Understanding Second Generation Southeast Asian Americans' Lived Experience of Interracial Romantic Partnerships with White European Americans

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UNDERSTANDING SECOND GENERATION SOUTHEAST ASIAN AMERICANS’ LIVED EXPERIENCE OF INTERRACIAL PARTNERSHIPS WITH WHITE EUROPEAN AMERICANS

by

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UNDERSTANDING SECOND GENERATION SOUTHEAST ASIAN AMERICANS’ LIVED EXPERIENCE OF INTERRACIAL ROMANTIC PARTNERSHIPS WITH WHITE EUROPEAN AMERICANS

Sophia K. Rath, Ph.D.
Western Michigan University, 2015

Scholars and mental health professionals whose work involves interracial romantic partnerships (IRPs) have a responsibility to be sensitive to the racial, ethnic, and psychological diversity that characterizes these relationships. Although a growing body of research exists about IRPs, no study to date has explored how being a second generation U.S.-born Southeast Asia American (SEAA) impacts individuals’ experiences in IRPs with White European Americans (WEAs). The present study employed qualitative, phenomenological methods to explore how second generation SEAAs make meaning of their personal and relational experiences in IRPs with WEAs. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 11 participants.

Data were analyzed using MAXQDA. Seven themes emerged: Reactions about racial and/or cultural identity, Cultural negotiation and management in the IRP, Having a refugee family background directly impacts the IRP, Understanding of partners’ experience of the IRP, Experiences of microaggressive and prejudiced responses toward the IRP, Experiences of how social intimates perceive the IRP, Participants’ messages to second generation SEAAs and to the general public regarding culture and IRPs. These findings highlight the dynamic interplay of influence that occurs between contextual factors (such as reflection on family refugee history, location in racial and ethnic identity development, and experiences of perceived racism) and IRPs. This interplay is illustrated
in the presentation of a composite case narrative, which is followed by discussion of the ways in which the study’s findings support, deviate from, and extend existing scholarship on Asian American identity development, IRP development, lived experience of IRP, microaggression and prejudice, and bicultural identity. Implications for practice, a critique of the study, directions for future research, and participant reflections are also addressed.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Imagine a canvas that sings with broad strokes of vibrant color.

While it blooms with love and light and accents of joy and inspiration,

it is also etched with subtle images of memory and humility.

Imagine a song that is painted with rich crescendos singing loudly and proudly of life

and truth that resonates through your very core.

Amid the jubilant chorus are soft, ivoried strokes so raw and fragile

that you must listen so very carefully lest you miss them altogether.

Imagine taste that makes tastebuds thrum, touch that sets heart afire,

and scent that reunites you with places you thought long forgotten.

These are my thanks for my tribe that is composed of all, past and present,

who have and continue to touch me with unreserved love, laughter, and light.

You each move me so very deeply, each and every day.

In each of you I am truly blessed.

Sophia K. Rath
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

“Hatred paralyzes life; love releases it. Hatred confuses life; love harmonizes it.

Hatred darkens life: love illumines it” (King, 1977, p. 122).

When I walk down the street and watch the people around me, my eyes inevitably are drawn to couples who are obviously in interracial romantic partnerships (IRPs). Maybe it is because of the small children they are sometimes pushing in their strollers. Perhaps it is the mild surprise one experiences when faced with something unexpected and one is not immediately sure why that something stands out, like a friend with a subtle new haircut. When I reflect a little more deeply, I know it is this: the acknowledgement of a shared experience. It is the knowledge that these couples chose a harder road. This is a road that is rougher, less directionally defined, and with more obstacles than racially homogeneous couples generally negotiate. It is a journey marked by unique challenges, including but not limited to discrimination from both intimate (e.g., family and friends) and non-intimate others (e.g., coworkers, strangers), as well as more internal processes such as the negotiation of differing ethnic identities. I base these thoughts not only in the growing body of research that attempts to illuminate the experiences of people engaged in interracial romantic partnerships, but also my own experiences.

The prevalence of IRPs in the United States has boomed since the advent of two significant events in contemporary history: the decriminalization of interracial marriage laws and the reform of U.S. refugee policies that allowed immigrants fleeing persecution in their countries of origin to resettle in America. Both of these events occurred in the
midst of the civil rights movement that marked the 1960s. Despite the controversy and gravity of these events, little research has focused on how these interracial couples experience themselves in the context of their racialized world. To date, most of the scholarly attention with regard to IRPs has focused primarily on objective, observable, and quantifiable factors that include examination of the rates, relationship patterns, and reasons for entering or dissolving such relationships (e.g., Fujino, 1997; King & Bratter, 2007; Bratter & King, 2008). Scholarship that reflects the subjective experiences of the individuals in these partnerships is scarce (AhnAllen & Suyemoto, 2011). How do interracial romantic partners understand themselves, each other, and their environment? What kinds of meaningful experiences arise within and between individuals in these partnerships? How do partners perceive the impact on themselves and the relationship of family of origin dynamics (e.g., influences of parental refugee experiences, values, and modeling), the second generation experience, ethnic identity, self-construal, and experiences of perceived racism? Thus, the primary goal of this study is to understand the subjective meanings that interracial partners create around such concepts within the context of their relationships. Specifically, this study focuses on understanding the experiences of second generation, U.S.-born adult children of Southeast Asian refugees who are in interracial romantic partnerships with White European American individuals (WEAs).

Notably, Asian Americans have the highest rates of interracial marriage in the United States (Passel, Wang, & Taylor, 2010; Fujino, 1997). According to Passel et al. (2010), 31% of Asian American who married in 2008 married someone of a different race or ethnicity, 75% of these unions being with WEAs. Additionally, 16% of all Asian
Americans who are currently married are partnered either interracially (i.e., with individuals of a different race) or interethnically (i.e., with individuals of a different cultural background). Contributing to these figures is the influx of Asian immigrants who entered and resettled in the United States during the last half-century, a large proportion of these individuals being Southeast Asian refugees who fled Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos during and after the Vietnam War. Unlike voluntary immigrants who leave their homelands by choice and with the optimism that life will be improved upon resettlement, refugees, in contrast, are individuals whose involuntary flight is motivated by survival (Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocnic, 2010; Ying & Han, 2007b).

The current investigation is different from other studies of IRP in several ways. Despite the heterogeneity that exists among Asian Americans, little empirical research has assessed their psychological diversity (Ying & Han, 2007b). Thus, understanding the experiences of Southeast Asian refugees and their future generations becomes a salient issue, especially with regard to the provision of culturally sensitive mental health services. For example, based on the unique experiences endured by the parent refugee population, it is reasonable to hypothesize that family of origin dynamics may influence the relational experiences of their adult U.S.-born Southeast Asian American children (henceforth referred to as second generation SEAAs) in ways that are distinct from those of their other Asian American immigrant counterparts. Additionally, second generation SEAAs compose a population that has not been exclusively studied in the context of IRPs. In this respect, this study is a unique contribution to the current body of scholarship.

With regard to the method of investigation, this study departs from prior research
on interracial relationships in distinctive ways. Most research on IRPs to date has been quantifiable in nature. This study utilized a qualitative methodological approach in which interview data illuminated the subjective lived experiences of the participants. Additionally, demographic variables with regard to partner gender identity and sexual orientation were taken into consideration during participant recruitment. Specifically, individuals who identified as being in heterosexual and same-sex relationships were welcome to participate in the study. Participants of any gender identity were eligible to participate. Allowing for this heterogeneity in the sample allowed the researcher to focus exclusively on phenomena relevant to second generation SEAAs and their IRPs regardless of these variations. It also supported the generation of multiple possible understandings of complex phenomena and contributed to an emerging, holistic picture of the phenomena and experience of them (Tawa & Suyemoto, 2010).

Because IRPs involving second generation SEAAs is an area that is yet to be explored by research, several focused bodies of literature in related areas of scholarship informed the design of this study, including literature on IRPs, the Southeast Asian refugee experience, the second generation experience, ethnic identity, self-construal (i.e., collectivistic versus individualistic worldviews), and racism. This chapter will offer operational definitions for these areas and proffer rationales for exploring these concepts as related to the topic of investigation. Chapter Two will enhance understanding and current research in these areas in the form of an in-depth review of the literature. In Chapter Three, procedural details and support for this study’s methodology will be discussed with particular attention to qualitative research methods. Chapter Four presents a detailed presentation of this study’s findings through thematic description of the study’s
essence. In Chapter Five, the study’s results are discussed through the presentation of a composite case narrative, contextualization against current scholarship, and implications for practice and future research. The dissertation concludes with reflection on second generation SEAs’ reported experiences of being a part of this study.

Overview of the Literature

Understanding interracial romantic partnerships. The coming together of individuals from different racial backgrounds has been encompassed in terms such as *interracial relationships, interracial couples, interracial dating,* and *interracial marriage.* For the purposes of this study, the term *interracial romantic partnership* (IRP) will be used to reference those in which the individuals involved consider themselves to be in committed, long-term partnerships. These partnerships may include couples who are dating, cohabitating, or married. Despite the implied diversity of these different types of IRPs, they share many experiential similarities.

Although research suggests that society is increasingly accepting of interracial romantic relationships (Passel et al., 2010), scholarship also acknowledges that societal resistance against these couplings continues to persist (Wang, Kao, & Joyner, 2006). Much of the existing research on the challenges experienced in interracial relationships makes reference to stressors associated with negotiating society’s leanings toward racial homogeneity and the perception of interracial unions as being unnatural. According to Lewis, Yancey, and Bletzer (1997), American society has traditionally supported racially homogenous relationships, with racism being the vehicle that drives societal pressure to endorse same-race marriages. Indeed, research supports the notion that the challenges experienced in many interracial unions are influenced by societal and familial objections
to interracial unions. For example, Reiter, Richmond, Stirlen, and Kompel (2009) found that individuals in intercultural relationships (defined as including interracial, intercultural, interethnic, and/or interfaith relationships) experienced lower levels of social intimacy than did those in intracultural relationships. The authors suggested that because individuals tend to take on the feelings of those around them, the perception that intimates and/or society do not support the relationship may contribute to lower relationship satisfaction, particularly in the social realm.

Miller, Olson, and Fazio (2004) assert that resistance to interracial romantic partnerships can persist most painfully within the families of those involved. These authors stated that interview studies are rich in reports that interracial couples endorsed experiences of “disapproval, conflict, and alienation from friends and family regarding the relationship as well as blatant discrimination from non-significant others” (p. 355). Some couples are even threatened with disownment from their families for defying expectations to choose partners within their race and/or ethnicity/culture, forcing individuals to face the painful task of choosing between their families and the one they love with either choice resulting in pain (Root, 2001). One of the goals for the current investigation is to explore how second generation SEAAs experience these challenges in the context of their interracial romantic partnerships with WEAs.

**Committed partnership.** Although the literature on committed partnerships will not be explored in depth, it is useful to offer an operational definition and rationale for the utility of this classification in the current investigation. Speaking from a theoretical perspective, Arriaga and Agnew (2001) posit that “commitment to a relationship is a multidimensional construct with three distinct components” (p. 1109). The first
component, psychological attachment to the relationship, refers to the affective or emotional connection that develops between committed relationship partners. The second component, long-term orientation regarding the relationship, is cognition-based and involves the assumption that the relationship will remain intact into the distant future, “for better or worse.” The third component, intention to persist in the relationship, speaks to the motivation to continue a relationship beyond the present time.

The rationale for focusing on committed partnerships in the current investigation is seated in the desire for the second generation SEAA participants to think critically about a depth of experiences related to evolution of their interracial romantic partnerships and the impact that refugee parentage, the second generation experience, ethnic identity, self-construal, and the experience of perceived racism may have on these experiences. Being able to reflect on relationship milestones such as meeting the in-laws, establishing a common household, and/or raising children provided data that not only tapped into the phenomena of interest, but was also rich and meaningful for the participants.

**Southeast Asian refugees and families.** According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2001), “Historical events and circumstances shape the mental health profile of any racial and ethnic group” (p. 111). Several events are subsumed within and around the Vietnam War, including the fall of Saigon, the “Secret War” in Laos, the Cambodian Civil War, the rise of the Khmer Rouge regime, and the Cambodian-Vietnamese War. These prompted the exodus of hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian (including Hmong and Mein) refugees who sought safe haven in the United States and other countries. Unlike voluntary immigrant groups who, by their own will, left their homelands in search of better opportunities, refugees
have escaped tenuous and usually violent political climates. Over 1.4 million Southeast Asian refugees from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam now reside in the United States (Rumbaut, 2008). Despite the national and cultural differences between these groups, common threads of worldview and experience are shared, including the traumas induced by war, dangerous migratory conditions, and the stressors of resettlement (Matkin, Nickles, Demos, & Demos, 1996; Ying, 2001).

Given these experiences, Southeast Asian refugees are particularly vulnerable to mental health problems compared to other Asian immigrants (Kim, 2006). Posttraumatic stress disorder and depression are especially salient concerns for many of these individuals whose experiences include persecution, physical and psychological torture, the loss of multiple family members, and uncertainty about the future. Kinzie et al. (1990) found that 75% of Southeast Asian refugees receiving care at a psychiatric clinic currently or previously suffered from PTSD; 81% of patients were diagnosed with depression. Rozee and van Beomel (1989) found that 90% of female Cambodian refugee participants had lost between one and ten family members, that many of these deaths were witnessed, and that many of the women were widows because of the war.

Despite having lived in the United States for decades, many Southeast Asian refugees and their families continue to struggle with the repercussions of the refugee experience. Marshall, Schell, Elliott, Berthold, and Chun (2006) reported that more than two decades after resettlement in the U.S., Cambodian refugees who lived in Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge occupation continued to demonstrate high rates of psychiatric disorders related to trauma, most notably PTSD and major depression. Therefore, it is logical to suppose that the families of Southeast Asian refugees, including their U.S.-born
children, can also be affected by the physical, emotional, and cultural upheavals experienced by the elder family members. Indeed, the little available research supports the implication that children of refugees are more likely than children of voluntary immigrants to be negatively impacted by their parents’ migration experiences. For example, Ying and Han (2007b) found that parental refugee status was a significant predictor of their children’s higher sense of familism (i.e., the cultural value of family and kinship) in comparison to children of voluntary immigrants. This, in turn, was related to increased depression and low self-esteem. Research also supports the impact of intergenerational transmission of trauma by refugee parents to their children, which can influence intelligence, emotionality, familism, peer relations, and prosocial behavior (Daud et al., 2007; Ying & Han, 2007b; Han, 2005). Yet to be studied, however, is the impact of parental refugee experiences on their adult children’s romantic relationships.

According to Nicholson and Walters (1997), refugees are more likely than immigrants to experience the loss of family or homeland owing to the forced nature of their migration and the inability to return home. In light of such losses, where the American expectation is for children to separate and individuate from their parents as they transition into adulthood and their own primary relationships, refugee parents often discourage individuation in their efforts to protect their children from real and imagined dangers, in addition to maintaining family and cultural cohesion (Bar-On et al., 1998; Ying & Han, 2007a). This intergenerational discrepancy that often occurs between immigrant parents and their American-born children can exacerbate conflict in areas of development that are considered normal life cycle processes in mainstream American culture. In their discussion of providing family therapy to Cambodian American families,
Boehnlein, Leung, and Kinzie (1995) observed that threats to close familial bonds, such as when a child chooses to begin dating or is considering marriage, can be perceived as threatening to family survival and result in significant conflict within the family. Thus, given refugee parents’ experiences of loss and their subsequent drive to preserve familial and cultural cohesion, “the difficulty of negotiating the expectations of two cultures is likely to be greater for children of refugees” (Ying & Han, 2007a, p. 338). The present study sought to understand this negotiation by asking second generation SEAA participants to share how being members of refugee families may influence their process of individuating and engaging in intimate relationships outside of the family, particularly in their interracial romantic partnerships with WEAs.

**The second generation experience: Being bicultural.** Acculturation does not stop at the first generation and immigrants’ attempts to negotiate life in a new cultural environment. Their U.S.-born children, the second generation, face the unique acculturative phenomenon of being bicultural, which involves managing the normative roles, beliefs, and values of the cultural heritage of their families along with those of the mainstream American cultural environment in which they live. In their discussion about the normative conflicts encountered by second generation individuals, Giguère, Lalonde, and Lou (2010) posited that there are areas in the lives of second generation individuals in which the norms that are promoted by heritage (e.g., Eastern) and mainstream (e.g., Western) cultures may be discordant. Subsequently, adherence to one set of norms may prevent the fulfillment of the other.

For many second generation Asian Americans who walk the bicultural line, this “culture clash” can cause significant stress in managing the different dimensions of life
including work, school, home life with the family of origin, and other significant relationships. Areas in which second generation individuals attempt to assert a sense of autonomy can be especially ripe for generating culturally-based conflict. Choosing a romantic partner who is a member of the heritage culture or from the mainstream culture is one example of such conflict. One of the goals of the current study is to understand how SEAAs make meaning of being bicultural individuals, make meaning of being members of two cultures that often “clash,” and how these meanings impact their experience of being in interracial romantic partnerships with WEAs.

**Ethnic identity.** Often at the heart of discourse on interracial romantic partnership is the topic of ethnic identity (Mok, 1999). The subject of interracial romantic partnerships can be a particularly controversial issue among Asian Americans because of the threat these unions pose to perceptions of ethnic identity (Fujino, 1997; Mok, 1999). Asian American partners engaged in interracial romantic partnerships are often accused of “selling out,” or of having little or no ethnic pride in their group, its members, and even themselves (Mok, 1999). However, scholarship offers evidence that counters this perception, indicating that while interracial romantic partnerships undoubtedly influence awareness of racial and ethnic identity (e.g., AhnAllen & Suyemoto, 2011), the reasons people enter interracial romantic partnerships are not unlike the reasons people enter intraracial partnerships, among these being propinquity (physical distance), physical attractiveness, and, most commonly, being in love (Fujino, 1997; Kitano, Fujino, & Takahashi, 1998). While both research and theory support positive correlations between interracial romantic partnerships and ethnic identity development, the experiential nuances of this relationship are understudied. This study seeks to discern these nuances
by understanding the meanings that second generation SEAA individuals attribute to their own ethnic identity development and how these impact their interracial romantic partnerships with WEAs.

**Self-construal: The interdependent self and the independent self.** According to the theoretical framework offered by Markus and Kitayama (1991), self-construal is conceptualized as the cultural worldview that influences an individual’s behaviors and psychological consequences with regard to cognition, emotion, and motivation. The authors assert that whereas individuals of Asian or collectivistic cultures tend to adopt a self-construal that is interdependent, individuals of more Westernized or individualistic cultures favor a self-construal that is more autonomous and independent. A second generation SEAA who is bicultural may adopt or shift between both types of worldview and self-construal.

In the context of interracial romantic partnerships, this researcher seeks to understand how culturally-loaded factors such as worldview and mode of self-construal influence interracial romantic partnership dynamics. According to Kim and Kitani (1998), “opportunities for intercultural contact can lead to serious misunderstandings in intimate intercultural relationships, including romantic ones” (p. 52). Indeed, a small body of research supports that self-construal is correlated to conflict management styles in romantic relationships (e.g., Kim & Kitani, 1998; Sinclair & Fehr, 2004; Yum, 2004). Given the challenges that second generation SEAAs and their WEA partners are presumed to encounter, one of the goals for this study is to understand how individual experiences of self-construal and worldview impact the partnership.

**Experiences of perceived racism.** Some of the most difficult challenges
associated with being in an interracial romantic partnership may stem from resistance from the people who are closest to the couple, especially where race and ethnicity are concerned. Acts of racism from complete strangers may, however, also have a substantial impact on interracial romantic partnerships. While the demonstration of prejudicial attitudes can be relatively mild (e.g., stares), they can also be overt (e.g., derogatory comments, substandard service delivery, workplace discrimination) (Killian, 2002). Collectively, the messages communicated by these behaviors can elicit a sense of oppression for those involved in interracial romantic partnerships. According to Molina, Estrada, and Burnett (2004), “These experiences can be taxing for couples. The dreams of weaving a supportive, culturally rich family may wilt as the challenges of stereotypes and bias exercise power over a couple’s dream of launching a new family” (p. 140). One of the goals of the current investigation is to explore in depth the meanings second generation SEAA attribute to experiences of perceived racism in the context of their interracial romantic partnerships.

Relatively, another area of inquiry and an as-yet unexplored research topic is how cultural racism may be experienced by interracial partners within the relationship. Carter and McGoldrick (1999) allude to this experience, asserting that as each partner begins to experience the pull of their own culture, in addition to his or her partner’s, anxiety in the relationship increases. This tension subsequently heightens each individual’s sensitivity to feeling culturally respected by his or her partner. This results in a response to the partner’s culture that freezes both individuals in an interaction that is unsupportive and reactive. Although Carter and McGoldrick focus more on ethnic differences between partners, it is reasonable to hypothesize that these experiences also segue into or are
additive to racial discourses in interracial romantic partnerships involving second generation SEAA individuals and their WEA partners.

**Summary**

Given the limited scholarship about the stories of individuals in interracial romantic partnerships, the primary goal of this study is to understand the meanings second generation SEAA individuals create within the context of their interracial romantic partnerships with WEAs. Specifically, this investigation seeks to understand how factors such as Southeast Asian refugee family of origin experiences, the second generation experience, ethnic identity, self-construal, and perceived racism are lived and understood by second generation SEAAs in interracial romantic partnerships with WEA individuals. These dimensions are clearly meaningful in the context of interracial relationships, but underexplored. Thus, illuminating the meaning of these factors offers not only a unique contribution to the literature, but also insight about a little understood group of individuals. In a climate where the salience of providing culturally sensitive mental health services for diverse and underrepresented populations is gaining increasing recognition, this research is a valuable undertaking.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The lived experience of adult U.S.-born children of Southeast Asian refugees (second generation SEAs) who are in interracial romantic partnerships (IRPs) with White European Americas (WEA) is a distinct yet underrepresented subject of scholarship. Although there seems to be a dearth of research literature about this phenomenon, this area of inquiry is significant when considering the unique and influential factors running in the background of these partnerships. This literature review attempts to illuminate these factors by surveying and synthesizing several focused bodies of research that are relevant to the current investigation: IRPs in general, the Southeast Asian refugee experience, the second generation experience, ethnic identity, self-construal, and perceived experiences of racism.

This literature review has several purposes. First, it threads together empirical and theoretical knowledge to inform the reader of factors that may influence the lived experience of second generation SEAs in IRPs with WEAs. Second, it provides a context for understanding the lived experience of these couples. Although the current investigation focuses solely on understanding the perspective second generation SEAs, it is a departure point for future research that appends knowledge of other relevant dimensions of these partnerships. Third, it serves as a guide for shaping the design of this study. Analysis of the literature related to being a second generation SEAA in an IRP with a WEA revealed specific gaps. I attempted to address gaps by developing purposive interview questions that aim to elicit an in-depth understanding of these individuals’ experiences. Finally, the literature review provides a context for how I conducted data
analysis and interpretation of relevant findings that contribute to current research literature.

To achieve these goals, each section of this literature review begins by offering the reader a descriptive context for each subtopic as it relates to understanding IRPs from the perspective of second generation SEAAs. These descriptions are followed by a discussion about current scholarship in these areas, including relevant theoretical and empirical research that is meaningful for the current investigation. Each section concludes by comparing the reviewed literature’s applicability to the current investigation.

Psychological literature often demonstrates overlap and interplay between the terms *ethnic identity* and *racial identity*. Some of the literature cited in this review demonstrates similar interchange between the terms *interracial*, *interethnic*, and *intercultural* when describing relationships between individuals of differing racial and ethnic/cultural backgrounds. When referencing specific bodies of research, I attempt to maintain consistency of language while maintaining the integrity of the ideas shared by the authors. Therefore, where it was obvious that the terms *interethnic* and *intercultural* were references to phenotypic differences between individuals, the term *interracial* is used even when additional cultural differences may be present. Acknowledgement of cultural differences is specified by the use of the terms *ethnic* and *culture*. Where I deemed it obvious that the terms *dating* and *marriage* are references to committed relationships, the terms *partnership* and *couple* are used to describe these relationships. Where reference is made to quoted text, the original language of the authors is maintained.
Understanding IRPs

“Successful interracial couples develop skills to resolve problems that threaten the very foundation of our society. They have perspective that escapes others and the wherewithal to define themselves where no set guidelines exist. These are skills that will be needed in the multicultural society” (Foeman & Nance, 1999, p. 533).

This section seeks to provide a general understanding of IRPs while also illuminating some of the experiences that may be encountered by second generation SEAAs in IRPs with WEAs. The subject of IRPs is multifaceted and what follows is an overview of key topic areas that are relevant to the current research study. First, IRPs in an historical context are discussed. The history of IRP is marked by significant sociopolitical strife; understanding some of the structural influences on these relationships sets the stage for describing challenges faced by IRPs. What follows is a description of some of these challenges as they occur at a larger societal level, as well as the more intimate level of the family. Some of the interpersonal and intrapersonal challenges that emerge within IRPs are then discussed, followed by descriptions of some of the mythology surrounding why IRPs form and discussion of how these connect to some of the misconceptions about Asians and Asian Americans. Examples of empirical research that challenge these myths and that offer clarification for why interracial partners come together are then presented. Finally, Foeman and Nance’s model (1999) for IRP development is described; this offers insight into how interracial partners may overcome the challenges faced during the life of their partnership.

**Historical context.** When Barack Obama’s parents married in 1961, less than one of 1,000 new marriages in the United States was the pairing of a black person and a white
person (Passel, Wang, & Taylor, 2010). The rate of IRP has since boomed. This can be attributed to two significant events in contemporary history: The decriminalization of interracial marriage laws and the influx of immigrants moving into and resettling in the United States. In 1967 the United States Supreme Court overturned a nationwide ban on interracial marriage by deeming anti-miscegenation laws racist and unconstitutional in the pivotal civil rights case Loving v. Virginia. Half a century later, 8.4% of all current marriages in the United States are comprised of interracial or interethnic unions (Wang, 2012). This data, derived from the 2008-2010 United States Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS), also indicated that one out of seven new U.S. marriages in 2012 -15% of all new marriages within that year - were interracial or interethnic unions. This number is more than quadruple the rate of interracial marriages that took place in 1980 and six times that of the interracial marriage rate in 1960 (Wang, 2012; Passel et al., 2010).

