamese origin, Hoa feels at a disadvantage in these spheres due to her comparatively small extended family and friendship networks. A further aspect of the social divisions experienced by Hoa related to her ethnic Chinese heritage which acted as a barrier to her local Vietnamese community. Hoa describes feeling not able to belong fully to the community because of the combination of her Chinese and southern Vietnamese origins:

because I wasn't born in Vietnam but because my great grandparents are Chinese, they are Chinese so they [Vietnamese] took me as Chinese-Vietnamese so 'okay so you are different' so there is no long relationship or communication there ... you just have that natural instinct, you just have this view and you can sense it. There is a barrier between me and them.

(Hoa, 25, southern Vietnamese, community worker, Southeast London)

Being ethnic-Chinese Vietnamese from the former South Vietnam, excluded her from community business networks which had implications for her professional life. In other mainstream employment sectors, the opposite process took place, as a form of 'whitewashing' experienced among the second-generation southern Vietnamese in their inclusion into professional contexts. For example, one participant, Duc, who works as a City banker, recounts the process by which he had to adopt the norms and values of 'corporate England' and marginalise his Vietnamese background in order to succeed/be accepted:

I guess I have already conformed at a young age, umm, you know, when I had set my sights on working in that kind of environment that I had already conformed to that, so, it wasn't a case of 'I had to readjust myself'. So by then I'd already sort of had the same sort of thoughts and feelings, the same kind of ambition, the same kind of ideals, ideology as the people who were recruiting. So it wasn't so much for me ... you know? I'd already conformed. Yeah?

(Duc, male, southern Vietnamese, 30, banking executive, North London)

Duc experiences an absence of a two-way process of integration having already embedding himself strongly in the workplace by 'conforming' to the 'white' world of banking. Duc is nevertheless critical of what he sees as a kind of ethnic tokenism operating in the industry whereby white middle-class values are dominant and expected to be held by everyone, even if you look different and represent 'diversity':

I felt sorry for people who didn't 'fit their mould'. You know, working now for the last few years I find that the whole ethnic diversity, ethnic sort of quotas which, every institution in the financial ... you know, 'oh yes we are ethnically this ...' it seems like 'yes you are but as long as the people fit your mould', so you are not likely to go and hire someone who, you know, went to a less prestigious institution and someone with very poor GCSE or A level

grades, umm. You will hire an ethnic person if they went to a British institution, if they had good grades, they had the same sort of thoughts and feelings etc. It is just you are looking for someone who are like yourselves, but are not white—that is your ethnic quota!

(Duc)

Duc's criticism of the practices within the industry is revealing of his own position within it, as while he was able to pass as middle-class and was seen to fit in, he also notes how he did not have the option to express his cultural background more openly. In this case, Duc's adaptation to the corporate workplace might be understood as a negotiation of the 'split identity' position noted by Sims (2007) as 'yellow on the outside and white on the inside', as he only partially belongs through the virtue of being easily culturally assimilable, based upon the strong educational values adopted from his university-educated parents.

It has been suggested that the UK Vietnamese have experienced a generational change with regard to their core values, which may have influenced the labour market trajectories of the second-generation (Hitchcock and Wesner 2009). One explanation could be that this has enabled them to more easily move away from the family business and enter into mainstream occupations. However, in employment and the labour market there is a mixed picture within the Vietnamese population according to northern/southern Vietnamese origins, social class, generation and industry. While, self-employment has been seen to be dominated by the northern Vietnamese, who have 'cornered the market' in the niche economy of the nail business – it has also tended to be dominated by the first-generation and new migrants. Hitchcock and Wesner (2009) use the notion of 'trusted networks' to explain the success of Vietnamese small businesses in the UK, which they argue is based on 'the extended family and friends, and loyalty to one's home region', giving the Vietnamese a competitive advantage. However, this explanation is of only partial use because it prioritises a focus on networks and overlooks the role of structural disadvantages in the mainstream labour market and an interpretation of these networks as being developed out of necessity. A lack of alternative sources of employment and an avoidance of racism, may better explain why the Vietnamese (like other ethnic groups) to enter into self-employment and become over-concentrated in a few key sectors of the economy (see Ram, Theodorakopoulos, and Jones 2008). For example, Bagwell (2006) found a combination of structural and cultural processes were at work; where the Vietnamese experienced limited support and service provision by enterprise-support services, and the success of the nail salons and their family business model actually prevented them from taking risks to expand outside the sector. In the mainstream labour market, while the second-generation of all backgrounds appear to be branching out into a range of occupations, those at the top of the occupational ladder have tended to come from southern Vietnamese backgrounds, whose families generally came from more professional classes in Vietnam, and who lacked both the networks and experience for business.

The examples in this section illustrate the different ways, and degrees, in which embedding has occurred in the labour market and has been negotiated by participants according to their social background under the backdrop of the resettlement legacy. In terms of understanding 'integration', a differentiated embedding approach captures in a more nuanced way how being perceivably well-embedded in one area (namely; work and

education) may necessitate the experience of weaker ties and social connections in the ethnic community or in mainstream society. Such explanations reveal the importance of taking into account complexity and multifaceted explanations of different modes of incorporation within and across refugee groups.

### **Community divisions and organisation in London**

The contemporary configuration of the Vietnamese communities in London are understood, both officially and unofficially, as being divided into four main social groups which correspond roughly to initial arrival characteristics: refugees from the former South Vietnam, refugees from the former North Vietnam, new undocumented economic migrants from northern and central Vietnam, and international students (see IOM 2006). The northern Vietnamese have tended to have more contact with Vietnam in recent years due to their less critical stance towards the Vietnamese government (as economic refugees and fleeing ethnic persecution for the ethnic Chinese, rather than straightforwardly political refugees), while the southern Vietnamese have maintained stronger contacts in the international diaspora (U.S.A., Australia, Canada and France), including a range of transnational organisations and networks, due to their more critical stance towards the Vietnamese government, as also found elsewhere in the diaspora (Lieu 2011; Viviani 1996). These subdivisions hold continued relevance among the first-generation (James 2011), as well as the second-generation (Author 2015) and shape their transnational activities (Author 2017). For those born in Britain; notably, the children of northern Vietnamese parents, greater contact with the London community has often translated into a more acute sense of exclusion and lack of belonging among the London Vietnamese communities due their awareness of their limited connection to and knowledge of Vietnam, including limited access to the cultural heritage and language. Meanwhile, those from southern Vietnamese families tend to have a more politicised identity and looked to international (anti-communist) diaspora organisations in the U.S.A., Australia, and France (Author 2015). Issues of internal division and fragmentation have shaped possibilities for the development of community solidarity and the development of infrastructure enabling engagement with public and mainstream organisations to secure resources and support. Notably, a lack of sustained support from government funds (for cultural and community resources) has had an impact upon public visibility and group-identity formation. As will be argued below, these factors have contributed to ongoing inequalities experienced by the Vietnamese in Britain particularly in areas of social and political participation.

### **Fragmentation and 'community cohesion'**

The Vietnamese population in London is geographically scattered across London boroughs, forming seven distinct community 'hubs' in Lambeth, Lewisham, Greenwich, Hammersmith, Tower Hamlets, Hackney, and Peckham. Community leaders in these areas have described these sub-communities as relatively self-contained noting that members were unlikely to network across other hubs to attend events or use services provided by others apart from for specific occasions such as Mid-Autumn Festival or lunar New Year. The development of these separate hubs is thought to have endured as a

legacy of council housing provision by boroughs during the 1980s (Vaughan 1992; Tomlins, Johnson, and Owen 2002). It was suggested by community leaders that the availability of housing and personal economic constraints remain an important determinant of housing patterns rather than those based on kin ties or solidarity. Over the years since 'secondary migration' (Robinson and Hale 1989), family members and those coming from the same villages in Vietnam applied to live near each other to form very small clusters of two or three households, but the majority of the Vietnamese population in London live among a range of other Vietnamese, forming networks with those from a similar background in Vietnam (community leaders 1, 2, and 3). A study by Tomlins, Johnson, and Owen (2002) exploring the housing issues of the Vietnamese population by area of greatest concentration – East and Southeast London (Lambeth, Greenwich, Tower Hamlets, and Newham) – found the main reasons given by the Vietnamese-born participants for moving were; proximity to friends, relatives, and other Vietnamese who shared common customs, thoughts, and lifestyles, as well as to share in facilities. These choices offered a sense of 'belonging' and provided a more definable social role for the refugees, rather than being made out of a sense of identity or kinship (Tomlins, Johnson, and Owen 2002). Haswell (1999) also showed that the Vietnamese attempted to avoid high levels of racial harassment by seeking protection in more ethnically concentrated areas. These experiences have been central to the way in which the community has been restructured and more recent research has shown how these decisions continue to shape the experiences of refugees and continue to be linked to employment and mutual support (Wilkins 2016). These factors relate to a broader identification of the role of housing among refugee groups as a key 'facilitator' of safety, language and other knowledge (Ager and Strang 2008), indicating that geographic fragmentation can undermine these processes.