Another historical factor contributing to the prevalence of IRPs is the saturation of immigrants, as well as the increasing number of their children now living in the United States. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 eliminated restrictions that favored immigration from European countries, allowing for the increased flow of immigrants from other non-European nations such as Asia and South America (Root, 2001). This legislation instituted priority for high-skill workers (e.g., engineers, scientists, and medical workers) and favored family reunification, subsequently supporting the fast-paced population growth of immigrants in the United States, particularly from Asian countries (Root, 2001; Leong & Okazaki, 2009). Now more than 37 million immigrants and their 33 million children total nearly 70 million persons living in the United States,
making up approximately 23% of the total United States population (United States Census Bureau, 2009).

Thanks in part to immigrants and their subsequent generations of U.S.-born children, nearly 35% of the total United States population is represented by racial and ethnic diversity (United States Census Bureau, 2009). Population trends indicate that as the United States becomes more diverse, unions between individuals of differing racial backgrounds will continue to grow, particularly among the U.S.-born children of immigrants (Passel et al., 2010; Qian, 2005). The numbers say one thing - that this apparent blurring of boundaries that delineate our ethnic and socially constructed racial differences signifies progress toward an ideal society that truly and wholeheartedly embraces being “multicultural,” “tolerant,” and “inclusive.” However, this obscures another story. Although the growth in the number of IRPs implies increasing tolerance toward relationships between racially heterogeneous people, this does not necessarily depict an accurate picture of the state of race relations in the United States (Wang, Kao, & Joyner, 2006). Indeed, Lewis and Ford-Robinson (2010) asserted that as the United States becomes more racially and ethnically diverse, equal access to various social institutions and organizations will become even more challenging.

From the individual perspective of those in IRPs, the experience of inequality and social stigma stemming from prejudicial attitudes toward their unions can result in significant intrapsychic and interpersonal consequences. Larger numbers of IRPs does not equate less pain. Scholarship has yet to address the experiences of SEAAs in IRPs with WEAAs. The following sections will highlight related research in order to paint a clearer picture of what the experiences of these individuals may encompass.
**Societal challenges to IRP.** Overall, attitudes in the United States with regard to race and relating to individuals from different groups have experienced a marked evolution over the last few decades. Discussions on IRPs even suggest that these partnerships represent a sort of barometer indicating that race relations and the social proximity between races are shifting (Lewis et al., 1997; Qian, 2005; Root, 2001; King & Bratter, 2007; Lewis & Ford-Robertson, 2010). Research offers some evidence that this distance is narrowing as a function of society’s growing acceptance of interracial relationships. Lee and Edmonston (2005) reported survey data indicating that the percentage of White Americans who endorsed laws against marriages between African Americans and White Americans declined from 35% in the 1970s to 10% in the 2000s.

In his discussion about interracial marriage in America, Qian (2005) attributed the increased acceptance of racial diversity to increased education about and exposure to people of other races. When people have more contact with each other, the opportunities to establish friendships and reduce stereotypes grow. Furthermore, tolerance grows with the passing of generations. That is, as older individuals who hold racist attitudes die off, younger generations of more tolerant individuals replace them. Qian (2005) asserted that this “softening of racial antagonisms” contributes to improved attitudes toward IRP.

Although it seems that society at large is moving toward acceptance of IRP, opposition persists. According to Wang (2012), 63% of Americans endorsed that they “would be fine” if a family member married someone from a racial or ethnic group other than their own; 37% of Americans disapprove of such a union. In Killian’s (2002) exploration of the narratives of 10 African American/White marriages, three dominant discourses emerged reflecting prevailing ideologies embraced by society at large. The
first discourse described was that supporting the value of homogamy, or marriage between individuals of the same group. All 10 couples interviewed reported on incidents during which negative attention from the public elicited awareness that they were acting against the prevailing ideology of partnering with someone of the same race. These behaviors ranged from relatively mild (e.g., stares) to more obvious behaviors (e.g., derogatory comments, substandard service delivery, workplace discrimination). The second discourse made reference to the hypersensitivity experienced persons of color. All 10 couples agreed that African American spouses were more likely than their White spouses to notice and emotionally react to negative public responses. Additionally, White spouses admitted a lack of awareness of their African American partners’ perception of these responses. This phenomenon is discussed further in the Perceived Experiences of Racism section. Finally, the discourse on the insignificance of history reflected couples’ tendencies to minimize or be ambivalent about the significance of racial history (be these personal family histories or otherwise), thus supporting society’s dominant discourse of history’s insignificance. All in all, these findings support that IRP does not evidence a post-racial society.

**Familial challenges to IRP.** Even if society’s stance on IRP is softening, opposition continues to persist amongst the loved ones of individuals in IRPs. Interview studies are rich in reports that interracial couples endorsed experiences of “disapproval, conflict, and alienation from friends and family regarding the relationship as well as blatant discrimination from non-significant others” (Miller, Olson, & Fazio, 2004, p. 355). These authors posited that race is used as a cue to status and that the use of this cue has implications for mate preferences and how family and friends perceive IRPs. Within
an undergraduate population sample, they found that Men of Color dating White females perceived their partners’ family and friends as being more disapproving of dating involvement with Men of Color than all other combinations of race and gender (e.g., Women of Color dating White males). Furthermore, White women who perceived their parents as prejudiced anticipated more negative reactions from family and friends to their romantic involvement with Men of Color; in other words, White women appear to receive pressure to date and marry White men. These findings suggested that being an Individual of Color acts as a cue to lower status and an indicator of the inability to provide economically as a life partner (Miller et al., 2004).

It is important to acknowledge some notable limitations to this study, one being the authors’ operational definition of status as solely being the ability to provide economically. The authors acknowledged that status could additionally be perceived as a cue of other social capital (e.g., prestige, morals, values). Furthermore, the operational use of race as a cue to status cannot account for all of the dynamics of prejudice against IRPs. For example, race also serves as a cue for cultural differences, which can be perceived to be just as threatening as the inability to provide economically.

For Southeast Asian refugee families who may be desperate to preserve cultural ties to their homeland, IRPs involving their children may pose more of a threat to cultural and familial economy than financial stability. In her seminal work studying the challenges of interracial marriage, Root (2001) indicated that for parents, “cultural beliefs tell them that interracial relationships bring tragedy, violence, grief, and heartache” (p. 20). For families of color who actively participate in the maintenance of cultural traditions, parental worries about IRP can be marked by the fear that these cultural
traditions will be diluted, and that their children will not only become estranged, but reject their heritage culture altogether. Thus, “parents’ grief over the race of their child’s partner seems to be grief more for what they themselves have lost than their child” (p. 20). In response, parents may utilize an array of psychological defenses to avoid dealing with the situation such as denial (“she didn’t learn this from us, she must have learned it from her friends”), minimization (“this is just a phase, it will eventually pass”), or compartmentalization (excluding the child and his or her partner from family gatherings). Some couples are even threatened with disownment from their families for defying expectations to choose partners who share the family’s race and/or ethnicity/culture, forcing these individuals to face the painful task of choosing between their families and the one they love (Root, 2001).

Challenges within IRPs. Much of the existing research on the challenges IRPs encounter refers to stressors associated with negotiating society’s leanings toward racial homogeneity and the perception of IRP as being “unnatural” (Root, 2001). According to Lewis, Yancey, and Bletzer (1997), American society has a tradition of supporting racially homogenous relationships, with racism being the vehicle driving societal pressure to endorse same-race marriages. Indeed, research supports the notion that the challenges experienced in many interracial unions are influenced by societal and familial objections to interracial unions, some of which were discussed earlier. For example, Reiter, Richmond, Stirlen, and Kompel (2009) sought to compare the experiences of intimacy between intercultural (which these authors defined as including interracial, intercultural, interethnic, and/or interfaith) and intracultural romantic relationships. The Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships (PAIR) was administered to 107 single
college students in heterosexual relationships for a minimum of six months to assess their perception of five dimensions of intimacy in their relationships: Emotional, social, sexual, intellectual, and recreational. Findings revealed that the sole dimension of intimacy that demonstrated significance was in the area of social intimacy, which describes the experience of having common friends and a similar social network. Individuals in intercultural relationships experienced lower levels of social intimacy than those in intracultural relationships.

Reiter et al. (2009) suggested that because individuals tend to take on the feelings of those around them, the perception that intimates and/or society do not support intracultural relationships may contribute to lower relationship satisfaction, particularly in the social realm. Given the study’s findings, furthering this research with qualitative research methods would shed more light on factors participants endorsed as contributing to low social intimacy. Further, the age of the participants may have impacted their perceived level of intimacy differently than older participants in longer-term partnerships may report.

Research also points to a relationship between IRP and psychological distress. Bratter and Eschbach (2005) explored this association by assessing a five-year pool of data from the National Health Interview Survey. They assessed and compared the prevalence of psychological distress in a representative sample of interracially/interethnically married and cohabitating individuals of various racial and ethnic groups (White, African American, Hispanic American, Asian American, and Native American) with individuals who were partnered with members of the same group. The results showed that interracial/interethnic partnership was associated with
significantly higher endorsement of severe distress for White women, Native American men, Hispanic men, and Hispanic women in comparison to individuals in homogenous partnerships. Although the findings suggested that being partnered interracially/interethnically does not automatically translate into psychological distress for all groups and genders, the researchers failed to acknowledge how cultural considerations may impact the demonstration and endorsement of symptoms of psychological distress.

**Myths about IRP.** Despite the challenges that can accompany romantic partnership with an individual of a different race (and in the context of this study, this can additionally mean different culture), people still engage in IRPs. Several theories have been proposed to explain why individuals partner interracially. Some of these models are deficit-oriented and seated in stereotypes that have little to no empirical support. In their review of existing theories around IRPs between Black/White couples, Foeman and Nance (1990) highlighted and challenged three such psychological myths that attempt to explain how these individuals come together. Although the mythologies described by these authors are centered primarily on discourse about Black/White unions, they are not significantly dissimilar to some of the myths and stereotypes that illustrate Asian/White unions.

The first myth regarding black sexuality is rooted in the times of slavery when White men feared that Black men would attempt revenge for White transgressions by having sex with White women (Foeman & Nance, 1999). Additionally, black women were stereotyped as slaves to sexual desire; this was posited as a means to assuage White slaveholder guilt feel for taking advantage of a helpless woman. Asian American women
are likewise often sexualized and seen as exotic, sexually compliant, passive, easy to seduce, and willing partners to European American men (Fong, Soe, & Aquino, 2010). On the gender flip side, Asian American men are often perceived as clumsy, emasculated, and asexual. These mythologies have the unfortunate consequence of typecasting both African Americans and Asian Americans into roles that do not accurately portray real intrapersonal virtues.

The second myth described by Foeman and Nance (1999) is that of hypergamy, which posits that Blacks partner with Whites in order to gain status. Although the authors did not deny that some Black-White partnerships might indeed be based on a social-economic trade-off, they asserted that research often found that greater equity (e.g., similar educational and class backgrounds) increased the likelihood of interracial coupling. Hypergamy is also a controversial discourse on IRPs between Asian Americans and WEAs. Commentaries on perceptions of IRPs between Asian Americans and WEAs reference often reference “selling out” as an act engaged by Asian Americans trying to acquire social status. According to Mok (1999), Asian American “sell-outs” dating White Americans are accused of having little pride in their own ethnic group, its members, or themselves. In her exploration of Asian Americans’ views on interracial couples, Chow (2000) offered further insight into this phenomena in her findings regarding how Asian Americans perceive why Asian Americans and White Americans pair up. She found that the discourse around racially-driven status inequality dominated discourse over freedom of choice. That is, rather than recognizing that real individual attraction brings two people of different races together, most respondents endorsed recognition of a race-determined power imbalance that favors being White. Respondents also attributed Asian Americans
partnering with White Americans as a rejection their own kind order to improve their own status.

The third myth discussed by Foeman and Nance (1999) held that Whites who partner with Blacks do so as an expression of neurotic conflict, e.g., to act out, punish family members, or to make a social statement. Foeman and Nance (1999) charged that proponents of this myth based their beliefs in the assumption that interracial partners suffer from mental disturbance. These proponents then conducted case studies on chosen couples that demonstrated disturbance and generalized their findings to the overall population of interracial couples, promoting the stigma that that IRPs are marked by disturbance and instability. To counter this myth, research has consistently shown that interracial partners come together for the same reasons that explain why same-race romantic partnerships form: They are in love (Root, 2001; Kitano, Fujino, & Takahashi 1998).

**Findings about why interracial partners connect.** According to Kitano, Fujino, and Takahashi (1998), the most common reason for becoming a couple in any type of relationship is being in love. Contrary to the mythologies surrounding why interracial partners may come together, research consistently shows that people enter them for non-racially motivated reasons that are similar to those in intraracial relationships (Porterfield, 1978; Porterfield, 1982; Davidson, 1992). For example, Lewis et al. (1997) compared the impact of nonracial factors with racial factors in their investigation into why Black/White married couples come together. Two hundred ninety-two participants who were in Black/White marriages responded to questionnaires asking them to evaluate how important certain factors were in influencing the decision to marry their spouse.
Nonracial factors included shared common interests, personal attraction irrespective of race, shared similar entertainment interests, and similar economic categories. Racial factors included the novelty of marrying interracially, social excitement of marrying interracially, finding different race men/women more sexually attractive, and finding persons of different races easier to talk with. The results indicated by an overwhelming margin that nonracial factors, especially common interests, entertainment interests, and personal attractiveness, were strong influencers on spousal selection in Black/White marriages.

In a comparison of intraethnic and interethnic dating relationships, Shibazaki and Brennan (1998) asked 100 participants (Caucasian, N = 56; Hispanic, N = 25; Asian, N = 11; African American, N = 4; Indian/Asian, N = 3; Arabic, N = 1) to describe what initially attracted them to their partners. Forty-four of these participants identified as being involved in an inter-ethnic relationships and 56 identified as being in same-ethnic relationships. The participants’ responses were coded into three categories of motives for initiating relationships: Appearance, personality, and similarity of couple members’ beliefs and interests. Chi-square analysis ($\chi^2 (2) = 1.37, \text{NS}$) determined no significant differences between individuals in interethnic relationships and individuals in same-ethnic relationships, lending further support to research indicating that interracial partners come together for non-race related reasons.

It may be said that the road to IRP begins in childhood. Indeed, studies have shown that growing up in a racially diverse environment influences the likelihood that one will become involved in an IRP. Yancey (2002) sought to understand the characteristics of individuals who have interracially dated. Interview and survey data
were gleaned from a nationwide sample of 2,561 participants (European Americans, N = 1,621; African Americans, N = 287; Hispanic Americans, N = 303; Asian Americans, N = 207). Logistical regression modeling was applied against independent variables including having lived in interracial neighborhoods, having attended integrated schools, and having worshipped in multiracial churches. With respect to Asian Americans and European Americans, Yancey (2002) found that individuals in these racial categories who dated interracially likely attended racially integrated schools. This finding suggests that exposure to other racial groups during one’s socioemotional development may have the effect of reducing the power of stereotypes and influence openness toward engaging in IRPs.

In another study, Fujino (1997) sampled 559 heterosexual, monoracial undergraduate students (Chinese American women, N = 94; Chinese American men, N = 88; Japanese American women, N = 69; Japanese American men, N = 57; White American women, N = 159; White American men, N = 92) to understand their dating practices. The participants completed questionnaires and described their dating histories, the ethnic backgrounds of partners, preferred dating partner attributes, the proportion of racial diversity in their high schools and hometown communities, and perceptions of the ethnic backgrounds of partners their parents preferred they do and do not date. Similarly to Yancey’s findings, Fujino (1997) found that propinquity (the physical proximity between or density of population groups in a given area) was the strongest predictor of interracial dating relationships among Asian Americans with White partners. This confirmed that Asian Americans who grew up in communities with higher propinquity with Whites had more White partners available to them (as opposed to potential Asian
partners) and thus were more likely to date White individuals.

In light of these findings, it is relevant to consider that given the distribution of Southeast Asian refugees around the United States, many second generation SEAs have similarly been socialized in multiethnic or predominantly White communities. It is also reasonable to presume that structural factors such as propinquity expose second generation SEAs to large pools of potential partners of different races; however, the pressure to partner with same-race partners can contribute to significant intrapersonal and interpersonal conflict. These tensions will be addressed further in this review of the literature.

**IRP development.** In their discussion about the perceptions and stages of IRP development, Foeman and Nance (1999) considered the dynamics that occur when interracial partners, particularly African American and White American partners, negotiate intimate relationships. With these deficit-oriented myths in mind, Foeman and Nance (1999) offered a model for IRP development that explains how partners attempt to develop successful partnerships. In Stage 1 (racial awareness), interracial couples learn to develop awareness from four concurrently operating perspectives: Their own, their partners, their collective racial groups, and their partner’s racial groups. This awareness is facilitated by communication that brings about and articulates a common perspective on the role of race in the couple’s attraction. For example, statements such as, “I am often attracted to Black men” versus “I liked a man who happened to be Black,” or, “I didn’t like the way they treated us in that restaurant tonight” versus “Let’s just eat in” serve to acknowledge the function of race in the lives of interracial partners.

During Stage 2 (coping with social definitions of race), the couple must decide
how to integrate the information gleaned from the first awareness stage into their relationship (Foeman & Nance, 1999). This is a time when the couple develops proactive and reactive strategies to protect and ensure the survival of the relationship in the face of people and situations that are potentially threatening. For example, the couple may choose to frequent public places that are more diverse and welcoming. They may also learn to respond to provocative questions and comments by responding in a way that deescalates or curtails tension. For example, African American person who is told, “You must think you are White,” may respond in jest, “Look at me, how could I not know I’m Black?” Foeman and Nance (1999) further posited that as couples work their way through these issues, they will become closer.

The ability to identify the unique racial makeup of their family as a positive source for strength is the hallmark of Stage 3 (identity emergence). During this stage, interracial couples or individuals ultimately choose to view themselves “as existing in their own right and on their own terms rather than as an inadequate subset of what is deemed desirable by others” (Foeman & Nance, 1999, p. 533). Having emerged from the previous stages with effective perspectives, strategies, and a self-affirmed identity as an IRP and family, interracial couples reaching Stage 4 (maintenance) focus on race as needed over the lifetime of the relationship.

**Section summary.** IRP has and continues to be subject to many challenges. The reviewed literature demonstrated that these challenges range from those instituted from the macrosystemic level of society down to the intimate microsystem of the family. These challenges may be influenced by various mythologies and/or prejudiced notions that surround IRP. These myths and prejudiced notions inaccurately portray IRPs and their
members as being innately dysfunctional. They additionally minimize the possibility that interracial partners come together for the same reasons as intraracial partners. Although these myths and notions have been countered by empirical research, IRPs and the individuals involved in them continue to experience their harmful repercussions. The model of IRP development offered by Foeman and Nance (1999) offers one vision of how interracial partners might manage these repercussions. In light of these challenges, the current investigation seeks to understand the meaning that second generations SEAAs attach to their own challenges in the context of their IRPs with WEAs.

**Southeast Asian Refugees and Families**

“*Historical events and circumstances shape the mental health profile of any racial and ethnic group*” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001, p. 111).

“I resent my parents for weighing me down with guilt . . . [But] they are more victims than I am . . . And because I love them . . . I dedicate my life here in America to them”

(Ying, Coombs, & Lee, 1999).

The experiences of Southeast Asian refugees and their families are underpinned with a turbulent history that distinguishes them from other Asian American populations. This section attempts to elucidate these distinctions by first discussing nomenclature related to diverse Asian American groups, including Southeast Asian American groups. The following subsection extends this discussion by describing the diversity that exists between individual Southeast Asian refugee groups with regard to mental health. Next is a verbal illustration of the refugee experiences of the individual Southeast Asian groups related to this investigation. Cultural considerations, premigration conditions, and the arrival of refugees in the United States are described for each group. This is followed by
discussion of the mental health implications of trauma experienced by Southeast Asian refugees. Next, the acculturative difficulties faced by Southeast Asian refugees following resettlement in the United States are described. All of these subtopics culminate in a discussion of their implications for Southeast Asian refugee families in the United States.

Particular attention is paid to the impact of the experiences of Southeast refugees on their U.S.-born children, setting the stage for exploring how refugee family dynamics may impact second generation SEAAs’ experience of their IRPs with WEAs.

**Nomenclature and Asian populations.** This discussion about Southeast Asian refugees begins with clarification of the language used to describe Asian Americans at large. The term *Asian American* is often used to refer to individuals residing in the United States who are of Asian descent. While Asian Americans do share Asian ancestry and aspects of Asian cultural heritage, Asian American is a broad term at best, encompassing a great diversity of nationalities and cultures that defy simple characterizations (Englar-Carlson & Rath, 2008). Some of the cultural heterogeneity that exists among individual Asian ethnic groups includes the values of collectivism, interdependence, and filial piety (Root, 1998; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Schwartz et al., 2010). Asian Americans are often erroneously viewed as a single homogenous group when, in fact, there are a multitude of distinct differences among Asian ethnic groups with regard to culture, language, group identity, religion, history, traditions, and exposure to war trauma.

**Diversity within diversity.** Choi, He, & Harachi (2008) stated that studies of Asian American sub-groups are scarce and that among the little scholarship that exists, individual Southeast Asian groups, including Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians (including Hmong and Mien), are often aggregated. Kim (2006) sought to shed light on
the diversity that exists within the Southeast Asian grouping by exploring the severity of mental health disorders among Southeast Asian clients from an ethnic mental health center. Four hundred twenty-two Cambodian, Laotian, Mien, and Vietnamese men and women were assessed for their functioning in the areas of emotional distress, psychotic symptoms, antisocial behaviors, and incapacity for community living. She found that the main effect of ethnicity was significant across all four ethnicities in the domains of emotional stress \(F [3, 413] = 2.81, p < 0.05\), psychotic symptoms \(F [3, 413] = 8.56, p < 0.001\), and antisocial behaviors \(F [3, 413] = 6.07, p < 0.001\). Post hoc analyses revealed that across these three categories, Vietnamese clients reported the highest level of difficulties, followed by Cambodians (particularly in the area of emotional distress) and Laotians (especially with regard to psychotic symptoms and antisocial behaviors). These results point to the complexity that diversity plays when exploring mental health among these populations and the importance of acknowledging its implications. Moreover, they highlight unique nuances that can be masked when populations are aggregated under the presumption of similarity.

Although aggregation can be problematic because it presumes similarity where diversity may be significantly meaningful, one of the influential factors motivating the current study lies in the common experience of war-induced trauma and migration experiences that are shared by Southeast Asian refugees. Thus, despite that the chosen population of interest for this study represents an aggregate grouping of differing national and cultural Southeast Asian backgrounds (i.e., Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Hmong), one of the key unifying phenomena of interest is how second generation SEAA individuals perceive that growing up in Southeast Asian refugee families impacts their
IRPs with WEAs.

**The refugee experience.** The Vietnam War and the events subsumed within it irrevocably changed the Southeast Asian region, including its individual cultures and peoples. The fall of Saigon, the “Secret War” in Laos, the Cambodian Civil War, the rise of the Khmer Rouge regime, and the Cambodian-Vietnamese War ultimately prompted the exodus of hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian (including Hmong and Mein) refugees from their homelands to safer havens in other countries, including the United States. Unlike voluntary immigrants who, by their own will, left their homelands in search of better opportunities, refugees are individuals who have been involuntarily displaced from their homelands (Berry, 2006). They have usually escaped tenuous and sometimes violent political climates, prompted to relocate as a consequence of war, persecution, or natural disaster. The relocation of refugees is usually facilitated by agreements between international aid agencies and the governments of the countries that have agreed to accept refugees. As of 2008, the United States is home to over 1.4 million Southeast Asian refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos (Rumbaut, 2008).

Vietnamese represent the largest group among Southeast Asian refugees in the United States, numbering nearly 800,000 as of 2009 (Southeast Asia Resource Action Center, 2011). A history of French colonialism exposed the Vietnamese people to Western culture. As a result, many Vietnamese refugees were exposed to urbanized settings and more highly educated in their pre-immigration life as opposed to other Southeast Asian groups. This would eventually facilitate settlement in the United States and the establishment of Vietnamese communities that could offer support to later refugees who were less educated and financially secure (USDHHS, 2001). When the
North Vietnamese Army and their rumored violence threatened to overtake Saigon and Southern Vietnam, hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese fled the country. Those who were unable to escape and were suspected of supporting the South Vietnamese government were sent to “reeducation camps.” Thousands of these individuals were abused, tortured, and killed. Others who successfully fled to the supposed haven of refugee camps in Thailand were subject to inhumane treatment that included physical assault, rape, and murder.

Vietnamese refugees entered the United States in three major waves. The first wave of approximately 220,000 people entered as evacuees before the fall of Saigon in 1975 (Ying, 2001). The second refugee wave arrived between the late 1970s and early 1980s and was comprised of over 300,000 Vietnamese (SEARAC, 2011). This particular group of Vietnamese refugees is often referred to as “boat people,” a reference to those who initially left Vietnam by boat across either the Gulf of Thailand to Thailand or the South China Sea to Malaysia (Gong-Guy, Cravens, & Patterson, 1991). The third wave of Vietnamese refugees who arrived in the early 1990s numbered over 181,000 (SEARAC, 2011). Many of these individuals were former South Vietnamese officers who were released from the reeducation camps. All in all, the Vietnam War represented an era of upheaval and violence for the Vietnamese people, leaving few untouched by war trauma (Matkin et al., 1996).

Cambodia enjoyed relatively peaceful cultural and economic stability before the effects of the Vietnam War and upheaval of Khmer Rouge communist regime gripped the country. Following the seizure of Phnom Penh in 1975, dictator Pol Pot sought to reconstruct Cambodia and purge the nation of Western influences. During the Khmer
Rouge’s rule from 1975-1979, an estimated 1.5 – 3 million men, women, and children died as the result of the violent policies instituted by the regime (Chung, 2001; Peang-Meth, 1991). To quell threats of rebellion within the captive nation, the Khmer Rouge eradicated cultural pillars such as education and religion. They systematically eliminated the educated class and those in positions of power and wealth. Government officials, military officers, businessmen, monks, artists, and teachers were imprisoned, tortured, and killed. Even symbols of Western culture and education such as eyeglasses and books were targeted and destroyed. The atrocities suffered by the Cambodian people at the hands of the Khmer Rouge were poignantly brought to awareness in the film The Killing Fields (Joffé & Puttnam, 1984). To this day, thousands of survivors continue to struggle with trauma experienced during the genocide inflicted by the Khmer Rouge. The tortures used by the Khmer Rouge extended beyond violence into sadistic torment that continues to haunt survivors decades later. These included:

... poking chopsticks in the ears, beatings with bamboo sticks, cutting off of fingertips,

burning, isolation, starvation, rape, assault, hanging by the feet, children swung by the feet and smashed against trees, and witnessing beatings or killing of their parents or loved ones. (Keo, 2001)

Some people were also forced to abandon their families, to kill others, and sleep among the dead. Most of those who managed to survive the tortures and escape execution were forced from their homes and into the countryside where they were forced to slave in rural
labor camps. In an effort to make Cambodia completely self-sufficient, the Khmer Rouge sought to increase agricultural production by converting its population into manual laborers. Families were separated into work teams and people were forced to work 18 to 20 hours per day. Sustained only by meager portions of rice, forbidden to eat any of the food that they themselves grew, and denied healthcare, thousands of Cambodians died of malnutrition, starvation, and disease. Those who were able to escape Cambodia into neighboring Thailand were subject to squalid conditions in the refugee camps, in addition to violence and abuse perpetrated by fellow Cambodians and Thai military personnel charged with operating the camps.