Socio-political differences also characterise the London Vietnamese population. These can be understood according to regional origins (northern/southern), ethnic origins (Vietnamese/Chinese), and migratory cohort (established refugees, new economic migrants and international students). Such groups live among one another but tend to use separate networks and different services (also see Tomlins, Johnson, and Owen 2002). This 'separateness' of social networks was explained by one community worker:

When I first came [in the early 1980s] it was quite divided between North and the South, and Chinese and Vietnamese, and now it is less than before, but still like the Chinese are setting up their own groups and the Vietnamese the same ... and sometimes you know they don't like dealing with the South [Vietnamese], you know they see the South [Vietnamese] more dominating, because they are more educated when they come in here. The majority of the South [Vietnamese] will be more educated than the North [Vietnamese], so sometimes I feel quite confused really, for me, my work, because myself I very much identify myself and my identity as combined—Chinese and Vietnamese.'

(Female, mid-forties, community arts youth worker, Chinese-Vietnamese, Lewisham, 2007)

While it was generally acknowledged that it is important for these sub-groups to have organisations and services tailored towards their particular and specific backgrounds, there were also concerns over missing out on overall opportunities across the London Vietnamese communities to share advice and facilities ranging from cultural events, specialist knowledge, and support in applying for government funding and fundraising

for particular community causes. Another community worker explains a similar process working among both the elderly and youth groups users of his community centre:

There is a funny feeling between the old generation. It just so happened that the young, the South people tend to stick together with the South and the North tend to stick together with the North, there has never been an agenda of separating the two or rejecting the other, it just so happens to be that way because, maybe our parents were that way.

(Male, 34, community worker, southern Vietnamese, Tower Hamlets)

These sentiments present barriers for cross-community building, accessing and sharing funding or developing a putative ‘cohesive community’ for strategic and political purposes (see James 2011). Differences like these present challenges for community workers seeking ways to improve the situation of the first-generation (of all groups), especially since the Vietnamese are no longer a priority for government funding. Vietnamese community leaders spoke about having to deploy a ‘high level of sensitivity’ in order to try to bring these different elements of the community together for funding purposes. From a practical perspective, Community Worker 2 commented that it was ‘very difficult to please everyone in the Vietnamese community, and cater for all the differences’. It is based upon these formations, and the plurality of identities among the London Vietnamese population that notions of presumed ‘groupness’, or a monolithic or cohesive ‘community’ must be challenged (Author 2015),

The perpetuation of intra-group divisions may be explained according to combination of both official and cultural processes which lead to differential access to resources and outcomes and impact differently upon the socioeconomic chances and opportunities of the Vietnamese populations. One participant recognised varying degrees of ‘hostility’ between groups but pointed out that among the first-generation of refugees there were still some ‘very radically minded members who held extreme anti-communist sentiments – especially those from southern Vietnam’ (Community leader 1). Among the northern Vietnamese population, a strong ‘the enemy’ sentiment is observed to persist and is believed to be held by those who are ‘less educated’. Notably, the majority of the community leaders are still of southern Vietnamese origins which is in keeping with their initial position as generally better educated and more politically engaged. James (2011) has noted that those who are involved in local communities in leadership structures, planning groups, the implementation of policy, and in provision of services are also involved in transnational activities through networks across the wider Viet Kieu population. These structures or sentiments were also observable in the views and experiences of the second-generation, but were instead based on forms of endogamy (rather than hostility), where they occupy separate social networks out of patterns of familiarity:

I just don’t feel associated to it [Vietnamese community] that much. I wouldn’t mind being part of it more and having a role in it, but then you do feel a lot of the time that it is not close knit enough or like people don’t like they disregard somethings you do like if you do something for the Vietnamese community, a lot of people though ‘oh it is just a scam’ or something like that. Or it is just umm people trying to make money sort of thing, so I haven’t really associated myself with it that much.