Very few Cambodians were already living in the United States when refugees began to arrive in a series of waves. The first wave arrived in 1975 when Cambodia fell to the Khmer Rouge. This group was comprised of over 4,600 refugees (SEARAC, 2011). Many of these first refugees were government officials with ties to the United States or members of the elite educated class. The second largest wave of refugees arrived in 1979 when Vietnamese forces ousted the Khmer Rouge. This group was comprised of 6,000 Cambodians (SEARAC, 2011). The third and largest wave of Cambodian refugees arrived between 1980 into the early 1990s and numbered over 130,000 (SEARAC, 2011). The majority of these refugees were traumatized survivors of the Khmer Rouge regime.

The Laotian Civil War, yet another result of the Vietnam War, revolved around the conflict between Laotian royalists and the Pathet Lao communist regime that was backed by the North Vietnamese Army. Ethnic tribal groups from the mountainous highlands of Laos, the Hmong and the Mien, were secretly recruited by the Central
Intelligence Agency to serve as soldiers and spies against the communist forces, referred to as “The Secret War.” After the Pathet Lao won the war and gained control over the country, thousands of Laotians, including Hmong and Mien, began moving out of the country. They were either evacuated by the United States government or fled by foot into Thailand.

The first group of 800 refugees from Laos arrived in the United States in 1975 (SEARAC, 2011). Many of these refugees were Hmong CIA operatives who were promised safe harbor by the United States government at the conclusion of the civil war. The next year, a large wave of 10,200 refugees arrived from Thailand, having fled to Thai refugee camps after Laos fell under Communist control. The next large wave arrived of over 105,000 individuals arrived between 1979 and 1981, partially owing to the public attention to the Cambodian-Vietnamese War and subsequent rise of sympathy toward Southeast Asian refugees. The last major wave of Laotian refugees arrived between 1986 and 1989 and numbered over 52,000 (SEARAC, 2011).

Unlike voluntary immigrants, refugees fled their homelands involuntarily and usually under highly tumultuous conditions. Repercussions of the refugee experience may include impacts on mental health, difficulty acculturating to life in the United States, and ideological shifts on how to raise a family in the United States. Thus, it is reasonable to suppose that the lived experience of the U.S.-born children of these refugees demonstrate some differences from the children of voluntary immigrants. The following sections will discuss these factors in further detail.

**Trauma of Southeast Asian refugees.** Despite the national and cultural differences that exist amongst the people and cultures of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos,
the individuals who fled from these countries share common threads of experience.

Altogether, Southeast Asian refugees constitute a group that is particularly vulnerable to mental health problems as compared to other Asian groups (Kim, 2006). War-induced trauma (such as physical and psychological torture, losses of multiple family members), dangerous migratory conditions (fleeing barefoot through jungles traversed by armed soldiers and wild animals), and the stressors of resettlement (culture shock, relocation in poor and violent neighborhoods) can contribute to lasting psychological repercussions long after resettlement in the United States (USDHHS, 2001; Ying, 2001).

In their review of the literature on the mental health needs of Southeast Asian refugees, Hsu, Davies, and Hansen (2004) stated that depression, somatic disorders, adjustment disorders, anxiety, and PTSD were the most common diagnoses among this cohort. In a study assessing the presence of PTSD among Southeast Asian refugees receiving care at a psychiatric clinic, Kinzie, Boehnlein, Leung, Moore, Riley, and Smith (1990) found that 75% of 322 patients sampled (Vietnamese, N = 127; Cambodian, N = 110; Laotian, N = 31; Mien, N = 54) had a current or past history of PTSD. Among these patients, Mien demonstrated the highest prevalence at 93%, closely followed by 92% of Cambodians who presented with current or past diagnosis. The authors additionally identified a variety of traumas suffered by each ethnic Southeast Asian group. Among the Vietnamese patients, war-related trauma experienced as a civilian (as opposed to trauma experienced in combat or during imprisonment) was most commonly endorsed. One hundred percent of the Cambodian patients who reported past or present diagnosis of PTSD experienced the atrocities of Pol Pot’s concentration camps. Laotians experienced both civilian war-related trauma and trauma unrelated to war. Among Mien patients, war-
related trauma experienced as a civilian and traumatic escape experiences were most frequently endorsed.

Marshall, Schell, Elliott, Berthold, and Chun (2005) found that decades after resettlement in the United States Cambodian refugees continued to demonstrate high rates of psychiatric disorder related to trauma experienced premigration. They conducted a series of interviews with participants from random households in Long Beach, California, which is home to the largest population of Cambodians outside of Cambodia. Five hundred eighty-six adults who lived in Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge occupation and immigrated to the United States prior to 1993 participated. The participants were between the ages of 35 and 75. The authors found that all participants had experienced trauma before immigration: 99% percent experienced near-death due to starvation, 90% reported that at least one family member had been murdered, and 70% reported witnessing some form of post-migration violence after settling in the United States. Correlated with exposure to trauma were high rates of PTSD (62%) and depression (51%). Additionally, among 42% of the sample, PTSD and depression were comorbid.

**Acculturation of Southeast Asian refugees.** Berry (1998) defined *acculturation* as the negotiation of two tasks: 1) Assessing the value of one’s cultural identity and deciding whether or not these should be preserved and 2) gauging the desirability of contact with mainstream society and deciding whether or not this interaction is worth seeking out. According to Berry (1998), the changes involved in acculturation may result in *acculturative stress*. Acculturative stress is caused by changes that occur during the process of acculturation and is influenced by several factors. First, it is influenced by the
strategy (i.e., integration, assimilation, separation, or marginalization) by which an individual has acculturated. For example, individuals who are marginalized tend to experience significant stress whereas those who are integrated tend to experience minimal levels of stress. The second influence on acculturative stress is that of the mainstream culture. If the mainstream culture demonstrates tolerance for and acceptance of cultural diversity, the stress of acculturating individuals can be expected to be relatively low. In contrast, if the mainstream culture communicates that one’s culture, language, and identity are unacceptable, the impact of an individual sense of security and self-esteem will be negative and result in higher levels of stress. Finally, acculturative stress can be impacted by the perception of acceptance or prestige of one’s group in the acculturation setting. For example, how an acculturating individual experiences acceptance toward their group contributes to stress if this acceptance (or lack thereof) is influenced by prejudice, discrimination, and exclusion.

Despite the many difficulties that Southeast Asian refugees face as they acculturate to life in the United States, these are not limited to residual issues related to past events. Scholarship in this area suggests that refugees must cope with their premigration traumas in addition to the ordeal of postmigration adjustment and acculturative stress. In their discussion of Southeast Asian immigrants, Bankston and Hidalgo (2007) observed that after resettlement, Cambodian Americans often continued to struggle with severe psychological and physical consequences of their premigration experiences. Moreover, most were settled in low-income neighborhoods and thus subject to violence and hostility from their new communities. Laotian Americans faced similar difficulties, having been resettled in low-income urban neighborhoods where refugees
contented with gang violence in addition to language barriers and large generational gaps between themselves and their U.S.-born children. Hmong refugees, originating from the rural highlands of Laos, experienced some of the most difficult problems adjusting to American society. Being a largely illiterate group with few skills that were useful in the American job market, Hmong Americans struggled with gaining employment and adjusting to the urban environs in which they were resettled.

Yi (2003) sought to assess the acculturation of Cambodian refugee women and the relationship to access to health care. She interviewed 216 women, posing questions around access to health insurance, preventative healthcare practices, and acculturation to U.S. society. The author found that nearly one-third of the participants had no form of healthcare. About 60% endorsed having a regular place to go to for healthcare; employment status was significantly related to this finding. Though half of the participants reported being gainfully employed, approximately a third of these women did not have health insurance and third did not have a regular place to go to for healthcare. Acculturation was assessed with regard to length of residence and English language skill. The author found that increased use of English, in combination with longer residence in the United State, significantly increased the likelihood of access to healthcare. Furthermore, low income, inadequate access, low language acculturation, communication barriers, and recent settlement in the United States were highly endorsed as barriers to healthcare.

Southeast Asian refugees continue to face difficulties, even decades after resettlement. Since many of these problems are faced post migration and in the context of the environs in which they are resettled, it is not unlikely for their children to face related
difficulties (e.g., access to healthcare resources due to parents’ difficulty navigating services) despite having been born American citizens. These difficulties are discussed further in the following section on Southeast Asian refugee families.

Southeast Asian refugee families. The refugee experience significantly impacts the manner in which Southeast Asian refugees practice culture and childrearing in the United States. Southeast Asian refugees and their families continue to struggle with the repercussions of the refugee experience even after decades of living in the United States. It is not unreasonable to posit that the families of Southeast Asian refugees, including their U.S.-born children, are affected by the physical, emotional, and cultural upheavals experienced by the elder family members.

Indeed, a small body of research supports the implication that the children of refugees are more likely than children of voluntary immigrants to be negatively impacted by their parents’ migration experiences. In their study investigating variations in familism between Asian American children of refugees and Asian American children of voluntary immigrants, Ying and Han (2007a) hypothesized that refugees acculturate less than immigrants, which in turn impacts familism endorsed by the children of refugees. They found that refugee parents demonstrated lower levels of acculturation than their immigrant counterparts. Furthermore, the children of refugees endorsed higher levels of familism, which was significantly correlated to higher levels of depression and lower levels of self-esteem in comparison to the children of voluntary immigrants. The authors asserted that the children of refugees “were burdened by their parents’ insistence and persistence in enculturating them to this value [familism], as a means of preserving their own and their children’s connection to their homeland and to themselves (p. 344).”
Research also evidences an impact of refugee parents’ intergenerational transmission of trauma to their children. Daud, af Klinteberg, and Rydelius (2008) sought to understand the resilience among refugee children whose parents had been traumatized and suffered from PTSD. A group of 40 Iraqi refugee children whose parents were tortured before migration to Sweden was studied along with another group of 40 refugee children whose parents fled other countries (Egypt, Syria, and Morocco) but were not tortured. The children in both groups were compared on differences in the areas of PTSD symptomatology; intelligence; self-esteem with respect to psychological wellbeing, physical components, relation to family, and relation to others; and behaviors in the areas of emotionality, hyperactivity, peer problems, and prosocial behavior. Sub-group comparisons were also made between children who demonstrated PTSD-related symptoms and children who did not show these symptoms. Thirty-one of the children of traumatized parents demonstrated PTSD-related symptoms while none of the children from non-traumatized parents group demonstrated PTSD-related symptoms. With regard to intelligence, children of non-traumatized parents scored statistically significantly higher on the Wechsler Intelligence Scales for Children, Third Edition (WISC-III) than children of traumatized parents. Children of traumatized parents without PTSD-related symptoms demonstrated more favorable values than children with PTSD-related symptoms in the areas of overall self-esteem and self-esteem in relation to family. They also demonstrated more favorable values in the areas of overall behavior, emotionality, peer relations, and prosocial behavior. These findings suggest that overall, children of traumatized parents who endorsed PTSD-related symptoms struggled more intrapsychically and behaviorally than their counterparts who were symptom-free.
Further, the findings indicate that adequate emotional expression, supportive family relations, positive peer relations, and prosocial behavior are indicators of resilience.

Given the limited body of scholarship on the effects of refugees’ experiences on their children, it is reasonable to postulate that the experiences of Southeast Asian refugees and the implications of these experiences on the family unit may also be reflected in the significant relationships of their children. Where the mainstream American expectation is for children to separate and individuate from their parents as they enter adulthood and form their own families, refugee parents often discourage individuation in their efforts to maintain family cohesion and to protect their children from real and imagined dangers (Ying & Han, 2007a). This intergenerational and intercultural dynamic between immigrant parents and their U.S.-born children can exacerbate conflict in areas of development that are considered typical life cycle processes for WEAs. Boehnlein et al. (1995) assert that for Cambodian American refugee families, the experience of multiple losses and traumas during the Khmer Rouge regime, during migration, and through the resettlement process drove survivors to forge especially strong family bonds to facilitate both physical and emotional survival. Thus, the separation of young adults from the family can present unique conflicts for families who have already sustained significant losses. Indeed, significant family life cycle transitions, such as a child moving out of town to attend college or preparing for marriage, can exacerbate parents’ depressive and/or PTSD symptoms. The subject of dating and marriage can be especially contentious as many Cambodian parents require their approval of marriage partners regardless of the age of their adult child.

In another overview of Cambodian families, McKenzie-Pollock (2005) observed
that intergenerational conflicts may arise when the younger generation, in the attempt to individuate or establish their own families, are perceived by the older generation as being disrespectful or abandoning their family of origin. Because the maintenance of close extended family relationships is so highly valued in Cambodian families, the distress of the older generation can cause the younger generation significant pain. As a result, family loyalty can sometimes force families to accept extremely difficult situations, such as when adult children decide to partner interracially.

Section summary. Southeast Asian refugees compose one of the many diverse Asian American groups living in the United States. Despite the cultural diversity that exists among Southeast Asian refugees, these individuals share common experiences of war trauma, tumultuous migratory experiences, and difficulties resettling in a new and unfamiliar culture. Some of the implications of these experiences include mental health difficulties, acculturative stress, intergenerational transmission of trauma, and repercussions on Southeast Asian refugee families. With regard to the current study, it is hypothesized that being a second generation SEAA in an IRP with a WEA is significantly impacted by the experience of being a member of a Southeast Asian refugee family, especially given tension around intergenerational conflicts, family separation, and implications for second generation SEAA’s well-being and self-esteem.

The Second Generation Experience: Being Bicultural

“Being grounded in both cultures will allow the individual to both maintain and enhance his or her personal and cultural identities in a manner that will enable him or her to effectively manage the challenges of a bicultural existence”

(LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993, p. 148).
One of the most significant experiences for some U.S.-born second generation SEAAs is being bicultural. Individuals who are bicultural have not one, but two sets of cultural identities to manage. Those who are bicultural negotiate roles, beliefs, and values embedded within the traditional context of their heritage culture in addition to their roles, beliefs, and values connected to mainstream American society. For second generation SEAAs, this can be a challenging task because cultural values of being Southeast Asian may be incompatible with those of being American. For example, although dating in mainstream American culture is viewed as an anticipated social milestone, some Southeast Asian cultures discourage dating.

The following section outlines the theoretical underpinnings of biculturalism as defined by LaFromboise et al. (1993). This is followed by description of some of the intrapersonal conflicts associated with being bicultural. This is followed by a discussion of the normative or culturally-based conflicts commonly experienced by bicultural second generation individuals in relation to interpersonal interactions. Finally, interactions within Cambodian and South Asian families are used as examples to illuminate how intergenerational conflict interacts with being bicultural and the process of dating.

**Defining bicultural.** LaFromboise et al. (1993) studied models that have been used to describe the psychological processes, social experiences, and individual challenges of being bicultural. I have chosen to define biculturalism based on the alternation model because the authors adapted their model for bicultural competence from this. According to LaFromboise et al. (1993), “the alternation model of second-culture acquisition assumes that it is possible for an individual to know and understand
two cultures. It also supposes that an individual can alter his or her behavior to fit a particular social context” (p. 130). This suggests that an individual, such as a bicultural second generation SEAA, can maintain a sense of belonging in both their heritage culture and mainstream American culture without compromising either cultural identification. Individuals who are able to alternate their behavior are thought to be less anxious and demonstrate higher cognitive functioning and mental health status than individuals engaged in assimilative or acculturative strategies of biculturalism. Because alternation does not assume a hierarchical relationship between the two cultures, it is possible for an individual to assume equal identity status in both cultures, even if he or she does not value or prefer them equally. Thus, a bicultural individual is able to maintain and enjoy a positive relationship with both heritage and mainstream cultures without having to choose between them (LaFromboise et al., 1993).

LaFromboise et al.’s (1993) model for bicultural competence addresses six dimensions involved in the effective management of living in two cultures. To help illustrate these dimensions, I include descriptions of potential experiences of second generation SEAAs as they negotiate being bicultural relative to each dimension:

1. **Knowledge of cultural beliefs and values:** Second generation SEAAs growing up in a refugee household will have an intimate knowledge of the cultural values of being Southeast Asian (i.e., Vietnamese, Cambodian, and/or Laotian/Hmong/Mien). Additionally, school and other social experiences outside the familial home will expose them to social norms associated with being American.

2. **Positive attitudes toward both the minority and majority cultures:** Second
Second generation SEAAs feel good about and find intrinsic value in the cultural beliefs, attitudes, and customs related to Southeast Asian heritage, in addition to American cultural beliefs, attitudes, and customs that are deemed valuable and beneficial.

3. **Bicultural efficacy:** Second generation SEAAs who demonstrate bicultural efficacy believe they can live effectively and satisfyingly within both the Southeast Asian and American groups without compromising their sense of cultural identity, even through difficult periods when they struggle with perceived rejection from one or both cultures.

4. **Communication ability:** Second generation SEAAs are able to effectively communicate ideas and feelings to members of either their heritage or the mainstream American culture. Being bilingual, for example, can help mitigate tensions around being able to understand and/or make oneself understood to others in either culture.

5. **Role repertoire:** Second generation SEAAs have a range of culturally appropriate roles and/or behaviors they have developed to fit certain situations.

6. **A sense of being grounded:** Second generation SEAAs who are biculturally competent have stable social support networks in both cultures to facilitate coping with the pressures of living in a bicultural environment.

Prior to data collection, I did not presume that the second generation SEAA participants for the current investigation would have fully achieved bicultural competence or that they would identify as being bicultural at all; however, I anticipated that some of the aforementioned competencies would emerge as thematic areas of reflection with
regard to managing the influence of two cultures in the context of interracial partners with WEAs.

**Bicultural identity conflict.** Although bicultural competence offers a model for staving off conflict, one could assume that conflict will inevitably arise for second generation individuals. Stroink and Lalonde (2009) explored the potential for intrapersonal conflict between the two identities that compose bicultural identity among second generation Asian Canadians. The researchers speculated that if a bicultural individual perceives two distinct cultural groups as being desirable but incompatible with one another, he or she would perceive themselves in a no-win situation that impacts well-being. It was found that as bicultural individuals’ perceptions of contrast between their two cultures increased, they were less likely to identify highly with either culture. The researchers suggested that this may be due, in part, to the effects these perceptions have on the ability to feel as if one is a likeable member of both groups. The researchers also found that being bicultural and endorsing high levels of identification with both cultures was related to self-esteem and life satisfaction. Additionally, the perception of contrast between an individual’s cultures was not always associated with self-esteem and life satisfaction. In other words, a second generation SEAA who is aware of the contrasts between their heritage Southeast Asian culture and mainstream American culture and who does not identify highly with either culture does not necessarily have lower levels of well-being (e.g., self-esteem and life satisfaction).

**Normative conflict among the second generation.** As discussed in the Southeast Asian Refugees and Families section, it could be expected that intergenerational conflict is normative to negotiating heritage cultural norms promoted by first generation parents.
and mainstream cultural norms. In the United States, being bicultural involves managing
the normative roles, beliefs, and values of the cultural heritage of their families along
with those of the mainstream American cultural environment in which they live. Giguère
et al. (2010) described a normative perspective to understanding the experience of
culturally-based conflicts commonly faced by second generation individuals. For
example, a second generation individual experience of both heritage and mainstream
cultures differs significantly from that of first generation parents because knowledge of
cultural heritage is not first-hand. Further, the children of immigrants tend to endorse
mainstream cultural norms and values more strongly than they do the traditional cultural
norms and values of their parents, which can incite culturally-based internal conflicts and
the sense of being “caught between two cultures” (Giguère et al., 2010).

In certain situations where heritage and mainstream cultural norms seem
incompatible, second generation individuals may engage the practice of “frame-
switching” as a way to mitigate conflict (Giguère et al., 2010). Frame-switching is
described by Hong, Morris, Chiu, and Benet-Martinez (2000) as the way individuals shift
between different cultural interpretive frames influencing thoughts and behaviors in a
given cultural situation. For example, a second generation SEAA may be encouraged to
speak Vietnamese and abide by Vietnamese cultural mores at home but “switch” to
speaking English and acting according to American cultural norms at school.

While frame-switching can be a useful tool for individuals who regularly
negotiate between two cultures, this mechanism may not always be effective, especially
when a bicultural individual values both sets of cultural norms. Choosing one set of
norms can occur at the expense of failing to fulfill the norms of the other, usually at the
risk of social rejection. For example, a second generation SEAA who chooses to date can be viewed as fulfilling a relatively nominal cultural norm; however, this may unacceptable behavior when seen through the traditional lens of heritage culture. Because traditional cultural norms are usually transmitted by the family, the normative conflict experienced by second generation individuals could be more appropriately characterized as existing between their familial and mainstream norms as opposed to between two cultural groups (Giguère et al., 2010). For many second generation SEAAAs who walk the bicultural line, this clashing of cultures can be the cause of significant psychological distress (e.g., social rejection, shame, or depression) when managing the different dimensions of one’s life (e.g., work, school, family relationships, or romantic relationships).

Lalonde and Giguère (2008) sought to illuminate some of the normative conflicts encountered by second generation individuals by describing those experienced by South Asian Canadians and Chinese Canadians. Areas in which bicultural second generation individuals face life-impacting decisions can be especially ripe for generating the collision between cultural worlds. An example of such a conflict is in choosing a romantic partner, especially if one is considering a partner from a different race and/or culture. Lalonde and Giguère (2008) observed that Western cultural norms usually support the idea of marriage being a consequence of romantic love. Further, although family approval is desirable, young adults are expected to choose their partners without parental assistance. These values contrast starkly with Eastern cultural norms that view marriage as an alliance between two families that may eventually be followed by love. Although the adult child’s selection of a partner is desirable, this value may be secondary
to the obligation to accede to parental expectations of what characteristics define a favorable partner.

Lalonde and Giguère (2008) posited that for bicultural second generation individuals, differences in cultural expectations can lead to significant normative conflict, especially if bicultural individuals are attracted to someone from a different cultural group. At the intrapersonal level, the desire for bicultural second generation individuals to explore the potential of such a relationship may conflict with parental pressure to wait for a more “appropriate” potential partner. Interpersonally, bicultural second generation individuals who behave contrary to heritage cultural expectations may encounter conflict with their families if they are to partner within their own group. For second generation SEAAs, this conflict may be especially tenuous given refugee parents’ experiences of loss and their perception of potential abandonment by their children.

Other areas in which bicultural second generation individuals can encounter normative conflict lie in attempts to assert a sense of autonomy (Lalonde & Giguère, 2008). Where Western values emphasizing autonomy and independence may encourage an individual to follow a passion where financial stability is not a guaranteed outcome, Eastern norms of familism and interdependence may prompt an individual to pursue work that can financially provide for the family. Thus, moving out of the family home and making decisions on educational and career paths can be both intrapersonally and interpersonally stressful for bicultural second generation individuals.

**Intergenerational conflict and dating.** As described in the Southeast Asian Refugees and Families Section, both intergenerational and intercultural dynamics between immigrant parents and their American-born children can exacerbate conflict in
areas of development that are considered normative life cycle processes for WEAs. The complexity of intergenerational conflict is highlighted with the understanding that Southeast Asian refugees were born overseas and can trace their cultural heritages and traditions directly to their countries of origin. This reflects a foundation in traditional culture not shared by their children born in the United States (Giguère et al., 2010). Thus, second generation SEAAs may be more apt to acquire the language, customs, and values of mainstream American culture because of difficulty relating to the heritage culture of their parents.

Addressing intergenerational differences regarding dating and partnership can be particularly stressful in Southeast Asian refugee families. For example, American cultural norms regarding dating and romantic relationships can be inconceivable to older Cambodians who expect to have the final say regarding their adult child’s partner, no matter the age of the child (Boehnlein et al., 1997; McKenzie-Pollock, 2005). Based on my own experiences, Cambodian parents who are cognizant of the value of education and cultural propriety can be adamantly opposed to allowing their children to date for fear that they will drop out of school and/or shame the family. Thus, the perceived separation of young adults from the family can be simultaneously painful for SEAA refugee parents and frustrating for their U.S.-born children.

Intergenerational discrepancies around dating and partnership can prompt bicultural second generation individuals to engage in covert dating behaviors or to “date on the sly” in order to avoid intergenerational conflict (Manohar, 2008). In her qualitative study that sought to understand the dating behaviors of bicultural second generation Indian Americans, Manohar (2008) offered an account of the dating experiences of
biculural second generation Indian Americans. According to Manohar (2008), first generation Indian parents do not engage in “intergenerational dialogue on issues of dating and sexuality . . . save to explicitly forbid the second generation, especially women, from exploring either” (p. 574). In response to the cultural taboo on dating communicated by first generation parents, second generation Indian Americans have devised strategies to circumvent intergenerational and culturally-based conflict around their dating behavior. For example, many interviewees endorsed some manner of dating in secret or lying to parents about their dating behavior. Interviewees also reported on a mutual pretense wherein second generation Indian Americans expressed the belief that their parents were aware of their dating behaviors but “turned a blind eye” in order to avoid conflict. Manohar (2008) also referenced the “semantics of dating” wherein nomenclature is manipulated to identify a secret dating partner as a “friend” to parents who may or may not be aware that their children are dating.

Section summary. The experience of being a second generation individual is marked by the task of negotiating two cultures: The heritage culture as communicated by the first generation and the mainstream culture in which one lives. Theoretically, the task of living within two cultures can be achieved by attending to several dimensions of bicultural competency; however, conflict with regard to identity, culturally-based normative conflict, and intergenerational conflict can impact one’s sense of being able to achieve competency. With regard to the current study, it is proposed that being a second generation SEAA in an IRP with a WEA may be significantly impacted by the experience of being a second generation individual. Given the cultural similarities between Indian and many Southeast Asian cultures, Manohar’s account of the dating experiences of
bicultral second generation Indian Americans offers a view of what second generation SEAAs experience in the context of their relationships with WEAs. If the tension around dating and exploring partnership in Southeast Asian refugee families is comparable to that of Indian Asian immigrant families, it could be conjectured that introducing IRP is even more turbulent. Additionally, if IRP is a point of contention between second generation SEAAs and their refugee families, it is reasonable to suppose that some of this tension may carry over into the partnership.

**Ethnic Identity**

“[This interracial dating relationship] makes me feel much more confident as an Asian American woman, even though I don’t fit the Midwestern standards. In the Midwest people don’t end up with Asian girls and for him not to agree on it so much and still be with me . . . I think that it makes me more proud to be Asian” (AhnAllen & Suyemoto, 2011).

Ethnic identity can be a nebulous topic for some second generation SEAAs who, unlike their parents, were born and socialized in the United States. It might also be supposed that ethnic identity is a topic that becomes more or less salient in the context of SEAAs’ IRPs with WEAs. This section seeks to offer a general understanding of ethnic identity with the objective of discussing its potential impact on the experiences of these individuals. First, I offer an operational definition of ethnic identity. This is followed by a description of a stage model for identity development proffered by Phinney (1996). Next, ethnic identity is briefly discussed as a “hot button issue” among Asian Americans who regard IRP as a symptom of deficiency in or lack of ethnic identity. This position is countered by the presentation of a study demonstrating that ethnic identity is not an
effective predictor of engagement in an IRP. This is followed by discussion of a research study that explores ethnic identity development among Asian Americans. Last, ethnic identity development is discussed relative to IRP by illustrating a study that forecasts how second generation SEAAs may experience the relationship between ethnic identity and their IRPs with WEA partners.

**Defining ethnic identity.** Before further discussion of ethnic identity, it is useful at this juncture to acknowledge the overlap and interplay that occurs between the terms *ethnic identity* and *racial identity* in psychological literature and to offer distinct, operational definitions for these terms. Phinney and Ong (2007) conceptualize ethnic identity as a multifaceted and dynamic construct that speaks to the sense of belonging and process of learning of a group or culture. With regard to culture, I refer to Carter’s (1995) definition, being “the transmission of knowledge, skills, attitudes, behaviors, and language from one generation to the next, usually within the confines of a physical environment” (p. 12). Elements that may come to mind when conceptualizing culture are the customs, traditions, and historical experiences associated with specific cultural groups.

Whereas the reference point in defining ethnic identity lies in an individual’s relationship with culture, racial identity is defined by one’s relationship with race, or the “sociopolitical designation in which individuals are assigned to a particular racial group based on presumed biological or visible characteristics such as skin color, physical features, and in some cases language” (Carter, 1995, p. 15). In their discussion of racial identity and reflected appraisals relative Asian American racial adjustment, Alvarez and Helms (2001) suggested that racial identity is a reflection of identification with one’s
own racial group, shared social experiences due to race, and the ways in which individuals develop and integrate the effects of racial power/oppression differentials that exist between groups.

Although the phenomenon of interest in this investigation lies in understanding how second generation SEAAs in IRPs with WEAs experience ethnic identity, it is useful to be cognizant of racial identity, because in the context of this study to be interracial is also to be interethnic. According to Phinney and Ong (2007), both ethnic and racial identities “involve a sense of belonging to a group and a process of learning about one’s group. Both identities are associated with cultural behaviors and values, with attitudes toward one’s own group, and with responses to discrimination” (p. 274). Additionally, ethnic and racial identities are couched in an environment that allocates resources differently for different ethnic and racial groups (AhnAllen, 2011). One of the goals for this investigation is to understand how second generation SEAAs might perceive and internalize messages about experiences of perceived inequality due to one’s group identity.

**Stages of ethnic identity development.** Phinney (1996) conceptualized the process of ethnic identity as less a theoretical explanation of a process and more as a guide for considering variation among young adults in their understanding of ethnicity. Ethnic identity was conceptualized as occurring in flexible stages through which individuals can progress and revisit in order to reexamine aspects of ethnic identity throughout their lifetime. During the first stage of ethnic identity development, which typically takes place during youth, ethnicity is not necessarily psychologically salient and is given little conscious thought. Individuals in this stage usually accept the values and
attitudes that are present in the environment, internalizing both positive and negative images and stereotypes about their group from their environs. During this stage, youths may also receive positive or negative messages about groups other than their own. For example, second generation SEAAAs growing up in predominantly White communities who were socialized to identify highly with the family’s heritage culture may not necessarily demonstrate a preference for the majority culture. Indeed, they may reject it altogether.

The second stage of ethnic identity development is conceptualized as immersion (Phinney, 1996). During this stage, individuals may become interested in learning more about their cultural group. Triggering experiences may stimulate this exploration, such as encountering racial discrimination. Because ethnicity may be highly salient (even ethnocentric) to an individual during this time, individuals may be more acutely aware of racism and discrimination. This awareness can contribute to feelings of anger toward the dominant group and empathy for members of other minority groups. For second generation SEAAAs in IRPs with WEAs, awareness of racially-oriented criticism toward the relationship or even within the relationship can prompt the SEAA partner to become defensive and idealize the heritage culture while denigrating White European-dominated culture.

The third stage of ethnic identity development (Phinney, 1996) involves the development of a secure and confident sense of self as members of their cultural group. Individuals “feel secure in their own ethnicity and are assumed to hold a positive but realistic view of their own group” (Ethnic identity development, para. 9). Although individuals may be comfortable with their sense of group membership, ethnicity may or
may not be as salient as in the prior stages of ethnic identity development. Second generation SEAs in this stage who wish to further self-exploration around ethnic identity may engage in activities that facilitate this growth, such as collaborating with members of other groups to promote intergroup relations. However, “those who are disillusioned with the status quo and see little possibility for change may believe that minorities are better off becoming self-sufficient within their own communities and thus embrace a philosophy of separatism” (Phinney, 1996, Ethnic identity development, para. 9).

**Ethnic identity and the notion of “selling out.”** For many Asian Americans, ethnic identity can be an emotionally charged issue. The related topic of IRP is controversial because of the threat that these unions pose to perceptions of ethnic identity. Indeed, a common notion is that the individuals in IRPs are “sell outs” who suffer from a low or non-existent sense of ethnic identity (Mok, 1999) and that partnering interracially is a means to assimilate to the majority culture (Chow, 2000). Research has provided evidence that counters these perceptions. For instance, Mok (1999) sought to assess the rate of interracial dating among Asian Americans and assessed a set of variables (e.g., acculturation, ethnic identity, perceptions of heterosexual attractiveness, American friendship, parental influence, and density to intra- and intraracial dating) for their ability to predict interracial and intraracial dating. A significant zero-order correlation was found connecting the experience of low ethnic identity with the likelihood for Asian Americans to date White Americans; however, ethnic identity failed to emerge as a predictor from multiple regression modeling. In other words, some individuals who date White Americans may endorse low ethnic identity, but low ethnic identity does not predict the
likelihood of dating interracially.

Acculturation, heterosexual attractiveness, and friendship with members of diverse groups significantly contributed to the prediction model for interracial dating. That is, the likelihood of Asian Americans to date White Americans is more strongly influenced by higher levels of acculturation, finding opposite-sex White Americans more physically attractive than Asian Americans, and greater exposure to diverse groups of people as opposed to how an individual feels about his or her ethnic identity. In response to these findings, Mok stated that “finding that ethnic identity is less powerful a force than acculturation speaks to the most charged claims made against interracial daters: That they are ‘sell-outs’ to the race” (p. 115).

**Asian American ethnic identity.** The use of the term “sell out” used to describe Asian Americans in IRPs implies that ethnic identity, or lack thereof, is a static condition for which there is no hope of growth or awareness. However, ethnic identity is academically recognized as being a dynamic process involving a sense of belonging to a group in addition to a process of development constructed over time and influenced by experiences, actions, and choices (Phinney & Ong, 2007). Relatedly, Yen and Huang (1996) sought to demonstrate that for Asian Americans, ethnic identity development is a dynamic, multi-faceted process that is significantly influenced by the social context. These authors argued that present theories and stage models for ethnic identity described dominantly linear, intrapersonal, and individualistic processes that are incompatible for conceptualizing Asian Americans, who may lean toward a more collective and public sense of self.

Yen and Huang’s (1996) study was conducted with a sample of 78 undergraduate
students (41 males and 46 females) of self-identified Asian ancestry attending a prestigious university. The participants were administered the Ethnic Identity Development Exercise (EIDE), a qualitative instrument developed by the authors that offered open-ended queries about the participants’ individual experiences of ethnic identity development. The instructions for the EIDE instrument were such that the participants had the freedom to explore and describe their ethnic identity development without specific cues or leads, i.e., they could write or draw their responses if they so wished.

The results of the study supported Yen and Huang’s (1996) hypothesis that ethnic identity development was a dynamic, malleable, and complex process. For the Asian American participants, a sense of ethnic identity was significantly influenced by three key factors. First, the participants described collectivistic rather than individualistic factors as being significant influences on ethnic identity. For example, relationships with parents, other relatives, and friends played a heavy role in how an individual negotiated a sense of self. Second, environmental factors, such as the presence (or absence) of other Asians in their geographic area and opportunities to travel to Asia or live abroad, appeared to have a greater effect than internal forces in shaping ethnic identity. Within this category, internalized stereotypes of Asians, negative self-comparisons with White standards, and feeling alienated from White society also impacted ethnic identity development. Finally, the participants’ reports of conforming to the expectations of White society in order avoid embarrassment of being different, in addition to the avoidance of shame in the family or among other Asians by identifying with their own culture as necessary, supported the cultural value of shame as a powerful agent in ethnic
identity development of Asian Americans.

Although these findings appear to be meaningful, it is difficult to ascertain their true significance given the use of the EIDE, whose validity and reliability was untested at the time of administration; however, the open nature of the assessment was deliberate in its intent to allow Asian American participants to conceptualize their own ethnic identity. The responses of a largely middle-class cohort of undergraduate students at a prestigious university may also be different from older individuals who might conceptualize ethnic identity based upon differing experiences and levels of awareness. Despite these limitations, the findings offer an informative stepping off point from which to estimate how second generation SEAAs might construe ethnic identity in the context of their IRPs with WEAs.

The relationship between ethnic identity development and IRP. Foeman and Nance (1999) assert that individuals in IRPs develop a racial consciousness that is unattainable to partners in same-race partnerships. If the same can be said for ethnic identity, then it makes sense to suppose that individuals in IRPs may negotiate and reexamine their own ethnic identities in ways that are similar to individuals who are in same-race partnerships. AnhAllen and Suyemoto (2011) explored this dynamic in their endeavor to understand the influence of interracial dating on the racial and/or ethnic identities of Asian American women and White European men. As one of the few research studies to investigate IRP between Asian Americans and WEAs, AnhAllen and Suyemoto (2011) exercised a qualitative, grounded theory approach to explore how interracial dating relationships influenced the ways in which the individuals understood their own racial and/or ethnic identities. Individual in-depth interviews were conducted
with nine Asian American women and their WEA male partners. Analysis of the interview data showed that the experience of interracial dating resulted in several perceived shifts in “seeing” and “acting” in relation to each partners’ understanding of self and others racially and ethnically. Perceived shifts in seeing referred to cognitive, perceptual, and emotional changes connected to new ways of thinking and understanding. Perceived shifts in acting addressed intentional behavioral and relational changes connected with new ways of behaving, applying concepts, and negotiating interactions.

I will focus on the emergent findings for the Asian American partners as these offer the most relevant insights into the lived experience of this study’s participants. The ethnic makeup of the Asian American partners in AnhAllen and Suyemoto’s (2011) study included two Taiwanese Americans, five Chinese Americans, one Filipina American, and one Korean American. For the female Asian American partners, five patterns emerged within the categories of “new ways of seeing the self,” “new ways of seeing others,” and “new ways of acting.” New ways of seeing the self involved increased appreciation of Asian American culture and heritage, increased self-confidence as a function of feeling accepted and valued by their partners, and increased appreciation of personal characteristics that were not related to being Asian American. A new way of seeing others involved the experience of increased open-mindedness and acceptance of White European American perspectives. A new way of acting involved feeling increasingly comfortable with speaking out and expressing oneself.

Although the goal of qualitative inquiry is not necessarily to generalize results to other populations, these findings are useful in reflecting on the different ways that the process of establishing and maintaining IRP might impact second generation SEAA’s
experiences of ethnic identity development. As indicated by Phinney (1996), ethnic identity development can be influenced and triggered by myriad experiences, and being in a committed partnership with someone of another race can be one such experience. This is not to understate the significance of one’s ethnic identity status prior to entering an IRP, in addition to any preexisting worldviews that one may carry into the partnership. This latter dimension will be discussed in the following section.

**Section summary.** Contrary to the beliefs of those accusing Asian Americans who date interracially of being “sell outs” to their ethnic groups, choosing an interracial partner is not a reflection of having a no ethnic identity. Ethnic identity development is a dynamic process that can become more or less salient throughout one’s lifespan. It can additionally be influenced by triggering events such as experiences of racism. Indeed, AhnAllen and Suyemoto (2011) demonstrated that being in an IRP can be a triggering event that influences one’s developing sense of ethnic/racial identity. This offers some support for the hypothesis that second generation SEAAs may experience ethnic identity development as an influential dynamic in the context of their IRPs with WEAs.

**Self-Construal: The Interdependent Self and the Independent Self**

“I guess there could be just one truth, but... there could be many different truths.”

*(Tawa & Suyemoto, 2010, p. 286)*

As previously mentioned, some of the challenges of being a bicultural second generation individual are seated in experiences of culturally-based conflict. Frame-switching might be exercised as a way of negotiating between distinct cultural environments. Relatedly, how does one intrapsychically and interpersonally negotiate between distinct cultural selves? In this section on self-construal, I attempt to illustrate
how this negotiation might occur. First, an operational definition of self-construal is proffered, followed by discussion on what self-construal means for bicultural Asian Americans. Finally, I describe how self-construal can impact individuals’ interpersonal approach with others. This latter discussion will offer some insight into how the self-construal of second generation SEAAs may impact their experiences of being in IRPs with WEAs.

**Defining self-construal.** In the theoretical framework offered by Markus and Kitayama (1991), self-construal is conceptualized as the cultural worldview that influences an individual’s behaviors and psychological consequences with regard to cognition, emotion, and motivation. Kim and Kitani (1998) define self-construal as a “constellation of thoughts, feelings, and actions concerning the relationship of the self to others and the self as distinct from others” (p. 53). Individuals of Asian or collectivistic cultures tend to adopt a self-construal that derives from a sense of connectedness with others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Additionally, the collectivist sees oneself as interdependent, viewing his or her thoughts, feelings, and actions in the context of relationships with others. In contrast, individuals of more Westernized or individualistic cultures favor a self-construal that is more autonomous and independent. When an individualist engages in a behavior, reference to others may be less important than whether or not the individualist considers the behavior desirable to him or her (Nagayama Hall, 2003).

**Meaning for bicultural Asian Americans.** Because second generation SEAAs may identify with both the collectivistic worldview embraced by their refugee families and the individualistic worldview of mainstream American culture, it may presumed that
these individuals shift between interdependent or independent self-construals, much like they may engage in frame-switching to adjust thoughts and behavior as appropriate for certain cultural situations.

A small body of research focusing on the bicultural experiences of Asian Americans confirms that these individuals exercise some degree of both independent and interdependent self-construals. Tawa and Suyemoto (2010) extended this research by conducting the first qualitative investigation to understand bicultural Asian American participants’ meaning and lived experiences of self-construal. Thirteen Asian American participants (seven females and six males) were composed of three Chinese Americans, two Chinese-Vietnamese Americans, two Vietnamese Americans, two Korean Americans, two Japanese Americans, one Filipina American, and one Pakistani American. The participants were interviewed using a two-part interview protocol. The first portion utilized an open-ended, inductive approach to explore the meaning making around the self in three social contexts: Primarily White situations, primarily Asian situations, and culturally mixed situations. During the second portion of the interview, the researchers showed the participants unlabeled, illustrated representations of both independent and interdependent self-construal and asked the participants to describe personal experiences in relation to the models.

Tawa and Suyemoto (2010) found that participants’ narratives about self-construal reflected meanings attached not just to an internalized “cultural worldview” (i.e., collectivism or individualism), but was also externally co-constructed with others. Participants reported that understanding of the self was influenced both by internalized ideas of the self as well as perceptions of how they are perceived by others. Some of the
participants endorsed exercising cultural frame-switching as a means to not only manage differing sets of behaviors to fit certain cultural situations (e.g., being at home with their Asian family and being at school), but also as a way to see oneself (“at home, I see myself as more interdependent, but at school, I see myself as more independent”). Additionally, participants reported on instances in which awareness of being a racial minority influenced their decisions on which set of behaviors and way of seeing oneself would (or would not) be beneficial in particular cultural contexts. At times, this decision-making resulted in utilizing self-construals that were seemingly incongruent for a given context. For example, one participant reported that in order to fit into predominantly White social contexts, he would engage an interdependent self-construal (adjusting his thoughts and behaviors to align with those of the group) to play down his “Asianness” (Tawa and Suyemoto, 2010).

Navigating self-construal as bicultural individuals can be a potentially complex experience for second generation SEAA’s, especially in the context of being romantically partnered with a member of the racial majority. To elucidate another example, consider a situation in which a second generation SEAA receives criticism from his or her WEA partner about observing a cultural holiday. In reaction to this negative attention, the second generation SEAA individual might utilize an independent self-construal to associate with the collective Asian context (and subsequently differentiate from the European American context) in order to assert his or her cultural identity, resist perceived racism, and maintain ethnic pride. Thus, it is not unreasonable to hypothesize that self-construal is an influential construct for managing the challenges that interracial romantic partners may encounter. This will be explored in the following section.
**Self-construal and interpersonal approach.** According to Kim and Kitani (1998), “Opportunities for intercultural contact can lead to serious misunderstandings in intimate intercultural relationships, including romantic ones” (p. 52). These authors sought to understand the effects of cultural worldview (collectivistic or individualistic) and self-construals (interdependent or independent) on conflict management styles in romantic relationships of Asian Americans and Caucasian Americans. It is important to note here that current investigation seeks to understand what kinds of meaningful experiences, as opposed to specific conflicts, second generation SEAAs attribute to being in IRPs with WEAs. Meaningful experiences might include both challenging and rewarding events. It is also important to note that the term “conflict management” does not automatically translate into resolving conflict of an acrimonious nature. Rather, “it should be viewed as an on-going process of handling conflict interactions” (Kim & Kitano, 1998). Conflict management may be thought of as one’s interpersonal approach.

The participants for Kim and Kitani’s study included 298 college students (136 males, 159 females, 3 unidentified gender) attending the University of Hawaii. The ethnic makeup of the participants were 96 Japanese, 52 Caucasians, 45 Chinese, 31 Filipino, 21 part Hawaiian, 17 mixed non-Hawaiian, 12 Koreans, four Samoans, three Hispanics, and 14 individuals who identified as “other.”. One hundred seventy-two (57.7%) of the participants endorsed being involved in romantic relationships. The participants were asked to read one of three hypothetical conflict situations in the context of a romantic relationship and then assessed for self-construal orientation and endorsement of various conflict management styles (dominating, integrating, compromising, avoiding, and obliging).
The participants were classified into two groups (Caucasian American/individualistic and Asian American/collectivistic) in order to assess the relationship between self-construal and cultural worldview. With regard to the relationship between cultural worldview and conflict management style in romantic relationships, the results showed that Caucasian Americans demonstrated a higher preference for a dominating conflict style than Asian Americans. Asian Americans demonstrated a higher preference for the obliging, avoiding, and integrating styles of managing conflict in romantic relationships than did Caucasian Americans. There were no significant differences between Caucasian Americans and Asian Americans for preference of the compromising style. With regard to the relationship between self-construal and cultural worldview, findings indicated that the greater an individual’s self-construal as independent, the higher the preference for a dominating conflict management style for romantic relationships. Further, the more an individual endorsed his or her self-construal as interdependent, the higher the preference for avoidance, obliging, integrating, and compromising conflict management styles for romantic relationships.

**Section summary.** Although the results of the reviewed studies are not necessarily generalizable to the experiences among second generation SEAAs, they contributed to the development of guiding hypotheses about how self-construal may impact second generation SEAAs in the context of their IRPs with WEA partners. For example, the findings of Tawa and Suyemoto (2010) provide a rich context for understanding how second generation SEAAs may negotiate self-construal in the context of their IRPs. Additionally, Kim and Kitani’s findings around cultural worldview, self-construal, and conflict style shed light on how these culturally-loaded constructs may
impact the interpersonal dynamics in these partnerships. These perspectives were useful to keep in mind through the research design process for this study, as well as during data collection and analysis when the participants’ stories were shared and synthesized.

**Experiences of Perceived Racism**

“As a consequence of growing up and being socialized in an environment in which members of their group (if not themselves personally) are privileged relative to other groups, Whites learn to perceive themselves (and their group) as entitled to similar privileges. In order to protect such privilege, individual group members, and therefore the group more generally; learn to protect their privileged status by denying and distorting race-related reality and aggressing against perceived threats to the racial status quo.”

*(Helms, 1995, p. 188)*

To date, most of the research on IRPs has focused primarily on quantitative factors such as the rates of, trends in, and reasons for the initiation or dissolution of these partnerships. Although much of this research makes reference to how the individuals in these relationships experience perceived racism, surprisingly little scholarship offers more than vague descriptions or conjectures of these experiences. Most of the richer descriptions are described in the few qualitative studies seeking to understand the subjective, lived experiences of individuals in IRPs (e.g., Killian, 2003; Wieling, 2003; Killian; 2002). In this section I seek to shed light on these experiences to gain insight into how second generation SEAAs may experience the impact of perceived racism in the context of their IRPs. First, I highlight the findings of two studies that explored the lived experiences of individuals in IRPs, paying particular attention to how racism was
experienced by the participants. I then discuss a particular point of interest that the current investigation seeks to illuminate: Intrarelational racism.

**Descriptions of perceived racism.** Killian (2003) used qualitative methods to interview 12 African American/White married couples and sought to understand how they experienced and responded to racism. He additionally explored how these couples negotiated racial and ethnic differences in their relationships. The perceived experiences of racism and prejudice that these couples encountered ranged from subtle cues of avoidance and exclusion to more obvious behaviors such as stares and verbalized derogatory comments. One interviewee reported having family members walk out on a wedding ceremony, others described workplace discrimination. In response to these types of negative attention, partners described several strategies for coping. A few of these included “fighting fire with fire” (e.g., staring back), disassociating from one another (e.g., sitting apart when traveling on the same bus), and not discussing negative public reactions altogether.

Killian (2003) reflected that the strategic responses engaged by interracial partners to “survive” take place in a context where the real possibility of violent backlash still exists, even decades after *Loving v. Virginia*. He also described the engagement of a dyadic double consciousness, wherein interracial partners,

. . . have their own sense of who they are and what their life is really about, and at the same time, through encountering negative cultural stereotypes of interracial couples, and through interactions with others are aware of the ways in which the larger society views them. (p. 16)

Subsequently, interracial partners who make statements such as “we’re really
“boring” or “we’re just like any other couple” may do so as acts to protect themselves from what is perceived as an oppressive society that reacts strongly to the idea of IRP (Killian, 2003).

For second generation SEAAs in IRPs, the dyadic double consciousness can be meaningful when efforts to enjoy their relationship with WEA partners are undermined by reminders of how “different” it is. As a second generation SEAA who has been in IRPs with WEA partners, I am reminded by my own hypersensitivity to vocal intonation and perceived intention behind being asked, “So, how did you two meet?”

In Wieling’s phenomenology (2003) investigating the experiences of Latino/a and White marriages, described encountering experiences of racism from their own families and friends. One Mexican American interviewee, “Antonio,” described his indignation when his father-in-law expressed relief that Antonio was “like one of them,” that is, supposedly responsible and educated. White female participants reported being approached by family members expressing concern about the women’s impending marriages to “machistas” who would dominate and abuse them.

These studies offer examples of the few pieces of scholarship attempting to understand the lived experience of perceived racism in IRPs. None, however, have explored how interracial partners make meaning of the impact of perceived racism on the partnership itself, which is one of the aims of the current investigation.

**Experiences of perceived intrarelationship racism.** Another area of inquiry and a topic unexplored by research is the how racism may be experienced by interracial partners within the relationship. Previously in the Understanding IRPs section I discussed Killian’s 2002 study in which he reported on the dominant and marginalized discourses
emerging from African American/White American married couples’ narratives. One of the emergent discourses was that of hypersensitivity in persons of color, which describes the perception that people of color are oversensitive to issues of race and thus “see racism everywhere they look.” Interestingly, Killian’s reflection on the emergence of the discourse of hypersensitivity in persons of color alluded to the presence of racism within the partnership.

While all 10 of the African American spouses interviewed agreed that they were more likely than their White American spouses to notice and emotionally react to experiences of perceived racism from the public, White American spouses also acknowledged having a lack of awareness of their partners’ differing social and emotional experiences around race (Killian, 2002). The author suggested that because White American partners may be uncomfortable with confronting racism, attempts to defend oneself from against this discomfort might inadvertently result in the playing into privilege: “White partners’ ‘rosier’ worldviews [around race relations] depend on certain discursive ‘truths,’ and their discourses carry concomitant privileges that their partners of color lack” (Killian, 2002, p. 610). For White American partners, engaging in serious conversations about race and racism can be a painful reminder of their privileged status relative to the underprivileged status of their African American partners. This awareness disrupts fantasies that White American partners may harbor about being immune to racism because of their participation in IRPs. Many White American participants pointed to two pieces of evidence that support this supposed immunity: Their IRPs and their testimony that “race was never an issue/problem” in these partnerships.

In my own conceptualization around the discourse of hypersensitivity, I do not
view this discourse as it exists within IRPs as being significantly different from racism that occurs outside of the relationship. Acts of racism may not always be conscious or malicious, but they remain acts of racism. Therefore, through the duration of the current research study I refer to this variation of racism as intrarelationship racism. Again, this is not to imply deliberate intent for WEA partners to hurt their partners of color. However, it is my perspective that to not label it perpetuates what Killian (2002) termed a “liberalist ideology” around race that silences the idea that racism exists and the pain it elicits.