(Rachel, 24, MSc student, northern Vietnamese, East London)

... some North Vietnamese people ... they didn't sort of treat me at all as being Vietnamese they just treated me as being just British and just there (..) they didn't have any understanding about how the South Vietnamese people came here ... like they had to leave Vietnam ... for me to get this level of education we had to move and so therefore I'd lost touch with my Vietnamese culture, South Vietnamese people tend to be much more sympathetic about that, whereas the North Vietnamese they have access to like ... they have money, they have I guess power, as well

(Binh, female, 19, medical student, southern Vietnamese, South London)

I find people from the North, in London, not everyone, but generally, I think it is a different taste, different habits, different mentality and they are not as nice to people that I found in Orange County [U.S.A.]. Most of them from the North were influenced by the government more, and this is what my dad as well believes, that the government has in a way brainwashed people and affected their mentality. So it is just like China it has created a certain type of people that has learnt to be protective, that has learnt to be a bit distrustful, you know?

(Hai, male, 28, law student, southern Vietnamese, Hackney)

While the second-generation were perceived by the community informants to be the key group to bring about change in the community (through improved communication and solidarity) given their lessened awareness of group differences, the extracts above suggest the contrary. Community informants referred to the 'greater ease' of the younger generation in 'crossing social boundaries' through one-to-one interactions (rather than group-level interactions) such as 'forming friendships', 'visiting the other's houses' and 'attending events' organised by another group. However, the second-generation Vietnamese were often well aware of these inter-group differences and felt them keenly, which inhibited cross-group interactions. In other sections of the community, role of Vietnamese businesses has been central in determining patterns of social and cultural community networks among employees. Tieu (2017) found that their social patterns tend to be shaped and confined by the long working hours often involved (Tieu 2017). This lends further evidence for why forms of group endogamy persist.

A preoccupation with the lack of an identifiable 'unitary' community was a strongly emerging theme across the interview data. While any presumption of 'groupness', or a 'cohesive' or unitary community should always be challenged due to the inherent heterogeneity of any group of people, for Vietnamese participants in this study, a more unified and publicly visible community was firmly advocated for developing a stronger sense of belonging in the UK. The lack of a singular central body representing the Vietnamese was described as an important cause and perpetuation of the fragmentation. Without a central body, 'the community' was perceived as unable to have official voice and potential to develop a shared sense of cultural heritage (cf. Fortier 2000). For the second-generation, who are trying to explore their cultural background and understand their history (something they are often lacking due to reluctance of parents to revisit or share the traumas of their experience), this was seen as a central concern. Second-generation participants spoke of a 'lack' of community both in terms of community organisations to organise events, Vietnamese events, as well as Vietnamese role models. This in turn led to a sense of feeling a 'lack of identity' as a British Vietnamese, especially when confronted by racism or challenges to their claims to belonging in Britain, as explained by Luke:



I mean quite a lot of people say this to me, that being from a different place even though you were born and bred, brought up in the UK, you don't have no identity, you know they won't call you 'you are British' they won't call you 'you're from here' even though you are from here, even all the things that you might know about or whatever there is no identity for us.

(Luke, second-generation southern Vietnamese, 24, financial industry, East London)

Luke draws upon the fact that being born and brought up in the UK, with all the knowledge of and familiarity with British culture that this entails, acts as no guarantee or entitlement to stake a claim in Britishness, especially with looking visibly 'different' and othered as 'Oriental' (see Author 2015). This notion of recognition and the lack of cultural recognition was deemed crucial for inclusion in Britain by many of the second-generation participants. This chimes with Phillips (1995) claim that the 'politics of representation' has overtaken the 'politics of ideas' as we place a greater sense of trust in those sharing our experience to represent us more closely. For Phillips, 'positions of influence in society' (1995, 54) are an increasingly important avenue for challenging existing hierarchies of power, as they can shape how young people feel represented in society, particularly as they are more actively engaged in within less formal spheres of influence (such as the media, culture, sport, and fashion). A sense of oppression was commonly experienced through the Vietnamese young persons' lack of representation in the cultural sphere, particularly through areas of media and popular culture (a trend that has also been observed in relation to the British Chinese; Parker and Song 2006). Participants commonly drew upon comparisons with communities abroad and in the UK that were felt to have a stronger presence, this emphasises the importance of 'soft' citizenship and a sense of recognition for people's sense of wellbeing (Taylor 1992), as illustrated below:

I think the Vietnamese community is not so well known over here as opposed to ... say in America. I would say it is a lot more successful in America ... I think over here, the Vietnamese community ... unless you are studying it or you work for the government or you have some kind of interest it would be classed together with the Chinese community. So we don't have a separate identity, not as far as I know anyway.