Section summary. Rich descriptions of the experiences of perceived racism appear to be understated in the literature on IRPs, despite their deleterious effects on the individuals to whom they are directed. These effects, in turn, are also understated, especially in the context of how interracial partners make meaning of and manage these experiences. In the context of the current investigation, it is my position that in order to gain as comprehensive an understanding as possible of the experiences of second generation SEAAs in IRPs with WEAs, perceived experiences of racism must be looked at “in the face.” This involved conducting research that gives voice to the individuals who experience racism, outside of and/or within their partnerships.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter offers a detailed account of the research questions, design, and methodological procedures that were engaged in this phenomenological study of the lived experience among adult U.S.-born children of Southeast Asian refugees (second generation SEAAs) in interracial romantic partnerships (IRPs) with White European American (WEA) individuals. Insights on the influence of factors such as refugee family of origin dynamics, the second generation experience, ethnic identity, self-construal, and perceived experiences of racism were explored by engaging participants in semi-structured, in-depth interviews.

Research Questions

Creswell (2007) recommended that qualitative researchers should reduce their studies to a single, overarching question and several subquestions. The overarching or “grand tour” question for this dissertation study is: What is it like to be a second generation SEAA in an IRP? This question was addressed by asking participants to reflect on how they understand themselves, their partners, and their environments in the context of being in a partnership with an individual of European American heritage. Subsumed under the grand tour question are two subquestions: First, what kinds of meaningful experiences occur between and within individuals in IRPs? This question was addressed by asking participants to reflect upon and share their experiences of both the interpersonal and intrapersonal challenges and rewards they experience in the context of the partnership. Second, how do individuals in IRPs perceive these experiences in connection with being a second generation SEAA? This question was addressed by
asking participants to reflect on how their self-described racial identity seemed to impact the IRP.

**Research Design**

To date, most of the research on IRPs has been quantitative in nature, focusing primarily on objective and measurable factors such as the rates of, trends in, and reasons for the initiation or dissolution of these partnerships. In her qualitative study investigating the influence of interracial dating on the racial and/or ethnic identities of Asian American women and White European American men, AhnAllen (2011) asserted, “little research has examined the actual experience of interracial relationships or how these relationships influence the individuals involved” (p. 62). Additionally, the branch of research focusing on partnerships involving Asian Americans does not seem to adequately address the diversity that exists among these individuals. For example, to date, no studies of IRP address the experiences of second generation SEAAs, the impact of refugee parentage on these individuals, or how either of these factors impact second generations SEAAs’ experience of IRPs. Therefore, as valuable as the present and dominantly quantitative scholarship on interracial romantic partnership is, it offers limited insight into the qualitative nature of how interracial couples experience themselves and their relationships, especially in the context of making meaning in a racialized world. Thus, the goal of this qualitative study was to gain insight into the essence of the lived experiences of its participants.

The present study’s goal of understanding the participants’ experiences within the context of their partnerships makes a qualitative research design a fitting manner of investigation because, according to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), “. . . qualitative research
involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 3). A qualitative method of investigation offers certain key advantages over quantitative methodologies for this vein of study. Where quantitative methodologies exercise a deductive or “top-down” manner of investigation that is motivated by generating hypotheses from an established knowledge base, the inductive or “bottom-up” manner of qualitative research methods values the emergence of themes and patterns from the data (Creswell, 2007). This is especially useful when little is known about a phenomenon of interest, i.e., the experience of second generation SEAA in interracial relationships. Qualitative research methods additionally offer the researcher the opportunity to obtain information in rich detail and with greater flexibility than quantitative methods, which often require standardized responses to standardized instruments (Patton, 2002). For the current study, semi-structured, in-depth interviewing was used to gather this information for the current investigation. When the need for clarification or elaboration arose through the course of the interviews, probing questions were employed to examine the words, behaviors, and experiences of the participants in greater depth.

A phenomenological research approach was especially appropriate for this study for several reasons. First, it focuses on understanding and effectively describing meaning-making within personal experience. The objective for this study was to increase understanding of the lived experiences of second generation SEAA in IRPs with WEAs. This line of inquiry is congruent with Creswell’s (2007) description of phenomenology, which seeks to understand the meanings that several individuals make about their
experience of a concept or phenomenon. Second, phenomenology is the favored qualitative approach for psychological and counseling research (Moustakas, 1994; McLoed, 2011). Wertz (2005) asserted that phenomenology has a long history in the discipline of counseling psychology, particularly with regard to diverse contributions in areas of mental health and counseling. He stated that “Phenomenology holds that psychological reality – its meanings and subjective processes – can be faithfully discovered” (p. 175). Finally, phenomenology was conducive to the integration of this study’s findings in a composite case narrative, which is presented in Chapter Five. Indeed, Moustakas (1994) indicated that qualitative researchers utilizing phenomenology are responsible for using the data from individuals who have experienced a phenomenon to inform the development of a composite description of the essence of this experience for those who lived it.

**Sampling Procedures**

The participants were sought via purposeful snowball sampling. According to Creswell (2007), snowball sampling serves to identify “cases of interest from people who know people who know what cases are information rich” (p. 127). For example, the Cambodian Student Society of California State University in Long Beach was used as a resource for identifying college-aged participants who were likely to be the children of refugee Southeast Asian immigrants. These participants, in turn, referred family members or friends who were second generation Southeast Asian Americans. Another recruitment consideration was that populations of various Southeast Asian immigrants have settled in several concentrated communities throughout the United States; thus, participant recruitment and data collection were focused in Long Beach, California; Fresno,
California; Chicago, Illinois; and Boston, Massachusetts.

The first activity of participant recruitment was identification of individuals known to the researcher who were able to assist with participant recruitment. These individuals were contacted via e-mail to elicit their assistance using a scripted email message (see Appendix A, Network Contact Email Text), in which they were asked to forward recruitment information to individuals within their personal and professional networks who may fit the inclusion criteria and/or to community organizations where these individuals may be found. The Recruitment Invitation (see Appendix B) outlining the nature of the study and the criteria for participation was attached to this email message.

Participants were also recruited via the email listservs for the following divisions of the American Psychological Association (APA): Division 17 Society of Counseling Psychology, Division 35 Society for the Psychological Study of Women, Division 44 Society for the Psychological Study of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues, Division 45 Society for the Psychological Study of Ethnic Minority Issues, and Division 51 Society for the Psychological Study of Men. This was achieved by first emailing the designated contact person for each division (per the APA website) to request contact information for the moderators for each division’s listserv (see Appendix C, APA Division Contact Person Email Text). Each division listserv moderator was then emailed (see Appendix D, Listserv Moderator Email Text) to request permission to disseminate the Recruitment Invitation to the listserv.

The Recruitment Invitation instructed individuals who wished to participate in the study to contact the researcher via email in order to initiate scheduling the first of two
meetings. Nearly 30 individuals contacted me to express interest in participation in the study. Some of these individuals did not meet the participant criteria and others did not reach the scheduling phase of the recruitment process. Appendix E (Schedule Phone Introduction Email Text) outlines instructions for potential participants were given to schedule an introductory phone conversation. An electronic copy of the Informed Consent Form (Appendix F) was attached to this message, offering potential participants more detailed information about the study. After potential participants responded via email with potential appointment dates and times, scheduling of the Phone Introduction was confirmed as described in the Confirm Scheduled Phone Introduction Email Text (Appendix G). Appendix H (Phone Introduction and Scheduling of Interview Meeting Script) outlines the items that were covered during the Phone Introduction, which served three purposes. First, it allowed the researcher to introduce herself and initiate rapport-building with the prospective participants who would eventually share details about their most intimate relationship. The secondary purpose of this contact was to outline the activities that would take place during the first meeting (i.e., discussion of informed consent, prospective participant screening, and/or in-depth interview). The final purpose of this contact was to discuss to schedule and the parameters of our first meeting. More specifically, it was important to inform the prospective participants that this meeting was conditioned on their continued interest to participate in the study per understanding of the Informed Consent Form and determination of the prospective participants’ fit within the inclusion criteria. We then scheduled a meeting time and determined a mutually agreed upon medium (in-person; Skype, an internet-based application that allows for video conferencing; or phone) in which to conduct the interview. Immediately following the
Phone Introduction, potential participants received a Study Information Bundle (see Appendix I) via email. This bundle contained another copy of the Informed Consent Form and an Opt Out Form (see Appendix J) that participants had the option to use at any stage of the study to terminate involvement. In the event that potential participants missed their scheduled Phone Introduction with the student investigator, a message (voicemail or email) was left requesting the individuals call or email me in order to reschedule (see Appendix K, Reschedule Phone Introduction Message Script). Ultimately, 11 participants who self-identified as second generation SEAAs in IRPs with WEAs were interviewed between August 2012 and November 2013.

**A note about sample size.** According to Patton (2002), “There are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry” (p. 244). Further, “The validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated by qualitative inquiry have more to do with information richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than with sample size” (Patton, 2002, p. 245). Recommendations for ideal sample sizes in phenomenological research vary widely. Creswell (2007) cited seeing this number range between one and 325 subjects. Dukes (1984) recommended studying between 3 to 10 subjects. Hill, Thompson, and Williams (1997) recommended including at least 8 to 15 participants for qualitative research. This range is large enough to determine whether findings are common among several people or merely happenstance among a very few. Additional participants in larger samples typically add minimal new data. For this study, the target sample size was 8 to 12 participants, or as many as necessary to achieve data saturation. Data saturation is explained in further detail in the Data Analysis section.
Participants

The inclusion criteria for participation in this study required that the participants be second generation SEAA individuals involved in interracial relationships with WEA partners. Each of the 11 participants identified as being of Cambodian, Vietnamese, or Hmong heritage. Furthermore, each participant’s parents were Southeast Asian refugees of Cambodian, Vietnamese, or Hmong heritage. Given the waves of Southeast Asian refugees that entered the United States between the mid-1970s through the early 1990s, a large proportion of second generation SEAAs residing in the U.S. fit into a demographic of young-approaching-mid-adulthood. Thus, although there was no maximum age limit for participating, as expected, the participants fell within the 20-40 year age range. Participants were also required be at least 18 years of age.

The inclusion criteria also required that the participants identify their partnerships as long-term, committed partnerships that have lasted at least one year. The rationale for focusing on committed partnerships of at least a year’s duration is seated in the desire to capture the experience of having moved beyond the initial stages of relationship development into a state that demonstrates commitment. Through their investigations of dating relationships, Arriaga and Agnew (2001) confirmed that commitment is marked by three components: 1) emotional connection, 2) the presumption by both partners that the relationship is long-term and intact “for better or worse,” and 3) the motivation to continue the relationship into the future. Having been involved in their partnerships for at least one year increased the likelihood that second generation SEAA participants would be able to think critically about a depth of experiences as related to the evolution of their IRP. Participants were offered the opportunity to reflect on how factors such as refugee
parentage, the second generation experience, ethnic identity, self-construal, and the perception of racism may have affected these experiences. Being able to reflect on relationship milestones such as negotiating mutual and individual relationship goals, managing conflict, meeting the in-laws, establishing a common household, and/or raising children not only provided data that tapped into the phenomena of interest, but also was rich and meaningful for the participants.

With the goal of tapping as purely into the phenomena of interest as possible (i.e., what it is like to be in an interracial relationship, what types of interactions arise in these relationships, and how these are impacted by refugee family of origin dynamics, the second generation experience, ethnic identity, self-construal, and experiences of perceived racism), participants were recruited regardless of partner gender identity or sexual orientation. Additionally, individuals who identified as being partners in heterosexual or same-sex relationships were welcome to participate in the study provided the inclusion criteria were met. The goal was to have a participant sample composed of men and women demonstrating heterogeneity across demographic variables such as gender, sexual orientation, primary language use, education, and socioeconomic status.

Individuals with any prior personal or professional relationship with the researcher were excluded from this study. Potential participants with a prior or current hierarchical relationship with me (e.g., supervisor-supervisee, instructor-student, etc.) were not invited to participate in this study. These exclusionary criteria were used to reduce the risk of unintended coercion and reduce the influence of social desirability to ensure integrity of the data.

The research sample was composed of eight females and three males. Each
interview was followed at a later time by a short follow up meeting during which member checking took place. The participants ranged in age from 21-37 \((M = 28)\) years. Five participants identified as Vietnamese American, four participants identified as Hmong American, and two participants identified as Cambodian American. With regard to achieved education, two participants had a high school diploma, one had an Associate’s degree, four completed Bachelor’s degrees, and four possessed Master’s degrees. The participants were from various regions of the United States ranging from the Pacific Northwest to the Atlantic Seaboard. Participant demographic information is summarized in Table 1. To protect the participants’ anonymity, each was assigned a pseudonym.
Table 1

Participant Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Achieved education</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Household income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vance</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hmong American</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>College student</td>
<td>40-49K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hmong American</td>
<td>Master’s degree</td>
<td>College advisor</td>
<td>40K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tory</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Vietnamese American</td>
<td>Master’s degree</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>90K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drew</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Vietnamese American</td>
<td>Master’s degree</td>
<td>Marketing manager</td>
<td>200K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kai</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hmong American</td>
<td>Associate’s degree</td>
<td>Photographer</td>
<td>64K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taylor</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Vietnamese American</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>Graduate student</td>
<td>14K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kadin</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hmong American</td>
<td>High school diploma</td>
<td>College student</td>
<td>Not Reported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lee</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Vietnamese American</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>Graduate student</td>
<td>100K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Vietnamese American</td>
<td>Master’s degree</td>
<td>College advisor</td>
<td>65K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Val</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Cambodian American</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>Business owner</td>
<td>60K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bryn</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Cambodian American</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>Graduate student</td>
<td>Not Reported</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With regard to relational background information, 10 participants described their sexual orientation as heterosexual and one participant described her relationship with her transgender male partner as “not heterosexual.” The length of the participants’ interracial partnerships ranged from 1.42-12.75 years \(M = 4.48\). Four participants described their partnerships as dating relationships, two participants were engaged, and five participants were married. All participants reported having met their partners’ friends and families. Lastly, participants’ parents’ arrival as refugees to the U.S. ranged from 1975 through 1988. Participant relational information is summarized in Table 2:
Table 2

Participant Relational Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender composition of IRP</th>
<th>Length of partnership</th>
<th>Partnership status</th>
<th>Year parents arrived in U.S.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vance</td>
<td>Male/female</td>
<td>2.5 years</td>
<td>Dating</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>Female/male</td>
<td>6.9 years</td>
<td>Engaged</td>
<td>1985</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tory</td>
<td>Female/male</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>1975</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drew</td>
<td>Female/male</td>
<td>3.5 years</td>
<td>Engaged</td>
<td>1975</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kai</td>
<td>Female/male</td>
<td>2.2 years</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>1978</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taylor</td>
<td>Female/male</td>
<td>1.4 years</td>
<td>Dating</td>
<td>1975</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kadin</td>
<td>Male/female</td>
<td>3.1 years</td>
<td>Dating</td>
<td>Early 1980s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lee</td>
<td>Female/male</td>
<td>2.4 years</td>
<td>Dating</td>
<td>Mother = 1988, father = 1986</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>Female/male</td>
<td>12.8 years</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>1975</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Val</td>
<td>Male/female</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>1982/3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bryn</td>
<td>LGBT-identified</td>
<td>3.5 years</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Early 1980s</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participant Confidentiality

Care was taken to ensure that the identities of the participants and all data related to their participation in this study were kept confidential. The privacy of all participants was protected to the maximum extent allowable by law. The only limit to this confidentiality was if the participants reported being a danger to self or others. If this information was disclosed, the proper individuals would be notified as specified by ethical and legal codes. At no point during data collection did any situations arise that necessitated breach of participant confidentiality.

All data was de-identified and any information containing the participants’ real names was reassigned with pseudonyms. Subsequently, participants’ real names were not connected to their responses in any way. Additionally, any other potentially identifiable information (e.g., demographic information) was replaced by general descriptors. Thus, when exact quotations were used to report the study’s findings (in the dissertation
manuscript), the ability to discern the identities of the participants was minimized.

All collected data (recordings, field notes, and transcripts) was stored in a locked container housed in a secure, confidential location. Informed consent documents and documentation that connected the participants’ real names with their pseudonyms were stored apart from the data in a separate secure location. Additionally, all transcription documents were encrypted throughout the entire research process to ensure the safety of participant data. Access to any research-related materials was limited only to the principal investigator (Dr. James M. Croteau), the student investigator (Sophia K. Rath), an auditor, and two authorized research assistants.

Pending the successful completion of this study, all transcription documents originally stored and encrypted on the student researcher’s computer were transferred to a password-protected flash drive and this flash drive was then stored with the informed consent documents. In accordance with federal laws and the *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct* (2010), data will be retained for at least three years after the study has been completed. Recorded media were erased immediately after transcription.

Reflexivity

Finlay (2002) described reflexivity as a manner of “outing” the researcher’s own role in qualitative scholarship, asserting that the integrity and trustworthiness of qualitative research lies in researchers’ ability to find ways to analyze how subjective and intersubjective elements influence their research. Reflexivity was defined as “thoughtful, conscious self-awareness” (p. 532) and in this study, involved recognition of my biases and explicitly locating myself within the research process. Particular to engaging a
a phenomenological study in which I explored the lived experience of my participants, it was essential that I acknowledge my own lived experience, understandings, and historical background and how these may impact the study at hand. At a more active level, reflexivity “involves a more wholesale embracing of subjectivity, for example, by exploiting researcher’s/co-researchers’ reflective insights and engaging in explicit, self-aware meta-analysis throughout the research process” (p. 536). Here, I exercise this process by sharing some of my personal background and experiences.

**About me, the researcher.** I am a second generation SEAA. Specifically, I am Cambodian American woman who was born and raised in Southern California. My parents are refugees who immigrated from Cambodia to the United States during the 1970s. My experience growing up in a refugee household was marked by feeling caught between two cultures. At home, life revolved around my family, getting along with one another, and having my decisions guided by what my elders thought was best for me. At school, I learned that being my own independent person was the most important identity to develop. For my parents, my being away from home was a source of anxiety and I was often discouraged from going to friends’ houses (and absolutely forbidden from sleepover parties). Subsequently, I suffered through seemingly endless Monday mornings as I listened longingly to my girlfriends’ rehashing of their weekends’ festivities. I was encouraged to excel academically but discouraged from participating in team sports I desperately wanted to join because my parents feared I would be injured.

As the reader can probably discern, the expectations of my family often clashed with my desires. These clashes would occur with greater frequency and intensity as I grew older and wanted to spend less time at home and more with my friends. At the time,
connecting these experiences with a sense of ethnic cultural awareness or ethnic identity (or lack thereof) was beyond my understanding. It would not be until many years later that I would realize that what I perceived as my parents’ hypervigilance was a function of the fear resulting from real and violent losses they experienced during the transition of leaving their homeland to settle in the United States, or that the push to excel academically was a reflection of the hope to rise out of poverty for a better and brighter future for their children.

“It’s us vs. them.” “You can only trust our people.” “No one does it like us; our culture is the best.” “Don’t be too Americanized.” These are some of the messages I received in and out of my extended family while growing up as a second generation SEAA. As a young girl, I did not understand what these messages meant. The clearest thing I can remember is feeling defiant and resentful for being told what to do when I thought I was already doing the right thing. I also remember wanting to do the exact opposite of what I was told to do. “Why not be American? That’s what I am and it certainly feels better than this.” My experience in this context often involved a dual sense of shame: Shame for not agreeing with my family to whom I felt I owed at least a modicum of loyalty, and also shame for sometimes wondering if maybe they were right.

I have also been in IRPs with White European American individuals. The rewards and challenges that I have experienced in the context of these relationships have been widely varied. Further, I do not doubt these experiences were at least somewhat impacted by factors related to my being a second generation SEAA (refugee family of origin dynamics, the second generation experience, ethnic identity, self-construal, and perceived experiences of racism). These relationships offered many opportunities to experience and
reflect on how my multiple identities (i.e., woman, Cambodian American, second generation) intersect with my relationship with someone who is racially and, in some respects, culturally different from me. While my partners and I shared many cultural similarities, we experienced just as many cultural differences. Additionally, we shared the mutual experience of (and related reflections on) being partnered with someone of a different race. Many of these personal reflections and experiences mirror the kinds of experiences which the participants of this study spoke. For example, the idea of frame-switching comes to mind when I think of being passionate and outspoken when debating politics with my partners, whereas I might be more reserved about expressing my political inclinations with my parents. I also think about how much more salient exploration around my ethnic identity was later on in my romantic relationships than when my partners and I first met. Although this has been an area of personal growth for me, it has not been without some interpersonal repercussions in these partnerships.

Given these experiences, it is essential for me to acknowledge how they influenced my approach to this study, including the way I viewed and interacted with the participants and the experiences and stories they shared with me. For example, the construction of the preceding literature review chapter was, admittedly, a deeply emotional experience at times. I experienced moments of horror as I read of the tortures I imagined my own refugee family members endured. It was also sobering to see myself in some of the research-evoked narratives shared by interracial partners.

I anticipated that I would likely relate to many of the experiences and reflections shared by the participants. For example, I have found it difficult at times to express to my partners how I experience racial microaggressions given that they have identified as
being White and thus, of the dominant culture. Based on this experience, I guessed that
the participants would speak to having difficulty relating with their partners on the topic
of racism. In fact, this was not true across all the participants. Among the participants
who did share similar experiences, not all did so to the extent that I have personally
experienced this phenomenon.

These narratives also had the effect of prompting me to look at certain topics or
themes in a different way than previously known. Therefore, bracketing, or making the
distinction between my own experiences and biases and those of the participants’, served
as a crucial tool in order to conduct this research with as fresh a perspective as possible.
By bracketing these views, I put myself in a better position to assess the phenomenon as
though “everything is perceived freshly, as if for the first time” (Moustakas, 1994, 34).

**Guiding hypotheses.** Given the inductive nature of phenomenological research,
the generation of hypotheses can be seen as running counter to the tradition of analyzing
data without preconception to facilitate the free emergence of relevant findings. Marshall
and Rossman (2006) assert that by avoiding precise hypotheses, the researcher retains the
right to explore and generate questions. In this vein, *guiding hypotheses* “are tools used to
generate questions and to search for patterns; they can be discarded when the researcher
gets into the field and finds other exciting patterns of phenomena” (p. 47). What I
anticipated would possibly emerge from the participants’ narratives was that refugee
family of origin dynamics, the second generation experience, ethnic identity, self-
construal, and perceived experiences of racism serve to impact second generation
SEAAs’ experiences of their IRP with WEAs in significant ways. Based on my personal
experience I expected to find the participants would report that being from refugee
families had impacted the integration of their WEA partners into their families. I also speculated that the experience of being bicultural would have benefits in navigating different cultural situations, but could also be unduly stressful. With regard to ethnic identity, I supposed that with time, the meaning of this phenomenon for SEAAs would have shifted since the initiation of their partnerships. With regard to self-construal, I expected that participants would speak of being more oriented toward collectivism and interdependence than they may have previously believed. And finally, as previously discussed, I speculated that the participants would speak of having difficulty relating with their partners on the topic of racism.

**Data Collection**

Data collection occurred, based on individual mutual agreement between the participants and myself, in the manner of an in-person interview, interview via Skype, or phone interview. Skype is an internet-based application that allows for video conferencing. This mode of communication is supposed to facilitate communication with participants where geography may challenge the feasibility of an in-person interview. As with any use of the Internet, there is a risk of security breach. According to the application’s website ([http://www.skype.com/intl/en-us/security/detailed-security/](http://www.skype.com/intl/en-us/security/detailed-security/)) several layers of security and encryption practices are exercised by Skype to maximize the privacy and protection of its users. For example, Skype issues all users a “digital certificate” or electronic credential that is used to establish the identity of a person placing and receiving a Skype call. These digital certificates are authenticated, and the identities of Skype users are established through confirmation of a Skype account username and password. Finally, Skype encrypts all communications according to the
Advanced Encryption Standard (AES) at the maximum 256-bit protocol. This encryption technology is reportedly used by the U.S. government to protect sensitive information. Interviews that took place via Skype were audio-recorded for the purposes of transcription and encrypted immediately following the completion of the interviews for storage on the researcher’s computer.

Two days before the scheduled meeting with each prospective participant a reminder email was sent (see Appendix L, Reminder About Scheduled Informed Consent/Interview Meeting Email Text) about the scheduled meeting. On the scheduled meeting day/time, the prospective participants were contacted either in-person, via Skype, or via phone, as agreed upon. Appendix M (Interview Meeting Script) served as a guide to structure this first meeting. First, participants were invited to ask any questions or express any concerns. They were also invited to ask questions or express concerns at any given time during the meeting. Next, the Informed Consent Form was verbally reviewed. Prospective participants who continued to express interest in participation in the study were asked to sign the form during this time.

Next, it was verified that the prospective participants met the inclusion criteria. Individuals who were determined to not meet the inclusion criteria were informed as such and thanked for their interest in the study. Prospective participants who did meet these criteria (henceforth referred to as “participants”) proceeded through the remainder of the meeting. Next, participants were asked some questions to gather background information. Then the in-depth interview was conducted per the interview protocol included in Appendix M. These in-depth interviews were audio-recorded for later transcription and data analysis.
At the conclusion of the in-depth interview, the participants had the opportunity to address any final questions and concerns. They were also reminded that they would be contacted again during the next few months to schedule a last meeting to conduct member checking and that additional data collection would take place during this time. Finally, the participants were thanked for their time and the first meeting was adjourned. The procedure for member checking and subsequent analysis of that data is described in further detail in the Data Analysis section.

**Development of the interview questions.** In order to effectively address the research questions, the participants were interviewed utilizing an open-ended, semi-structured, in-depth qualitative interview protocol. The development of this interview protocol was influenced by the review of the literature offered in Chapter 2. Where there were gaps in scholarship and research with regard to the experience of second generation SEAAs in IRP with WEAs, additional questions were generated by the researchers based on personal experiences and observations. The resulting interview questions were designed to facilitate exploration into the grand tour research question and subsumed subquestions. The interview questions were constructed in an open-ended way to encourage the participants’ communication of meanings that they associate with their subjective experiences. Potential follow up and probing questions were devised to encourage further exploration or clarification of the participants’ statements.

Prior to data collection, I pilot tested the interview questions with two individuals who were not connected with the study. Pilot testing did not involve any data collection. It was conducted purely for the purpose of testing the relevancy of the interview questions and to determine if administration of data collection procedures required
further refinement.

**Data Analysis**

Five phases of data analysis were engaged for this study.

**Phase 1.** During Phase 1 of data analysis each interview data set was processed individually. The findings were recorded utilizing MAXQDA software for qualitative data analysis. MAXQDA facilitates the organization of significant statements into a clear visualization or map of the data as the interview data are funneled down into a system of broad categories, individual themes, and a coding scheme.

- **Step 1:** The student investigator became intimately familiar with the data by listening to the audio recordings of each interview, transcribing the media verbatim, and reading through field notes taken during each interview.

- **Step 2:** The student investigator reviewed the transcriptions to distinguish salient points or meaningful statements made by the participants that were related to the phenomena of interest. These statements and further analyses of these statements were recorded utilizing MAXQDA.

- **Step 3:** The student investigator reviewed these salient points to organize them into broad categories, each of which was assigned a coding scheme according to the meanings the categories were interpreted to represent.

- **Step 4:** Phenomenological reduction was used to discern new ways of understanding the data in order to begin tapping into the essence of the phenomena of interest. Phenomenological reduction helped conceptualize the broad categories into individual themes that could represent a
meaningful facet of each participant’s experience.

- Step 5: Individual themes were validated by comparing them against the salient points to see if they fit or captured the meaning of the original raw data.

**Phase 2.** Phase 2 of data analysis took place in the form of an external audit on the data analysis conducted in Phase 1. The auditor chosen for this task was an independent researcher with no prior attachment to this study or significant knowledge of the subject matter. She identified as a counseling psychologist who was well-versed in qualitative research and data analysis, having completed coursework in qualitative research methods, conducted her own qualitative research, and served as an auditor for other qualitative research studies.

During this phase two transcripts were randomly chosen and submitted to the auditor with their accompanying field notes and the products of Phase 1 data analysis (salient points, broad categories, individual themes, and coding schemes). The auditor reviewed these materials to evaluate the products of the Phase 1 data analysis, paying particular attention to the development of the broad categories, individual themes, and the coding scheme containing the meanings attached to these categories and themes. Specifically, the auditor evaluated these items for accuracy of analysis; clarity with which the broad categories, individual themes, and codes were defined; and any redundancies or overlap. In short, did the Phase 1 analysis accurately and clearly speak to the essence of each second generation SEAA’s experience?

The auditor’s feedback was integrated as appropriate to reconcile or clarify any ambiguities in the Phase 1 analysis. This included the identification of several additional
salient points that either contributed to preexisting themes or the generation of new themes. She also made suggestions for rewording themes in a more succinct manner. A third data set then was chosen for the auditor to evaluate. Based on feedback provided from this audit, I determined that the broad categories, individual themes, and codes were clearly defined, accurate, and concise.

**Phase 3.** Phase 3 of data analysis involved assessing the analysis products drawn from individual data sets as a collective of all of the participants’ narratives. Analysis during this phase was similar to Phase 1 analysis in many respects. Findings were recorded using MAXQDA and the individual themes gleaned from the individual interview data sets were funneled into collective essence themes.

- **Step 1:** The individual themes were reviewed and organized into broader collective categories, each of which was assigned a coding scheme according to the meanings the categories were interpreted to represent.
- **Step 3:** Phenomenological reduction was used to discern new ways of understanding the data in order to derive the collective essence of the phenomena of interest. Phenomenological reduction helped conceptualize the broader collective categories into collective essence themes that represented meaningful facets of the participants’ experience as a group.
- **Step 4:** The collective essences themes were validated by comparing them against the individual themes derived from the Phase 1 data, as well as the raw interview data. Comparing them against the individual interview analysis products and raw data helped in determining if the collective essence themes accurately reflected the narratives shared by the
participants.

**Phase 4.** Phase 4 of data analysis took place in the form of an external audit on the data analysis engaged in Phase 3. This was performed by the same aforementioned independent researcher. Auditing during this phase was similar to Phase 2 analysis in many respects. During this phase, two transcripts were randomly chosen and submitted to the auditor with their accompanying field notes and the products of the analysis (broad categories and collective themes). The auditor reviewed these materials to evaluate the accuracy of the data analysis, paying particular attention to the development of the coding scheme, broader collective categories and collective essence themes. Specifically, the auditor further evaluated these items for accuracy of analysis, clarity with which broader categories and collective essence themes were defined, and identified any redundancies or overlap. In short, does the analysis clearly speak to the overall essence of the experience of second generation SEAAs?

The auditor’s feedback was integrated as appropriate to reconcile or clarify any ambiguities in the analysis. This included the reorganization of individual themes within the collective themes as suggestions for rewording themes and subthemes in a more succinct manner. A third Phase 3 data set was then chosen for the auditor to evaluate. Based on feedback provided from this audit, I determined that coding scheme, broader collective categories, and collective essence themes were clearly defined, accurate, and concise. After these changes were made, a final assessment was conducted of the accuracy and clarity of the broader categories and collective essence themes to be sure they fit the products of the Phase 1 data analysis (individual themes) as well as the raw data (salient points). Phase 4 concluded with the development of a narrative synopsis of
the collective essence themes drawn from all participants (See Appendix N). This synopsis was shared with each participant during member checking.

**A note on data saturation.** Data saturation describes the point of data analysis at which the researcher can no longer find new information that adds to the understanding of a phenomenon (Creswell, Hanson, Plano Clark, & Morales, 2007). Testing for data saturation is not an independent process or phase of data analysis; rather, it is an awareness that is integrated into the whole of the data analysis process. To achieve data saturation, Phase 1 and Phase 3 data analyses were first performed on a majority of that participant sample that was randomly chosen (six interview data sets).

After completion of Phase 3 data analysis and determination of collective themes a seventh data set was randomly selected to determine if any new collective essence themes emerged. This process was repeated for an eighth randomly selected data set. When full analysis of two consecutive data sets yielded no new collective essence themes, data saturation was considered achieved. Collective themes emerging from additional data sets that varied significantly from the collective essence themes derived from the previous data sets were considered “new” and added to the pool of existing collective themes. Phase 1 and 3 data analyses were engaged with the addition of data sets until two data sets in a row yielded no new collective essence themes. Data saturation was achieved during Phase 3 with the eleventh data set.

**Phase 5 - Member checking.** The final phase of data analysis involved member checking. This took place a few months after the first interview with each participant. According to Carlson (2010), member checking is an opportunity for participants to validate the interpretation of the data they provided. The primary goal for conducting
member checks with the participants was to determine if the collective essence themes that emerged from the data analysis accurately described the participants’ experience as a second generation SEAA in an IRP with a WEA. Member checking also served as means to collect additional data that corrected or clarified the analyzed data.

At the conclusion of Phase 4 data analysis, a narrative synopsis of the collective essence themes was developed (See Appendix N). This included overviews of the categories and individual essences gleaned from the individual data, as well as the broader collective categories and collective essence themes drawn from the participants. Each participant was contacted via phone (see Appendix O, Schedule Follow Up Meeting Phone Script) and informed that data analysis was complete and to expect via email a brief synopsis of the findings. In the event that a participant did answer the phone, a message (voicemail or email) was left requesting the individuals to call or email the student investigator in order to schedule the Follow Up Interview (see Appendix P, No Response to Follow Up Meeting Request Attempt #1 Message Script). If the participant did not contact the student investigator within one week, the student investigator contacted the participant by phone once more to extend the invitation to a Follow Up Meeting. In the event the participant did not respond to the student investigator’s second attempt at contact, a message (voice mail or email) was left offering an opportunity to inform me of the intent to withdraw from the study via phone or email (see Appendix Q, No Response to Follow Up Meeting Request Attempt #2 Message Script). If the participant did not respond within another week to the my final follow up contact, it was presumed that the participant had no wish to continue with the study and no further contact was made. If the participant did return the student investigator’s call, s/he was
invited to schedule a follow up meeting per the Schedule Follow Up Meeting Phone Script (Appendix O). Each participant who confirmed scheduling of the Follow Up Meeting was asked if they were interested in continuing their participation in the study. If the participants expressed continued interest in participation, a follow up meeting was scheduled to go over the results. They were immediately sent a document (See Appendix N) that reported the study’s preliminary findings for review before the Follow Up Meeting.

Nine out of the eleven original study participant responded to my follow up contacts and confirmed scheduling of follow up meetings. Two days before the follow up meeting, participants were sent a reminder email (see Appendix R, Reminder About Scheduled Follow Up Meeting Email Text). Appendix S (Follow Up Meeting Script) served as a guide to structure the meeting. First, participants were invited to ask questions or express any concerns that came up since the last meeting. They were reminded that they were welcome to ask questions or express concerns at any time during the meeting. The synopsis was reviewed during the meeting. Each participant had the opportunity to provide corrections or clarification regarding the emergent themes and offer new information that may have surfaced since the initial interview. The participants were invited to share their thoughts from hearing this presentation of the first round of data analysis.

After the follow up meeting, data analysis procedures were conducted as described for the first in-depth interviews. The media was transcribed, coded, and organized into thematic essences. No new themes emerged from the member check; however, several participants added information based on reflection of their first
interviews and review of the Study Results Synopsis. Many participants corroborated with themes and subthemes that had not previously come to mind and were endorsed by other participants. Many participants also made suggestions for minor changes in syntax to increase clarity of describing themes and subthemes. The results of data analysis are presented in Chapter Four and discussed further in Chapter Five.

**Review of the Study’s Rigor**

Qualitative research is often criticized for its apparent lack of scientific rigor (Mays & Pope, 1995). “Without rigor,” asserted Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers (2002, p. 14), “research is worthless, becomes fiction, and loses its utility.” Indeed, the presumed lack of reliability and validity of qualitative research findings is arguably the most prolific criticism of qualitative research (McRoy, 1996). Qualitative rigor can be met, however, with mindful engagement of verification strategies or systemic “checks” implemented during each step of the research process that serve to enhance reliability and validity. According to Morse et al., (2002), building verification strategies into the qualitative research process forces the researcher to correct the direction of analysis and development of the study as necessary. Moreover, post hoc assessments of research rigor “runs the risk of missing serious threats to the reliability and validity until it is too late to correct them” (p. 14). For example, pilot testing my research questions prior to data collection provided the opportunity to assess the relevancy and clarity of my research questions, resulting in the adjustment of syntax that later eased participants’ understanding of my inquiries. In this section, I highlight additional strategies engaged through the course of the study that contributed to its rigor. These procedures include reflexivity and bracketing, multiphasic analysis of the interview data, use of an external
Morrow (2007) suggested that acknowledgement of the researcher’s worldview and positionality relative to a study’s participants is an important element of addressing subjectivity in qualitative research. Given my personal connection to the phenomenon of interest, I was deliberate in my efforts to acknowledge the influence that my subjective experiences, biases, motivations, and assumptions may have on the process and outcomes of my research. Through the course of this study, the processes of reflexivity and bracketing (described in detail in Chapter Three) were crucial for ensuring that I assessed the phenomenon of interest as freshly as possible, as if for the first time.

The decision to employ a multiphasic approach to data analysis also contributed to verification by ensuring that my data were systematically checked and rechecked, that focus on the phenomenon of interest was maintained, and the fit of data against my analysis and interpretation were constantly monitored and confirmed. Rigor during the analysis phase was also supported by the use of an external auditor who provided an objective assessment of both the accuracy of my data analysis as well as the clarity with which I reported my findings. Lastly, collaboration with the participants through the process of member checking ensured that these findings accurately represented the stories shared by each individual.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

This chapter presents the results obtained from this study of the experience of U.S.-born adult children of Southeast Asian refugees who are in interracial romantic partnerships (IRP) with White European American (WEA) individuals. I first describe the participants and the rationale for their selection into the study. This is followed by a descriptive presentation of the major collective essence themes that emerged from the data. Finally, a summary of these results that encapsulates the spirit of the study’s essence is provided.

Context for the Results

To best understand the results of this study, it is important for the reader to know each participant’s story as each offers a contextual framework for understanding the participant’s experience as a second generation Southeast Asian American (SEAA), a partner in an IRP, and the meanings associated with these identities. Demographic and relational information were collected to facilitate the storytelling process and are presented in Chapter 3. What follows is additional background information that serves to connect the reader more intimately with each participant:

• Vance is a Hmong American male in his early 20s. His parents were boat people who fled Laos. Vance describes himself as a “White-washed Asian” who grew up in predominantly White communities. At the time of his interview, Vance and his female romantic partner had been dating for 2.5 years. He does not view his IRP as being significantly different than same-race couples. He and his partner also have little involvement with his family or his Hmong culture as a couple. Other
than some awkwardness he and his partner experience when she interacts with his family, Vance experiences little conflict or scrutiny about his IRP.

• Kelly is a Hmong American female in her mid-20s. Her parents suffered multiple family losses during their immigration experience out of Laos. Although Kelly describes herself as “the Whitest Hmong person you’ll ever see,” she also identifies strongly as a Hmong woman. At the time of her interview, Kelly and her male romantic partner of 6.9 years were engaged to be married. She believes that her older siblings’ experiences with IRPs facilitated her parents’ acceptance of her partner as a member of the family. Although Kelly’s experience of her IRP is mostly positive, she feels upset and indignant when perceiving others scrutinizing her relationship.

• Tory is a Vietnamese American female in her late 30s. Her parents’ refugee stories include fleeing Vietnam by boat and witnessing the deaths of several loved ones. Tory grew up highly aware of her parents’s struggles as refugees who sought to create a better life for their U.S.-born children. She is also proactive in staying connected with her Vietnamese culture. At the time of her interview, Tory and her male romantic partner of five years were approaching their second wedding anniversary. She believes that the trauma of the Vietnam War influenced a family value for deprioritizing “superficial factors” such as race. This, in turn, contributed to their easy acceptance of her IRP. Due to the prevalence of IRPs where she resides, Tory experiences relatively concern related to outside scrutiny of her relationship; however, she and her partner often discuss how cultural differences impact their IRP.
• Drew is a Vietnamese American female in her early 30s. Her family fled Vietnam just days before the Fall of Saigon. Drew acknowledges that disagreement with patriarchal aspects of Vietnamese culture influenced a tendency to date non-Asian partners. At the time of her interview, Drew and her male romantic partner of 3.5 years were engaged to be married. Although Drew has mixed feelings about her Vietnamese culture, there are valuable elements of this heritage she is eager to continue as she looks forward to having her own family.

• Kai is a Hmong American female in her early 30s. A family member who had already left Laos and settled in America sponsored her parents in the late 1970s. Although Kai was raised to value Hmong traditions and to maintain connection to Hmong culture, her family also recognized a value for adapting to American norms. Thus, Kai strongly identifies with both her heritage culture and being an American. At the time of her interview, Kai and her male romantic partner of 2.2 years had recently married. She shared that although her family is welcoming of her IRP, she is aware that elders of her greater Hmong community disapprove of the relationship. Kai and her husband both actively engage with her family and participate in traditional Hmong events.

• Taylor is a Vietnamese American female in her late 20s. Her parents were boat people who fled Vietnam by sea. Taylor described growing up believing that her family was a “pretty Westernized Asian family.” At the time of her interview, Taylor and her male romantic partner had been dating for 1.4 years. Through the course of her IRP Taylor came to appreciate that her background is more traditional and conservative than she previously believed. Although she and her
partner occasionally have conflict related to their cultural differences, Taylor believes that she and her partner grow from these experiences.

• Kadin is a Hmong American male in his early 20s. His parents fled Laos for a refugee camp in Thailand before settling in America. For Kadin, life as a Hmong American involves living a “dual life” that involves awareness of the cultural expectations of his heritage Hmong culture as well as mainstream American culture. At the time of his interview, he and his female romantic partner had been dating for 3.1 years. He does not perceive his IRP as being significantly different from same-race relationship; however, he acknowledges that he and his partner occasionally struggle with their cultural differences.

• Lee is a Vietnamese American female in her mid 20s. She expressed knowing little about her parents’ refugee experience and transition to life in America. Lee shared that growing up as a bicultural individual elicits many conflicting feelings; while she values certain aspects of Vietnamese culture, she feels restricted and frustrated by others. She described identifying most with mainstream American culture. At the time of her interview, Lee and her male romantic partner had been dating for 2.4 years. She shared that she often engages cultural explaining when she and her partner interact with her family. She also described feeling pressured to subscribe to the cultural expectations of her partner’s family.

• Alex is a Vietnamese American female in her early 30s. An American family sponsored her family after they fled Vietnam. Alex described growing up in a household that encouraged assimilation to American culture; however, she described herself as an individual who values being both Vietnamese and
American. At the time of her interview, Alex and her male romantic partner of 12.8 years were married and just had their first child. Alex and her partner are actively engaged with each other’s cultures and are intentional about teaching their biracial son about both sides of his heritage. Alex reported experiencing minimal conflict or scrutiny regarding her IRP.

• Val is a Cambodian American male in his late 20s. His mother and father met in a Thai refugee camp after escaping persecution in Cambodia. Val shared that although he grew up in a primarily White environment and views himself as more “Americanized” than some of his Cambodian American peers, he strongly values being connected to his Cambodian heritage. At the time of his interview, Val and his female romantic partner of six years were married. Val and his partner are actively engaged with each other’s families and cultures. Val reported experiencing minimal conflict or scrutiny regarding his IRP and attributes this to the richly diverse community in which he and his partner now reside.

• Bryn is a Cambodian American female in her mid 20s. She shared that being a member of the LGBT community is also a strong part of her identity. Bryn’s parents fled Cambodia for a refugee camp in Thailand before settling in America. Bryn shared that she grew up in a predominantly White environment that she experienced as very discriminatory. Moreover, she described feeling somewhat traumatized by her traditional Cambodian upbringing. At the time of her interview, Bryn and her LGBT-identified romantic partner of 3.5 years were recently married. She described being surprised at how interested her partner was in learning about her Cambodian heritage, which influenced Bryn’s developing
interest and pride in her heritage culture.

Though each participant presented a unique history, all were able to reflect on and share about the lived experience of being second generation SEAA in IRPs with WEAs. Their stories were studied to identify the most prominent emergent themes that were common across all or most of the participants. These themes were then consolidated to conceptualize the core idea or essence of the study. A complete description of the procedures engaged during analysis of the interview data is provided in Chapter Three.

Multiple collective essence themes (henceforth referred to as themes) emerged regarding the lived experience of being a second generation SEAA in an IRP with a WEA and are presented in Table 3. With some exceptions, these themes were common to all or the majority of the participants. Under the purview of an individual theme, subthemes that described more nuanced aspects of the superordinate theme were also carefully evaluated. With some exceptions, these subthemes were common to the majority of the participants. Some themes and subthemes are more contextual than others; however, they are intertwined into the experience of being in an IRP. For example, though some participant statements comprising the theme Reactions about racial and/or cultural identity were not direct responses about the interracial partnership, they set the stage for how the participants identified themselves as multicultural beings through the course of the partnership. This information allows the reader to better understand the participants and the information proffered in the telling of their stories.
Table 3

Emergent Themes Related to Being a Second Generation Southeast Asian American in an IRP with a White European American

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes (# participants endorsing)</th>
<th>Associated Subthemes (# participants endorsing)</th>
<th>Sample Statement</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Reactions about racial and/or cultural identity (11)</td>
<td>a. Positive feelings about identifying with/valuing aspects of heritage culture (8)</td>
<td>a. “I’m trying to record my mom’s sayings on my MacBook because I feel like it’s part of the culture, the various adages. And I feel like it’s missing in our American culture.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>b. Negative feelings about identifying with and struggling with expectations of heritage culture (7)</td>
<td>b. “I was very, very disappointed and upset about my culture. . . we have these expectations that we need to meet and if they’re not met then all hell breaks loose.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>c. Positive feelings about identifying with mainstream American culture and valuing parts of being culturally American or “White” (6)</td>
<td>c. “At this point I just feel like I’m too acclimated to American culture that going back into a patriarchal culture like the Hmong culture . . . I don’t know if I could handle it and accept it as fully as I could if I wasn’t fully immersed in American culture”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>d. Awareness of being bicultural (6)</td>
<td>d. “The best way I can explain it is my mom wanting to provide a very half and half experience. Being very Americanized because we live in America but also</td>
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</table>
2. Cultural negotiation and management in the IRP (11)

*Definition: Participants’ reports of the pros and cons of cultural negotiation in the IRP.*

| a. | Perceiving advantages or gains from the cultural negotiation/management in an IRP (8) |
| b. | Constant attention to cultural difference challenges in an IRP is emotionally taxing (9) |
| c. | Believing that each partner’s culture is valued and actively integrated into the partnership (6) |
| d. | The need to “manage” culturally related parts of the partnership to increase comfort/decrease cultural dissonance (8) |
| e. | Racial and cultural awareness progressed with time (6) |
| a. | “Overall I think that we’ve had a lot of good understanding of each other and that’s kind of one of the pluses that I’ve enjoyed. We tend to be pretty open-minded now, too. We’re willing to try new things that we’ve never done before with each other’s families and stuff like that.” |
| b. | “I’d say a lot of couples . . . they have the same beliefs, they’re from the same culture. But being in a relationship where two cultures are totally different . . . I think that’s one of the biggest challenges I think that we face compared to other couples.” |
| c. | “It’s like we really embrace the various facets of our relationship. He’s from New Orleans and their culture’s really fascinating. Similarly with the New Orleans culture and the Vietnamese culture is the French influence.” |
| d. | “I showed him the
beauty of my culture
to the extent that I
enjoy it.”
e. “For our friendship
and our whole
relationship, like
cultural differences
weren’t factors. It was
more of being there
for him and vice
versa, and really just
going along with
each other. But
getting to know each
other at the intimate
level, it seemed like
cultural differences,
you know, they,
you’d come up
naturally.

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<tr>
<th>3. Having a refugee family background directly impacts the IRP (6)</th>
<th>No subthemes</th>
<th>a. “I think at the beginning of our relationship there was a lot of, um, I don’t wanna say I was frugal but I definitely have the value of not wasting food. If he would not finish his food or not want it anymore, um, I was like, ‘wow, that’s a waste.’ And I think that that’s definitely something that’s picked up from my family.”</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Definition:</strong> Participants’ views on how their refugee background specifically influences the IRP.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Understanding of WEA partners’ experience of the IRP (10)</td>
<td>a) “My partner struggles with the norms of my family and heritage culture” (6)</td>
<td>b. “I feel as though he probably has to be more sensitive to a lot of things. Also, he doesn’t know much about Vietnamese culture so it’s all very new to him and at the same time he has to</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Definition:</strong> Participants understand what it may be like to see the interracial relationship from the perspective of their WEA</td>
<td>b) “My partner values and actively seeks to understand my family and heritage culture” (8)</td>
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partners.

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<tr>
<th>5. Experiences of microaggressive and prejudiced responses toward the IRP (7)</th>
<th>No subthemes</th>
<th>a. “I think another issue that does arise that I think [my partner] and I struggle with that other people don’t is . . . those stares because we’re not commonplace. Or the looks that are kind of wondering ‘oh, why are they together?’ Because I feel like those are the people I want to prove wrong. It just is so tiring. I just wanna yell to them, ‘Stop staring at us!’”</th>
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<tr>
<td>Definition: Participants are aware of subtle acts of real or perceived discrimination directed toward their IRP.</td>
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<tr>
<th>6. Experiences of how social intimates perceive the IRP (8)</th>
<th>a) The relationship is regarded positively by social circles (6) b) The was some concern and/or opposition expressed by social circles (6)</th>
<th>a. “I think I have a pretty positive and supportive environment for my relationship.” b. “There was some opposition with my family at least. His family I don’t think would ever say anything. When my grandma met him for the first time she said, ‘he isn’t Vietnamese’ and my mom said, ‘why didn’t you pick a Vietnamese boy?’”</th>
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<tr>
<td>Definition: Participants’ perception of how family, friends, and community support or oppose their IRPs.</td>
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<tr>
<th>7. Participants’ messages to a) Encouragement to other</th>
<th>a. “I guess my advice is</th>
<th></th>
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</table>
Second generation SEAAs and to the general public regarding culture and IRPs (11)

**Definitions:** Messages that participants wish SEAAs and the general public to know about being in an IRP

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<tr>
<td><strong>a)</strong></td>
<td>Don’t disregard your background. I mean, it is who you are . . . It’s kinda cool being like in an interracial relationship because I really see how Vietnamese I am and all this time I thought I was white Americanized but I really do see how strong my upbringing was and I do like I really like the way we respect our elders and parents.”</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>b)</strong></td>
<td>“Be open to sharing your own ethnic background with the other person so that they know a little bit about the way you see the world, the way you interact with people or have relationships with other people.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>c)</strong></td>
<td>“I just want other people to know that [my partner] and I are just like other couples . . . You know, we bicker about who’s gonna take the dogs out. We bicker about who’s gonna do the laundry and the trash . . . We both have names. We are both so much more than that what our race or what our exterior is. It would be great if you could acknowledge that.”</td>
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Major Themes

Seven major themes emerged from analysis of the interview data. Three were reported by all 11 participants: Theme 1, Reactions about racial and/or cultural identity; Theme 2, Cultural negotiation and management in the IRP; and Theme 7, Participants’ messages to second generation SEAAs and to the general public regarding culture and IRPs. Additionally, three themes were common to a majority (six or more) of the participants: Theme 4, Understanding of partners’ experience of the IRP was endorsed by 10 participants; Theme 6, Experiences of how social intimates perceive the IRP was reported by eight participants, and Theme 3, Having a refugee family background directly impacts the IRP was common among six participants. Finally, Theme 5, Experiences of microaggressive and prejudiced responses toward the IRP was shared among four participants. Although not all themes were endorsed by all 11 participants, it seemed important to include themes that were central to the research questions, particularly with regard to meaningful interpersonal and intrapsychic experiences in the context of IRP.

Theme 1: Reactions about racial and/or cultural identity. The reflections each participant shared regarding the evolution of his or her racial and/or cultural identity were two-pronged. In addition to describing their development as individuals, the participants also discussed this development in the context of their IRPs. These included varied combinations of thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and attitudes that encompassed reactions about being a Person of Color, being American or “White,” and connection to a culture that is starkly different from that of a WEA romantic partner. It is important to note that although not all participants who addressed this theme responded with reference to their interracial partnerships, reactions about racial and/or cultural identity are intimately tied
to the experience of being in an IRP. For example, Val reflected on his exposure to Cambodian culture while growing up and expressed disappointment that his rich cultural experience differed starkly from that of his younger sister’s:

I have a 14-year-old sister and she’s very, very spoiled and almost too Americanized in my eyes, you know? Which plays a role. My mom’s not doing the same things with her she did with me. She hasn’t done a Buddhist ceremony yet. She hasn’t done the sit on the floor and, you know, pray for hours at a time, and sit on the floor and listen to other people speak Khmer to you and not understand what they’re saying and respecting it.

Though this statement does not directly refer to Val’s experience in his interracial partnership, he would later in his interview discuss how transmission of his culture was a salient dynamic shared with his WEA partner.