(Hanh, female, 34, financial sector worker, southern Vietnamese)

Everybody knows about African and Indian culture like the festivals, Caribbean carnivals and like the Hindu festivals, everyone knows about that, but no one knows about Buddhism or like the Mid-Autumn Festival. So it is like we are not part of it—we are just left alone to do our own thing.

(Thi, male, 25, designer, Chinese-Vietnamese, southern Vietnamese)

This lack of political and cultural presence is seen as contributing to a marginal social position in the UK and was frequently raised in the narratives of second-generation Vietnamese participants who often contrasted their experience to those of the more vocal Black and African Caribbean groups in Britain. For example, one participant (Mark) noted the Vietnamese community needed a 'Martin Luther King figure' to help galvanise a politicised Vietnamese identity. Here the depoliticisation of the first-generation refugees, due to their ascribed 'economic' rather than 'political' refugee status, might partly explain its translation to the second-generation, whom without a form of homeland politics have yet to develop a UK-based politics. Thus, the combination of community and structural fragmentation with experiences of racism and perceived 'otherness' in mainstream



society has presented obstacles for young Vietnamese to make group-based claims and take up positions of influence and belonging in British society. Experiences of embedding in this social sphere were markedly weaker, or more newly emerging by comparison to the more functional indicators of the labour market.

## Conclusion

This article has shown how a differential embedding approach (Ryan 2018) to understanding the ‘integration’ of the Vietnamese refugee population in the UK, is essential for accounting for the complex and variegated ways in which settlement and adaptation takes place. This assists understandings which move beyond the polarised success/failure paradigm engendered by the concept of integration. Internal fragmentation and varied patterns among the Vietnamese refugee communities reveals the importance of taking a differentiated approach to understanding how embedding occurs across social sectors. In so doing, this article has also revealed how agency is involved in negotiating processes of attachment and identity formation. Paradoxically, while differentiation and fragmentation in the case of the Vietnamese, appears to have hampered the development of organisational structures for facilitating mobilisation around shared issues, experiences and identities (by weakening the bargaining position as a minority group at structural and social levels), it has also conversely contributed to the distinct areas of ‘success’ in the community (particularly among the first-generation) relating to the development of an ethnic niche economy which emerged with relatively little investment and capital. But while this niche economy has provided employment to some sections of this hitherto underemployed population, it has also restricted their economic participation in other mainstream sectors and served intergenerational gaps in labour market participation.

Notwithstanding the gaps in the data on the educational and employment profile of the community, the apparent educational achievement of the younger generation and their employment in professional mainstream sectors suggests that the second-generation has become significantly upwardly mobile by comparison to the first-generation. Although evidence indicates this group is beginning to branch out into less traditional and more creative areas (such as journalism, the arts, and performance arts) (Author 2015), a combination of first-generation expectations (and those of their parents), societal stereotypes, and lack of leadership/role models in the community have meant that they still remain in largely traditional sectors and perceive social barriers in entering new areas of employment and in aspiring to reaching higher leadership roles. There is evidence that key cultural, social, ideological, and regional differences still pattern social networks, which in turn impact upon specific forms of advantage and disadvantage in the UK. Generational differences pattern the experience of the second-generation, particularly in relation to their upward educational and social mobility, while concerns around cultural identity and visibility confront the second-generation in relation to both the Vietnamese community and mainstream society. These aspects emerge out of the experience and foundations laid down by the first-generation and emphasise the on-going relevance and interplay of the five influencing factors set out by Gisselquist (2020). The experience of community fragmentation and of being a numerically small and new minority in the ethnic landscape of Britain has arguably stymied the public visibility and social status of the UK Vietnamese in

cultural and political spheres. Given the socially diverse nature of the neighbourhoods occupied by the Vietnamese communities and recent evidence of diversification of identifications of the younger generations, new opportunities to recast the restrictive social images of previous decades have emerged through possibilities for wider pan-ethnic engagement and solidarity; both at an individual level (see Author 2015) and at an organisational level. This is exemplified by the merging and coalition of a panethnic Southeast Asian community centre in coalition with the Chinese and Filipino community groups (LESAM 2018). Such examples suggest that other forms of support, solidarity and engagement are emerging and are likely to generate broader and deeper sources of social and cultural engagement and embedding.

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