**Theme 1a: Positive feelings about identifying with/valuing aspects of heritage culture.**

Eight participants described having positive feelings about identification with Southeast Asian cultural heritage. The most prominent emotive experiences included enjoyment of specific aspects of one’s heritage culture (such as its customs, language, and beliefs) and pride in the perceived richness of one’s heritage culture relative to mainstream American culture. For instance, Alex expressed pleasure in her participation of her biracial/bicultural child’s learning of the Vietnamese language:

One of the things I have my parents doing is to speak to [my son] only in Vietnamese for the majority of the time. My husband and I both agree that’s something important. And my husband is really quite sad that, you know, “you
don’t know how to speak.” And I would like [my son] to be able to do that because that is his grandparents and that is his family, even though my parents can’t speak English. For me it’s kind of nice because I spoke it as a child but then never used it again. It’s in there but it just needs to come back out. So when I hear them talking to him, I’m understanding and recalling. And it’s actually quite nice because they start out with the easy stuff like, “head,” “nose,” and “mouth” and I’m relearning this stuff.

Kai’s positive experience with her Hmong culture was expressed as appreciation for her background. This was shared while she explained how she integrates her mother’s teachings about marriage into her current life and relationship:

I think that being born as a Hmong woman and being raised by a traditional Hmong wife, I did carry over the values of a proper wife. You know, my mom did teach me well and I do carry that over. So parts of [my culture] I have chosen to keep with me, like some of the traditions as far as the beliefs and everything.

Some participants described ways in which they felt aspects of their heritage culture to be superior to analogous traits of mainstream American culture. Tory reflected on her perception of gaps in American culture and her attempt to retain some of the oral traditions of Vietnamese culture in hopes of eventually sharing them with her biracial/cultural child. She explained, “I’m trying to record my mom’s sayings on my MacBook because I feel like it’s part of the culture, the various adages, and I feel like it’s missing in our American culture, not teaching adages to the kids nowadays.”

Tory mused on the richness of the Vietnamese language before she laughingly compared Vietnamese cursing to American cursing in order to illustrate her point, “It’s
not just [cursing] your mom. It’s your dad, your grandma and your grandpa, and your ancestors. There’s an art to it. American English is [only], ‘F you.’ You guys don’t know how to tell people off. It’s too simple.” On a more serious note, Tory also reflected on filial piety, stating that despite her identification as an American, the value of independence “is still a little foreign to me, and I think because I really identify with the filial piety. I grew up with this family, to make sure they’re doing all right even if they are doing all right.”

**Theme 1b: Negative feelings about identifying with and struggling with expectations of heritage culture.** Seven participants described having negative feelings about how they related with their heritage culture. These experiences included feeling ashamed by their heritage culture, dislike of particular aspects of their heritage culture (such as certain beliefs and attitudes) and being hurt by the limitations and restrictions prescribed by their heritage culture. For instance, Taylor expressed frustration about an attempt to navigate her Vietnamese family’s expectations of filial piety around an incident involving her partner that resulted in conflict:

I was very, very disappointed and upset about my culture. The reason why we have so much drama in the first place is because we have these expectations that we need to meet and if they’re not met, then all hell breaks loose with our parents. We’re not even allowed to pray to the [Buddhist] altar. I had really wishful thinking that my family was more White and more chill.

For Drew, negative emotive responses toward her heritage Vietnamese culture were connected to her experience of visiting Vietnam and observing relationships in an indigenous context. She shared that discomfort about what she witnessed on this trip was
triggered when her family proposed that a traditional tea ceremony be incorporated into her wedding:

My mom and my grandma really wanted the traditional tea ceremony at the beginning of our wedding celebration and that part actually made me uncomfortable, initially. I actually had to go through a whole big ordeal because I didn’t want to go through a tea ceremony. I really hated parts of Vietnamese culture. Like, really strong business women by day would still have to go home and be a servant to their husbands and take care of everything around the house while the husbands drink and went out with their friends and how easy it was for men to joke about [infidelity]. I was really up in arms because I do not want to honor a culture that believes in all these things that allow for men to be unfaithful.

Bryn shared that her initial choice to distance herself from Cambodian culture while planning her wedding was the result of feeling traumatized by her upbringing:

I’ve had this experience of running, kind of distancing myself or at least not wanting to learn much about my ethnic background because of the experiences I’ve had with my ethnic culture growing up. It wasn’t that I wasn’t proud of my ethnic background it was just something that I never really felt connected with. I think that my experience with the culture is associated more with trauma than it is with something that I would be proud of because my experience with Cambodian culture was too restricting for me as an individual. So that’s why I didn’t really value wanting to get to know the culture very much or even having it a part of our wedding. I grew up in a very conservative, traditional Cambodian Baptist church. So when I grew up, I got a lot of messages about how young women should
behave, how young women should look, what career path I should choose, what I should believe in, who I should marry, even what ethnic group I should marry into. I felt like it was too restricting for me.

**Theme 1c: Positive feelings about identifying with mainstream American culture and valuing parts of being culturally American or “White.”** Six participants described feeling positively about identifying as Americans. These emotions ranged from feelings of pride and empowerment to feelings of relief. Additionally, participants described embracing characteristics associated with being culturally White that are typically less prominent with identification as being culturally Asian. For example, Kai expressed the belief that she is more empowered in her identification as being culturally American than if she had been born in her parents’ native Laos:

> The American culture [taught] me also that I do have voice, I do have a choice. It has made me a more open person and a stronger woman, too . . . to be able to speak my mind and stuff like that. You can call it stubborn, but I wouldn’t be where I am today if I wasn’t born in the United States.

Kai went on to explain that traits viewed favorably in American culture, such as being “stubborn,” would be viewed as unfavorable in the context of traditional Hmong culture.

Some participants shared that they identified more with mainstream American culture or being culturally White as opposed the heritage culture of their refugee parents. These participants often used the term “Americanized” to describe their leanings toward mainstream American social norms and expectations. Kelly’s identification with being more American was described as a natural state of being: “I’m just so acclimated . . . it’s just so me and it was something that I never assumed or thought about.” As a Cambodian
American, Val was aware of being different and how this perceived difference may limit shared understanding with other Americans:

I already kind of differentiated myself from the other U.S. born Southeast Asians, or specifically, Cambodian Americans even growing up just because I was much, I guess to put it bluntly, much more Americanized than they were. It helped me also blend in very much so. It was very easy for someone to communicate as soon as I opened my mouth and spoke, and my mannerisms and how I treated the situation . . . it became a very comfortable situation where it’s not always understanding [of] the other side, you know?

For Val, an interpersonal approach toward adopting a stereotypically American communication style helped him to blend in with the culture of the White majority.

**Theme 1d: Awareness of being bicultural.** For six participants, certain experiences highlighted their consciousness of being a member of two starkly differing cultures. Some participants described being bicultural with a sense of pride and, in some ways, even functional. Others reflected on experiencing tension related to a sense of living separate cultural lives and described the associated struggles of juggling cultural values that are sometimes in opposition to one another. For Alex, awareness of being a culturally multifaceted individual extends beyond her personal identification and plays a significant role in her professional life:

I consider myself Asian American, specifically Vietnamese American. But interestingly enough, I am from central Pennsylvania, which doesn’t have a large Asian population to begin with. So I like to joke around and say that I am Pennsylvania Dutch. I am by all sense of the word a girl from the east coast, mid-
Atlantic region, specifically. And through my experiences and through my relationship with my husband I also consider myself a little bit of Irish and so I’ve taken on a little bit of that kind of Irish heritage that he brings with him. . . I’ve been working in higher education for about 8 years now so I see myself as somebody within my own multicultural diversity [who is] very cognizant of my students’ multicultural diversity.

Kadin described his experience of being bicultural as more tenuous. When asked about his experience being in an IRP with a WEA, his immediate response was, “it’s harder because a Hmong American, you’re almost living like a dual life. You have to be Hmong, but at the same time you have to be American.” Kadin shared that although he is comfortable navigating life as a mainstream American, the intersection of this identity with the expectations of traditional Hmong culture sometimes gives him pause, particularly in the context of his romantic relationship: “Being me in an interracial relationship, I think that’s also kind of difficult because the Hmong tradition is that you marry a Hmong woman. . . it’s hard because right now I’m really happy with my life.”

Similarly for Bryn, her Cambodian family’s value for collectivism clashed with her American value for individualism:

It was also kind of very much the value of, I forget the word, but being like everyone else kind of thing, not your own person. That was something that I didn’t identify with either. I remember growing up, I would always hear from my mom, “why do you always have to be different? Why do you always have to be different?” It’s very painful but I’m working through it now.

**Theme 2: Cultural negotiation and management in the IRP.** All 11
participants discussed various types of experiences they felt were particular to IRP with a WEA. These were described as events that highlighted perceived “pros and cons” of cultural negotiation and management within IRP, perceptions of how culture is synthesized into the partnership, and reflections on how participants’ racial and/or cultural awareness progressed through the duration of the partnership.

**Theme 2a: Perceiving advantages or gains from the cultural negotiation/management in an IRP.** Eight participants described feeling enhanced by their IRPs in personal and relational ways. These included the experience of personal cognitive and/or behavioral growth, progression of ethnic identity development, and the belief that their IRP is enhanced by the couple’s cultural differences. For example, Bryn described the culturally Cambodian household in which she grew up as an environment that valued moderation of emotional expression. She found that the context of her IRP with a WEA challenged this norm and significantly reshaped how she experiences and expresses feelings:

> When I think of evolving in our relationship, I think most about how I’ve opened up with communication. For the past few years when we first started dating I wasn’t really big on communication unless I was upset. I didn’t really like to talk about it and even when I was really excited or happy about something I couldn’t really talk about that either or talk about emotions. I’ve gotten upset a lot with [my partner] and he’s been very patient with me. That’s definitely something that has evolved for me over the years.

Similarly, Kai found that her manner of expressing emotion has shifted from the cultural norms that were modeled to her as a child:
I think about being with my husband, I see how affectionate his family are to each other. In the Asian culture, we don’t hug each other, we don’t say we love each other because it’s awkward. I wasn’t raised that way. But I openly say I love you to his mom. I openly give his mom and dad hugs. That also taught me to openly express my feelings more to my brothers and to my sisters and show them a little more affections than is typical, than the typical brother and sister relationship in the Asian culture. That has to be one of the biggest rewards as far as with my family. My dad through the years has also been adapting it a little bit more. He said I love you once, which was really weird.

Taylor described being surprised at the impact that her IRP had her own ethnic identity development. She described growing up culturally White and acknowledged that the relationship with her WEA partner, in a way, has helped Taylor to re-root herself in her heritage culture:

It’s kinda cool being in an interracial relationship because I really see how Vietnamese I am and all this time I thought I was White, Americanized. But I really do see how strong my upbringing was and I do like I really like the way we respect our elders and parents. I think that that’s lost a lot. That kind of thing is lost in our society.

Other participants expressed feeling that their IRPs were enhanced by the cultural differences present in the relationship. Throughout her interview, Tory reflected on positive aspects of her partnership. These included the role of her Vietnamese culture and how this intersects with her WEA partner’s culture:

As you can tell, I obviously enjoy it. Just only recently realizing that our cultures
have a commonality with the French culture has just made it more entertaining. I like the way my husband says it. He says it’s an entertaining relationship because we use these cultural differences, or what have you, as opportunities to not just tease each other, but through that teasing we’re conversing with each other.

**Theme 2b: Constant attention to cultural difference challenges in an IRP is emotionally taxing.** Nine participants shared that specific experiences related to being in IRPs with WEAs are particularly challenging and generate negative emotional reactions. These experiences include feeling alone amid a society demographically dominated by same-race couples, anger toward others perceived to be scrutinizing the IRP, and fear of being rejected by significant others (friends and family). Most salient to these participants was the sense of ever-present consciousness or worry associated with such experiences. For instance, Kadin voiced feeling constantly aware of the perception that same-race couples have an advantage over interracial couples because of the relative simplicity inherent in the lack of cultural negotiation:

I’d say a lot of couples . . . they share the same beliefs, they’re from the same culture. But being in a relationship where two cultures are totally different . . . I was raised as a shaman. That’s completely different than Christianity. I think that’s one of the biggest challenges I think that we face compared to other couples.

Kadin’s thoughts echo the experiences of other participants who described a sense of isolation connected to a belief that same-race couples who share culturally similar backgrounds may not need to navigate the cultural learning and negotiations that are involved in IRPs, such as differences in religious practices.
Tory poignantly shared about a challenge that was also encountered by other participants, namely, the apprehension associated with meeting WEA partners’ families/friends for the first time. She described her emotional state leading up to meeting her WEA’s family as particularly anxiety-ridden because she presumed she would be rejected for being racially different:

I was very concerned about how they would take it that I wasn’t White. [But] I had nothing to be scared of because when I met them, they pretty much welcomed me with open arms. This is kind of bad of me [because] I was expecting them to say something bad or negative and I was waiting for it and it never happened. So it was, like, I shouldn’t think negatively as a perceived notion.

**Theme 2c: Believing that each partner’s culture is valued and actively integrated into the partnership.** Six participants spoke of having a shared value with their partners regarding the acknowledgment and integration of each other’s culture in their relationships. Many of these participants made reference to regular participation in each other’s family events and cultural practices. For Lee, cultural differences in both ethnic identity and religion actively play out in her relationship with her partner, “Culture is a big part of our relationship and also religion as you probably know. And then I’m thinking about how the cultural communications of both of my families are going to come into play and it freaks me out.” Despite her anxiety, Lee stressed that mutual understanding is an important element of her partnership:

I think knowing where both of our families are coming from is probably what I think is most important. Because it shapes a lot of how both me and my boyfriend are and that understanding both sides would be a really good thing to keep in
mind in our relationship. You know, in case we have discussion about something
or have a fight or something like that.

Kadin felt particularly positive about how culture is actively shared in his
relationship with his WEA partner:

Overall I think that we’ve had a lot of good understanding of each other and that’s
kind of one of the pluses that I’ve enjoyed. We tend to be pretty open-minded
now, too. We’re willing to try new things that we’ve never done before with each
other’s families and stuff like that.

Theme 2d: The need to “manage” culturally related parts of the relationship to
increase comfort/decrease cultural dissonance. Eight participants described instances in
their IRPs during which the intersection of culture elicited dissonance in the form of
discomfort or interpersonal conflict. At times emotional and/or behavioral “management”
reactions served to mitigate culturally-related dissonance. For example, Kelly spoke of
her tendency to offer her partner reassurance when she perceived his discomfort during
interactions with her Hmong family:

I think even when they speak Hmong in front of him I think [my partner] may
assume they’re talking about him, when they’re really not . . . I think he does feel
the need to impress and make a good impression and how I respond to that is that
I tell him all the time that my family does love him. And they do and he shouldn’t
feel like they’re talking about him or that they don’t like him or you know my
parents are cursing under their breath because he’s not Hmong . . . I do try to help
him as best I can by telling him that he doesn’t have to worry about that. That I
love him, my brothers and sisters love him, my nephews love him, my parents
love him, but then again I don’t know if he truly believes me or if he thinks I’m just being the nice fiancé, telling him that he doesn’t have to worry.

Though Vance engaged humor when describing how he deals with cultural differences in his partnership, he expressed awareness of the gravity of his cultural conundrum:

I’ve held it off. I haven’t really dealt with that issue yet. So I don’t know how to mingle the families together. I don’t know what to expect in terms of actual ceremonies and what not. Like do we follow the old ceremonies, or do we go just for the new? Do we actually try to combine them? I guess at this point I’m just kind of like just (laughs) letting it go, and hoping that one day I don’t have to deal with it. Which is foolish to do.

Theme 2e: Racial and cultural awareness progressed with time. Six participants reported that in the context of their IRPs with WEAs, awareness of race and culture developed with the passage of time. Indeed, these participants indicated that race and culture had little, if any, role during the formative moments of these relationships. Often, relationship milestones (such as the prospect of meeting a partner’s family or expecting the birth of a child) served as the impetus for examining how racial and cultural dynamics emerge in the relationship. Tory shared that in the beginning of her partnership, most of the dynamics in the relationship with her partner focused on developing a friendship:

I think in terms of dating, [my partner] being White never crossed my mind. And I think for us, the friendship, it just bloomed. So the fact that it took a while for differences to come up, that’s probably the reason why when someone, like not just you, but when I read of cultural differences and interracial relationships, it
takes me awhile to think about that because for our friendship and our whole relationship, cultural differences weren’t factors. It was more of being there for him and vice versa, and really just getting along with each other.

Tory explained that active awareness and integration of culture in the relationship with her WEA partner moved to the forefront when they became more romantically involved, “Getting to know each other at the intimate level, it seemed like cultural differences [would] come up naturally.”

Kelly related a similar experience during which the interracial component of the relationship shifted when it became apparent that she and her partner were becoming more serious about each other:

[My partner] and I just really hit off from the very beginning. And at that point it wasn’t an issue of “Oh my, gosh, he’s White. How are my parents going to deal with this?” That was my initial reaction, “Okay, how do we connect?” I don’t think it was until we got serious it got to the question of “Oh, gosh. How will my parents accept this?” When I kind of knew we were serious I kind of just said, “Okay, now I have to introduce him to my parents and how is that going to go? And I’m gonna introduce him to my sisters and my brothers and how is that gonna go?” But the only kind of hesitation I ever felt was when I was like, okay this is serious how is this going to be presented or kind of reacted by my family and close friends.

**Theme 3: Having a refugee family background directly impacts the IRP.** Six participants shared the belief that being raised by Southeast Asian refugees significantly influenced their IRPs. More specifically, each of these participants internalized the
transmission values they perceived to be unique to the refugee experience. These values, in turn, have manifested in the participants’ interracial romantic relationship in various ways that include the practice of religious faith, attitudes about family economics, romance, and spontaneity. Bryn poignantly described how religious faith impacted her refugee parents’ experience and how this is transmitted into her IRP:

Because of [my parents’] experience in Cambodia with the communist regime, they also wanted something to believe in. Their religion, that was something that helped them maybe understand what happened and how they survived or why they survived. So they keep in faith and something to believe in. My experience with that religion that I grew up in helped me in my relationship, to understand my partner’s understanding of religion because he also comes from a Christian background. So we were able to go to church together here and even though I don’t necessarily believe the same thing that he does, I’m able to understand how it can be important for people and how it’s important to him and respect that.

Several participants spoke of growing up in family environments in which mindfulness around finances and shared use of resources was highly valued, particularly given the often impoverished conditions in which their families lived while awaiting the opportunity to immigrate to the U.S. This was often communicated as a value for frugality. Tory expressed appreciation that her partner shares this value:

My husband and I have frugality in common. His parents were depression-era. Neither of us wants to be wasteful. We tend not to be extravagant and don’t eat out a lot. This brings us together, his upbringing with mine. We have a shared intergenerational trauma experience. I realize we have a lot more commonalities
than I thought.

According to Val, his family’s refugee history significantly shaped his outlook on romance. While reflecting on his parents’ relationship, he described how their evolution as a couple while attempting to survive extreme conditions indelibly marked his perspective on the meanings of love and partnership:

I think the biggest [impact] is not to take your relationship for granted and that anything can happen. I mean, my parents were arranged to be married in refugee camp and without developing a traditional, courting kind of situation where they get to know each other and go on dates and what not. They didn’t know each other. But to this day my mom will say he is the love of her life. She had also fallen in love with him. Which kind of gave me a very cool vision of love. That part of it is a little bit of that pure chemical attraction and a little bit of faith, but also getting to know somebody. They were forced to get to know each other so I think they also built that. It kind of started my whole view and how it probably kind of started my personally being a hopeless romantic in a sense. You know, understanding their story and coming from a refugee camp and living on nothing but rice, water, and sugar.

**Theme 4: Understanding of WEA partners’ experience of the IRP.** Ten participants expressed having an understanding of what it may be like to experience their IRPs from their partners’ points of view. These understandings included the belief that WEA partners struggled with the norms and expectations of SEAA participants’ heritage cultures, as well as the perception that WEA partners were proactive with regard to understanding and engaging in participants’ families and heritage cultures.
Theme 4a: “My partner struggles with the norms of my family and heritage culture.” Six participants expressed the perception that their partners struggle with engagement in their families and heritage cultures. These participants made reference to a range of experiences that they imagined their partners enduring, including self-consciousness about being racially and/or culturally different, feeling overwhelmed by familial and cultural expectations, and discomfort around values that clash with WEA cultural norms. For instance, Lee recognized that her family’s communication style may be incongruent with her WEA partner’s cultural norms around expression:

I feel as though [my partner] probably has to be more sensitive to a lot of things. Like, the way my parents may react to something or the way they communicate is . . . a lot more blunt I guess than he’s used to. Also, he doesn’t know much about Vietnamese culture so it’s all very new to him and at the same time he has to keep being sensitive to it. It’s probably a struggle for him too.

Kai shared that she is highly aware of the emotional toll that her Hmong culture and family may have on her WEA partner:

If I was to be in [my partner’s] shoes, I would definitely be drained by the expectations. Because we’re constantly doing rituals. We’re constantly having gatherings and it’s not just my family. My cousins are like brothers so if they have a gathering, we’re expected to go. And I definitely would be overwhelmed if I was him. Mainly because he also came from a family of just two.

Kai’s understanding of the Hmong culture’s clan structure and intimate involvement with extended family members made her aware that the many family events she and her partner are obligated to attend can be taxing at times, particularly to one who is
unfamiliar with the culture.

Similarly, Tory reflected on her WEA partner’s struggle to make sense of cultural differences with regard to parental relationships and money management. She described one way in which she engages filial piety through the practice of financially supporting her parents:

I’ve had this chat with some of my girlfriends that are Vietnamese. I’ll send money to my mom and dad to help them out, and I think to [my partner] that’s still a foreign concept to him because he came from a family that had money. They went on family vacations. We didn’t have family vacations. We were just working, just trying to make ends meet.

For Tory’s WEA partner, the demonstration of parental respect by offering financial support runs counter to mainstream American cultural values that foster individuation between parents and children, in addition to financial independence between discrete family units.

**Theme 4b: “My partner values and actively seeks to understand my family and heritage culture.”** Eight participants expressed the belief that their WEA partners value the participants’ families and heritage cultures. Moreover, WEA partners were reported as being engaged in activities such as attending family events, being proactive in learning about and participating in traditional customs, and attempting at least some efficacy in the acquisition of the participants’ heritage language. For many participants, WEA partners’ attempts to close cultural gaps increased a sense of intimacy in the IRP. When asked how this occurred in her partnership, Alex shared that her partner’s prolonged exposure to her family and Vietnamese culture has made it easier for him to navigate her cultural world
in a way that may not make sense to others. She utilized language as an example to illustrate this process:

How my husband has been through our relationship and understanding about how where I’m coming from is very multilayered, in a sense. I think that’s because we literally grew up with each other. He was able to see that through my family dynamic, my family is not just what people think it would be if you were from the outside looking in. People have asked him, “Well, how do you communicate with her family?” and it’s like, “What do you mean? Yeah, mom’s a little hard to understand but I can get through it exactly fine.” With anything it’s like he got introduced to each little thing, and slowly but surely he got used to it and now he can now answer better than I can some days.

Several participants perceived that their WEA partners demonstrated overt respect and enthusiasm for their heritage cultures. Bryn laughingly described her surprise when her partner proposed the incorporation of Cambodian customs into their wedding festivities:

I think [my partner] was more interested in learning about Cambodian culture than I am. I didn’t really value wanting to get to know the culture very much or even having it a part of our wedding. He wants it a part of our wedding. Like he wants to wear the outfits and everything at the wedding.

After her painful experience growing up in a restrictive cultural environment, Bryn partially credited her reevaluation of her ethnic identity to her partner’s interest in her culture. “Something that I appreciate in our relationship is that I think my partner is more proud of my ethnic background than I am!”
Theme 5: Experiences of microaggressive and prejudiced responses toward the IRP. Seven of the 11 participants spoke to the experience of microaggressions and prejudice. For these individuals, acts of real or perceived discrimination in reaction to their partnerships were undeniably interwoven into the experience of being partnered with a WEA. The participants spoke poignantly of feeling discomfort when noticing other’s reactions to their IRPs, particularly when there was the perception of being scrutinized and/or negatively judged. Such instances commonly occurred when participants were in public with their WEA partners (e.g., while dining at a restaurant, taking a walk outdoors, interacting with coworkers/employers/teachers); however, participants also spoke of prejudice in the context of interactions with social intimates, such as family and friends. When Kelly described being stared at while out in public with her partner, she emphasized her stark awareness that their union is perceived to some as unusual. She wearily related the constant grappling with the perception of others’ scrutiny of her IRP:

I think another issue that does arise that I think [my partner] and I struggle with that other people don’t is those stares because we’re not commonplace. Or the looks that are kind of wondering, “Oh why are they together?” Because I feel like those are the people I want to prove wrong. It just is so tiring. I just wanna yell to them, “Stop staring at us!”

Val also expressed feeling uncomfortably familiar with – and pained by - the experience of microaggression.

I have heard in backgrounds, like, “Who, what is she doing with him?” or whatnot. You know, nothing to my face, but enough where it’s in my awareness.
And you know, and it’s always just been like . . . I feel sorry for them. And it hurts a little bit.

Alex shared that her WEA partner is particularly sensitive to comments that inadvertently “other” her. She described an incident during which instructors gave feedback on the presumption that she was not a native English speaker:

When I was in college my faculty advisor and another faculty of mine said that they think the reason for why I had such problems in terms of my writing skills was because I was an ESL student, by her definition. You know, my parents were not native American speakers and therefore I was not speaking proper grammar because of that . . . To this day, that really bothers my husband. I remember when I told him what was said to me. He was so mad and angry and it’s like, “Are you kidding? You speak as good as anybody who is a native speaker, so to say that you are someone whose English is a second language . . . that’s just such bullshit.”

Kai shared that awareness of prejudice extends beyond her individual experience. Indeed, she reported that her entire family was the target of strong disapproval from their cultural community. More specifically, clan elders criticized her parents for permitting their daughter’s interracial union:

I do know that the elders do look down upon me. They were very, a bit blunt in their comments. I still get the, “Oh, why didn’t you marry a Hmong guy? Are they not good enough?” Or “Why did you marry a White guy?” And it’s just stupid questions and I know that they look down on me and my dad for my decision. But being born in the United States I don’t feel that reputation is as important. I feel
that happiness is more important. And so that’s why I chose to do what I wanted to do and marry who I wanted to marry. And in turn, I feel that I am in a happier relationship than many.

**Theme 6: Experiences of how social intimates perceive the IRP.** Eight participants shared how they perceived people in their close social circles, namely family and friends, reacting toward their partnerships. Some of these reactions included positive feedback that communicated care for the couples’ well-being as well as active support for the IRP. Other reactions included expressions of concern and even direct opposition toward these relationships because of the racial and/or cultural dissonances represented by the union.

**Theme 6a: The relationship is regarded positively by social intimates.** Six participants reported on the perception that their IRPs with WEAs were positively regarded by the most important and meaningful people in their lives: family and friends. More specifically, the participants felt actively accepted as an IRP. This acceptance was related to how participants perceived their social environments, as well as relational patterns within their social circles that “paved the way” for their IRPs. Val attributed some of the positivity he experiences regarding his relationship to the progressiveness of his community:

> With my friends here, as well as my family, they really admire us as a couple. Maybe not so much in the physical way that we are an interracial couple, but more of just . . . a lot of people enjoy our energy together, which I think sometimes comes from our differences from each other and [city omitted to retain anonymity] being kind of very, very, very liberal and very, very like open minded
as a community.

Although some participants experienced anxiety when it was time to share their IRPs with loved ones, they were often surprised by a warm reception. Lee recounted how introducing her WEA partner to her family was met with unexpected support:

Yeah, my parents have actually responded to him being around a lot more positively than I thought. I was very hesitant to bring him home. I didn’t bring him home until after a year into our relationship almost and when I did they were kind of relieved I was dating. They saw that he’s a very kind and gentle person, so whenever anyone asked in our family, whenever anyone asked them about how he is, they gave very positive reviews. So that’s how he’s considered really affinitive in my family.

Here, we see that Lee’s anxiety about sharing her IRP was ameliorated when her intimates were able to see beyond her partner’s race to focus on his character. Similarly, Kai’s family seemed to prioritize her happiness over any preference for her to partner with a man of Hmong heritage. She stated, “I think even though [my partner is] Caucasian, and even though my parents would have preferred me to marry a Hmong man, they see how happy I am . . . My dad has accepted him as his own son.”

Other participants credited the relative ease with which their relationships were accepted to what they believed to be unique preexisting family dynamics. For example, Tory described her mother as her “biggest supporter” and an “artsy minded person” whose nontraditional way of looking at life facilitated acceptance of Tory’s IRP.

Similarly, Kelly shared that having siblings in IRPs contributed to her parents’ acceptance of her relationship with her WEA partner:
[It] definitely helped that I have older siblings that also are in committed kind of interracial relationship. I have an older sister whose partner of 14 years is a White male and I have an older sister who is married to an African American man who is great and a little sister has a White partner . . . I don’t want to say it’s been easier for them, but I do think because I do have older siblings that maybe had to deal with struggles that I didn’t really come to need to talk to my parents about being with a non-Hmong person. That’s definitely been really great for my family. They have been really accepting with that. My friends of course have been great.

**Theme 6b: There was some concern and/or opposition expressed by social intimates.** Six participants reported that at some point during the course of their IRPs, friends and/or family articulated reservations about their relationships. Reactions from significant others included surprise seated in a lack of exposure or familiarity to IRPs and so-called teasing that made participants question the intentionality of such feedback. Participants also described expressions of disapproval revolving around the fact that they did not choose partners of the same heritage culture. Although IRP was not new to Kadin’s friends, the concept seemed somewhat alien for his family. He related:

> From my side I think that the environment was a little weird at first because of the whole, like, interracial was kind of new to my parents. But for us it’s just whatever. Like our generations, it’s kind of . . . I think it wasn't really that big of a surprise in terms of like friends but in terms of family, I think it was more like “that’s weird,” you know?

Val indicated that despite his family’s acceptance of his WEA partner of over six
years, he continues to receive messages regarding the discrepancy between her WEA identity and his family’s preference for a Cambodian wife. He shared, “My mom [makes] jokes every once in a while and [it turns] into a few too many and it’s like, ‘I get it, you want me to be with a Cambodian woman. I’m sorry. It’s not going to happen.’”

Kai distinctly recalled a conversation during which her mother articulated the rationale for the preference of a Hmong partner for Kai:

She said, “The reason why I want you to marry a Hmong guy is because he already knows the culture. He already knows that if you were to help your family he won’t question you because he already knows that when you marry your wife, you marry her family . . . And if they need help it shouldn’t be questioned. I worry that if you marry a White guy, a Black guy, a Mexican, whatever, that you know he’s going to question you when I need your help one day.”

In Kai’s experience there was no mistaking that her mother’s reluctance for a non-Hmong partner demonstrated a fear that her partner would not be sensitive to the family’s cultural value for filial piety and interdependence.

For Lee, others’ hesitation to endorse her IRP was also overt. She described how family members clearly communicated a preference for a partner that shared their Vietnamese culture. Lee stated, “There was some opposition with my family . . . When my grandma met him for the first time she said, ‘He isn’t Vietnamese’ and my mom said, ‘Why didn’t you pick a Vietnamese boy?’”

Bryn stated that her partner’s racial and cultural identity as a WEA initially trumped her family’s discussion about his identity as a transgender male:

When I first brought him home to my parents, they didn’t know about his
transgender status. So the first issue was that he was [of] White European descent.

I remember after dinner and he left, my mom asked, “Are you sure you don't want to bring home someone who’s Cambodian or Asian?” And my response was, “No, I think I like this one.”

Bryn stressed that being a queer couple was also the subject of concern that continues to motivate attitudinal evolution within her family regarding gender identity and sexual orientation; however, dissonance elicited by the interracial and intercultural differences between Bryn’s family and her partner are both fueled by how they experience the significance and transmission of cultural values associated with being Cambodian.

**Theme 7: Participants’ messages to second generation SEAAs and to the general public regarding culture and IRPs.** This theme speaks to each participant’s desire to communicate specific messages to other second generation SEAAs in IRPs and the general public about culture and interracial romantic partnership. I essentially asked each participant, “What do you want people to know about interracial romantic partnership?” Their responses produced a collection of poignant wishes that included 1) encouragement to other second generation SEAAs in IRPs to take ownership of their heritage cultural roots, 2) encouragement to second generation SEAAs in IRPs to embrace continued learning of their partners’ cultures, and 3) encouragement to the population at large to examine and overcome biases and stereotyped notions about IRPs.

**Theme 7a: Encouragement for other second generation SEAAs in IRPs to “hold on” to heritage cultural roots.** Four participants wished to encourage other second generation SEAAs in IRPs to embrace their cultural heritage. Some of these participants expressed a belief that many second generation SEAAs are losing touch with their rich
cultural roots and the very essence of being a Southeast Asian American. Some of the advice they proffered to other second generation SEAAs included suggestions to “remember where you come from,” revisit and relearn one’s heritage culture, and engage in dialogue with those who express interest in learning more about Southeast Asian cultures. As she reflected on what to share with other second generation SEAAs, Taylor related that through the course of her IRP, her awareness about the similarities and differences between herself and her WEA partner actually supported her rootedness in Vietnamese culture:

I guess my advice is don’t disregard your background. I mean, it is who you are . . . It’s kinda cool being in an interracial relationship because I really see how Vietnamese I am and all this time I thought I was White/Americanized. But I really do see how strong my upbringing was and I really like the way we respect our elders and parents.

For Taylor, engagement in her IRP made her reflect more deeply on her Vietnamese identity. A culture that historically elicited significant struggle and shame is now the subject of welcome exploration and progression of her ethnic identity development.

Relatedly, Vance shared the belief that understanding himself as a cultural being in the context of his multicultural environment is important for the health of his IRP:

. . . About identity and environment, I think there’s a lot to be said there with any couple. Because I feel if they don’t answer those questions themselves, they haven’t asked the right questions. If they haven’t bothered to think about themselves . . . then they haven’t really matured enough as a couple.

As Bryn discussed what she would like to share with other second generation
SEAA\textsuperscript{s} in IRPs, she stressed the importance of understanding one’s heritage culture, and then sharing the culture with one’s romantic partner. After describing how the process of reengaging with her Cambodian culture and welcoming her partner into this process facilitated his understanding of how Bryn interacts with her environment, Bryn recommended, “Be open to sharing your own ethnic background with the other person so that they know a little bit about the way you see the world, the way you interact with people or have relationships with other people.”

Tory expressed similar sentiments, emphasizing that above the personal benefits of understanding her heritage culture, she also recognizes that she may be the best source of cultural information for her WEA partner:

And I think I’d like to say to those of my generation to younger . . . to be more open to the Vietnamese culture. And I think if Vietnamese Americans or Asian Americans in general not just embrace it, to learn more about why they do what they do, but also give the other person a chance, whether they’re White, African American, whatever, because they may be more receptive than you ever imagined.

Tory stated that in addition to keeping her connected to her Vietnamese roots, cultural sharing is a perk of her IRP that she hopes other second generation SEAA\textsuperscript{s} can enjoy:

I think that’s one of the joys I’ve learned from [my partner]. He’s never been to Vietnam. He wasn’t in the war. So he’s like, “tell me about it,” that sort of thing. And I think that’s just with people in general, the other party might want to know more about your Vietnamese culture, and you might be the best person to tell them.
Theme 7b: Encouragement to other second generation Southeast Asian Americans in IRPs to recognize the importance of mutual learning of each partner’s cultural norms and values. Six participants wished to highlight the importance of shared learning between romantic partners about each other’s cultural expectations and values. The participants spoke primarily of the value of being open to learning about each other’s personal cultural experiences and attitudes; however, they also stressed the significance of being accepting of cultural differences. Val furthered this idea by emphasizing his perception of the harm that may come to a relationship that lacks shared openness to cultural exploration:

You try and do a good job of balancing being a different couple in America, but also holding onto your cultural backgrounds. Like my wife’s southern background to my Cambodian; she came out and she dressed up in traditional Cambodian clothing and sat down with the family and did that and respected my half. And I went down to the south and hung out with her pretty redneck family and drank and ate food and hung out and had a good time. It’s definitely something that can happen and I would say don’t be afraid to just explore. Because if you don’t have that acceptance or that’s beyond just you two accepting each other as a couple, I think ultimately it hurts the relationship.

Similarly, Kadin stressed the value of mutual acceptance in the midst of cultural differences that exist in IRPs:

I would say that just be open-minded. Don’t close yourself from [your partner’s] side, from their beliefs. I think it’s important to understand and kind of accept them, as who they are and what they believe in. Don’t force them to change what
they believe in just ‘cause you don’t believe in that.

For Kadin, avoidance of being pushy around cultural learning strengthens relational bonds by promoting mutual respect between partners.

Vance wished to share that not only is a lack of openness detrimental to relationships, the inability to be accepting of cultural differences inhibits a relationship’s growth. He stated, “If people aren’t accepting of each other’s differences, then that’s going to be a definite barrier. If one isn’t willing to try or to even understand the other person, then that’s definitely a huge, huge disadvantage to the relationship.”

**Theme 7c: Encouragement to the general population to overcome biases and stereotypes about IRPs.** All 11 participants endorsed different types of messages they wished to convey to the general public. These messages included encouragement for the general public to be more accepting and considerate of IRPs, to challenge and overcome preconceived notions about IRPs, and to know that individuals involved in IRPs experience are fiercely proud of their unions.

Kelly’s appeal for herself and her partner to be respected as people was particularly poignant:

I just want other people to know that [my partner] and I are just like other couples. You know, we bicker about who’s gonna take the dogs out. We bicker about who’s gonna do the laundry and the trash. We both have names. We are both so much more than that what our race or what our exterior is. It would be great if you could acknowledge that.

Kelly shared that the energy involved with negotiating the biases and stereotypes that others project onto her relationship is exhausting and dispiriting. Moreover, the scrutiny
that her union elicits is dehumanizing. She added, “It’s not like he’s green and I’m an alien. We’re people. That’s all you need to know at this point.”

Similarly, Lee expressed the desire for the general public to be mindful and respectful when encountering diverse families: “Keep in mind that you have to be empathic about where people are from and their families.”

For Val, IRP represents unity in diversity. It is also a dynamic that cannot be avoided given the pervasive and progressive nature of multiculturalism in mainstream society:

[IRP] is the future. This is something that is happening, something that should be happening. It doesn’t need to be forced. It definitely represents message that we more accepting of individuals, of the individuals around us, no matter their identity or self-identity is, their ethnic identity, or even now their sexual preference, anything that would consider themselves a minority or a majority, anything that may be different. Just like how people like to see pictures or see a video as opposed to reading about it. Right in your face you see it and this is evidence that this is happening and should be accepted. And it shows positivity. It shows a positive movement opposed to a negative movement.

Bryn’s message to the general public, despite its brevity, spoke volumes. In light of the trials and tribulations related to her identity as a second generation SEAA and the challenges associated with being interracially partnered with a WEA, her message to the general public was simply, “I love my relationship. I’m very proud to be in this relationship.”
The Spirit of the Study’s Essence

The stories shared by each participant offered narrative snapshots of a dynamic and complex phenomenon that can be both rewarding and challenging. At the heart of this phenomenon is the participants’ awareness that despite the difficulties and complexities involved in IRP, they are workable. More importantly, the richness of personal and relational experience within IRP facilitates participants’ engagement in overcoming its challenges. This message resonated through each major theme that emerged from the in-depth interviews. For instance, many participants described having felt alienated or hurt by their heritage cultures at some point; however, some of these same individuals described feeling increasingly connected to these cultures. Indeed, this evolution was often attributed to dynamics within their IRPs (e.g., negotiation and management of cultural differences). Additionally, factors such as varying levels of bicultural identity negotiation, refugee family dynamics, and “culture clashes” with partners impacted second generation SEAAs’ partnerships with WEAs in meaningful ways.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to gain an understanding of the lived experience of second generation Southeast Asian Americans (SEAA) who are in interracial romantic partnerships (IRP) with White European Americans (WEA). More specifically, this study sought to understand the experiences of second generation SEAAAs who are the children of refugees. It is notable that relatively young adults comprise this study’s participant sample. This was expected given the immigration patterns of Southeast Asian refugees who settled in the United States from the 1970s through the 1980s. Although the participants are a generation removed from their parents’ refugee experiences, the results clearly point to the impact of these events on second generation SEAAAs’ lives and relationships.

This chapter will discuss the results of this study in several ways. Chapter Four presented the essence of this study through thematic description. In the present chapter, I supplement this expression of the essence of the study in the form of a composite case narrative. This is followed by discussion of key findings that emerged in the narrative as they relate to current scholarship. Next, I posit implications for practical application of my results, followed by my critique of this study and suggestions for. Finally, I reflect on second generations SEAAAs’ reported experiences of being a part of this study.

Composite Case Narrative

Tapestries are woven pieces of art that have the traditional purpose of telling stories. In the following composite case narrative I attempt to weave the 11 stories shared by my participants and the themes emerging from these stories to form a narrative
tapestry that expresses the essence of this study. In the context of this research, the composite case narrative lends itself to an effective and powerful marriage between science and subjective human experience. Wertz, Nosek, McNeish, and Marlow (2011) asserted, “human science research is not just a personal cognitive process” (p. 1). These authors cited the work of Gendlin (1997) to extend the idea that research on the human experience involves an intimate and bodily participation in life that makes knowing possible; in short, a “felt sense.” Gendlin’s philosophy charges the researcher with a responsibility to provide texture to descriptions of phenomena so that the reader may “go beyond emotion or a mere feeling about the topic, and find in oneself the physicality evoked by the words” (Wertz et al., 2011, p. 2). The composite case narrative offers such a structure within which results can be richly described.

The composite case narrative is not simply the retelling of stories. Rather, it is interpretation by the researcher that is influenced through knowledge offered by scholarship, through listening and hearing the stories told by participants, and the researcher’s engagement of reflexivity (Wertz et al., 2011). It also seeks to connect with universal human qualities so that the patterns and themes are relatable and conducive to new understanding about the phenomenon (Todres, 2007). The composite case narrative may not be exhaustive of all the findings; more importantly, it allows “the reader to have an increased sense of contact with the phenomenon without fully possessing it” (Wertz et al., 2011, p. 2).

The following composite case narrative is a fictional representation of the collective experiences of this study’s participants. Although effort was made to include each theme, not all subthemes are included, nor do the highlighted themes and subthemes
necessarily represent the experience of all the participants. Themes and subthemes represented in the composite case narrative are indicated by parentheses and their descriptive definitions can be revisited in Chapter Four. To facilitate the reader’s engagement with the themes and subthemes presented, the narrative is presented as a story told from the first person perspective of Amara, a second generation, U.S.-born adult child of Cambodian refugees.

In order to gain in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of interest, the case composite narrative begins with Amara’s description of her parents’ refugee experience and her cultural upbringing. I think that this background information is relevant for providing context for Amara’s experience of her IRP with a WEA. As the narrative progresses, emergent themes reflecting the findings of the study are more apparent and specified according to the thematic organizational structure proffered in Chapter Four (see Appendix U, Table 3 Emergent Themes Related to Being a Second Generation Southeast Asian American in an IRP with a White European American).

**Amara’s story.** My name is Amara. Some people call me Amy. I am a 30-year-old, heterosexual, second generation Cambodian American woman who is engaged to a White European American man. My parents are refugees who survived “the killing fields” of Cambodia. They arrived in the United States and settled in Long Beach, California in the early 1980s. Understanding my experience of the relationship with my fiancé requires understanding of events that happened before I was even born, when my parents lived in Cambodia. In all reality, my story also includes the story of my parents’ journey to the United States; it has limited meaning without understanding their history, which is also my history.
My parents hardly ever speak of their immigration experience. I knew very little of their story until I reached adulthood. The limited knowledge I have now of my parents’ experience is pieced together by various stories told to me by extended family members and family friends. Back in Cambodia, my parents were educated and successful working professionals who were forced by the Khmer Rouge out of their home in the city to work in the countryside. Living conditions were squalid and prisoners were rationed scanty portions of rice and water to sustain themselves as they toiled long, arduous days farming crops they were forbidden to eat. Conditions were so bad that the prisoners took to eating soil and insects to stave off hunger. Those who were too weak or ill to work were often beaten mercilessly for their inability to work, sometimes to death. My parents witnessed several family members and friends die in this fashion. Female prisoners were regularly assaulted and raped; I don’t know if any of the female members of my family, including my own mother, were attacked in this way.

After a time my parents were among a group of prisoners chosen to be transferred to another camp, presumably to be executed. En route to the camp the Khmer Rouge captors leading the group were attacked by anti-communist forces, allowing the opportunity for the prisoners to escape. My parents and their friends spent weeks trying to get through the jungles on foot, searching for the safety of a refugee camp. This journey was extremely dangerous as the group was in constant fear of being recaptured, being caught in crossfire, starvation, dehydration, and illness. They encountered numberless bodies of people who were executed by the Khmer Rouge or who had fallen during their quest for freedom. They hid from bands of Khmer Rouge “poachers” charged with hunting for escaped prisoners. When my parents and their group finally arrived at a
refugee camp in Thailand, their number had dwindled by half. My parents lived at the
camp for a year before they were sponsored by an American family, whose church helped
to resettle refugee families in the United States. This family helped my parents settle into
a new life in Long Beach, California where I was eventually born and raised. After a few
years, my parents were able to sponsor my dad’s grandparents, who had been living in a
refugee camp in the Philippines. When they arrived to the United States they moved into
our house and helped to raise me and my siblings.

My childhood was steeped in traditional Cambodian culture. Weekends were
usually spent attending gatherings at the homes of family members and friends. My
siblings and I were taught and spoke Cambodian until we began elementary school. It
was important to our parents that we absorb as much of the culture from their homeland
as we could. I was expected to show respect to my elders by bowing slightly at the waist
and pressing my palms together in prayer-like fashion, a gesture called sampeah. I
offered prayers at altars erected to honor my family’s ancestors and loved ones lost
during the Khmer Rouge regime. I attended innumerable special events during which
monks were often solicited to offer blessings at weddings, funerals, and parties. My
siblings, many cousins, and I called these “Cambodian parties” because our relatives
would scold us if we spoke English. For some of these events I was dressed in brightly
colored sampot, a traditional dress that is reminiscent of rapper M.C. Hammer’s fashion
during his heyday. At home, my parents and grandparents wore sarong, lengths of fabric
sewn so they could be wrapped around the waist.

Filial piety was a value that my parents strongly instilled in their children. During
my early childhood I obeyed my parents and grandparents without question. As the eldest
child, I was expected to help my grandparents watch over my siblings while our parents worked. I was told that it was important to always be on my best behavior for the younger kids looked up to me. I loved playing chef when elder family members invited me to help cook meals. As I grew older it became my informal duty to cook rice every evening for dinner and to make sure that my grandparents and then my parents were served their meals before the kids and I could start eating. This was just one of the ways that we showed respect. We usually had dinner leftovers for breakfast. I didn’t know it was weird to have rice for breakfast until my friends said so. In my family, it was not economical in terms of time or money to prepare fresh food for every single meal. Every now and then, though, my siblings and I were treated to pancakes.

After many years of hard work, saving money, and wanting the best opportunities possible for their children, my parents moved us from our inner city neighborhood to a marginally middle class, predominantly White community. We moved just before I started school. Teachers and friends began to call me “Amy;” I find it hard to believe that Amara was too difficult to pronounce correctly. I quickly gained efficacy speaking English language but I was still expected to speak Cambodian at home. I was occasionally bullied by non-Asian peers for being “Chinese” and having “squinty eyes.” I used to wonder if other kids would be nicer if to me if I had curly blond hair and blue eyes. I was rarely allowed to play at my friends’ homes, though they were welcome to play come play at my house. Given my parents’ experience of losing multiple loved ones, they feared for their children’s safety and preferred us to stay home under watchful supervision. This often frustrated me because my friends’ toys were so much better than mine. My family rarely had the opportunity to indulge us kids in the latest fads in toys.
and clothes, often opting for the economy of hand-me-downs from the older children of extended family and friends. There’s another reason I liked playing at my friends’ homes: it offered some reprieve from the embarrassment I felt when asked, “Why do you talk funny to your mom and dad?” and “Why don’t your grandparents know English?”

As I grew up I became more and more sensitive to being seen by my peers as different. I experienced more conflict as I found myself trying to live simultaneously in two worlds: the Cambodian world at home and the American world at school (Theme 1d). These cultural worlds often clashed and when they did, they clashed hard. For example, I was expected to be independent, outspoken, and competitive at school. My parents would probably have been horribly embarrassed to see how I hollered and made a ruckus with the other kids during recess. I was bossy with my friends. I was also the obnoxious kid who was always the first to raise my hand when my teachers asked us questions. At home, I was usually scolded if I raised my voice or brought undue attention to myself. Asserting an opinion that was different from my elders was either dismissed as childish nonsense or considered disrespectful. At home I was expected to avoid conflict and to value modesty above being boastful. To be really frank with you, I thought it was more fun to be White (Theme 1c).

My family also highly valued being together as much as possible and relying on each other. I found this to be more and more annoying as I got older. When friends invited me to go to the mall or to a movie on the weekends, I would beg and plead and eventually argue with my mom to allow me to go. I usually ended up declining these invitations because it wasn’t proper for me to spend time outside of school at places where there might be boys. I think most importantly, my parents really valued the
precious time the family spent together after a long week’s work. I began to resent these “rules” (Theme 1b) and wish that my parents could be more like the parents of my White American peers, who seemed to allow their kids more freedom to socialize and have fun (Theme 1c). My siblings and I began speaking more English at home and at family gatherings where elders scolded us for being “too Americanized.” Which, of course, made us want to be even more American.

By the time I began college I had lost most of my ability to speak Cambodian. I had to move away to go to college and this offered a sense of freedom I felt I missed out on when I lived at home. I visited home often but attended fewer and fewer Cambodian parties where I often felt criticized by my elders for losing my “Cambodianness.” They always chided me, “You forget where you come from.” Although the resulting embarrassment always irritated me, I also never failed to feel ashamed (Theme 1b). I focused on being a successful student, being social, and trying to blend in with my peers. I began to date and went out with men with varied cultural backgrounds. After graduating from college I got a job as a financial advisor at a company located about an hour away from my parents’ house. Although I lived within easy visiting distance of my parents and grandparents, I was expected to do most of the commuting to see my family. Some of my friends don’t understand why I do this. “What a pain! Why don’t they come and see you for a change?” Sometimes I ask myself the same question, but it’s just the respectful thing to do (Theme 1d)

I began dating Jacob, a White European American man, a few weeks after meeting him at a friend’s birthday party. We had so much in common including a love of travel, the outdoors, animals, and cooking. Jacob and I could talk for hours about
anything and everything, it seemed. We were eager to learn everything possible about each other and shared a lot of laughter and tears as we exchanged stories about our families, growing up years, and life adventures thus far. Although it was obvious that Jacob and I were different in many ways, we were so caught up in our similarities that we barely noticed things like race and culture at first (Theme 2e). I think we were so busy getting to know each other and nurturing our relationship that we kind of minimized concerns related to race and culture; these seemed like technicalities we’d deal with when the time came. Every now and then we’d notice that other people gave us weird looks when we were out together, but we didn’t pay these incidents much mind at the time. All that mattered was that we got along and were falling in love. And love conquers all, right?

After a few months of dating, Jacob invited me to meet his parents at a backyard barbeque. This was very exciting but also very scary for me. On one hand, I felt that my relationship with Jacob was progressing wonderfully. We became great friends who looked forward to a future together, so meeting each other’s parents was a natural step in the development of our relationship. On the other hand, I was nervous about what Jacob’s parents would think about me, especially about being Asian, not White, not one of them (Theme 2b). I think this was one of the first times that race came up as an issue in our relationship. In the days that led to the barbeque I had anxious thoughts about how his parents would treat me. I imagined them reacting as I expected my protective parents would react toward Jacob: with reservation, intrusive questions, and thinly veiled suspicion. I presumed that Jacob’s parents would prefer that he be dating a White American woman. My parents would definitely have preferred to see me date someone of
my own race, someone who they would view as being at least somewhat familiar with
our culture and values. So as much as I hoped that Jacob’s family would accept me, I felt
like I could understand any misgivings they had about me being “different.” I can’t tell
you how relieved I was when they welcomed me with open arms (Theme 6a).

I stalled on introducing Jacob to my family for as long as I could. I wanted to be
sure that we were in the relationship for the long haul before integrating him into my
family. I’ve never really discussed my romantic life with my parents. They have always
been vocal in their fears that romance would distract me from being successful in my
education and career; they worked too hard to put me through school for me to, as they
would often say, “throw it all away.” The fear that I would abandon my family was
unspoken but always painfully present (Theme 1b). I felt like I needed to help my parents
“warm up” to the idea that I was dating. And not just dating, but dating an “American.”
As expected, my parents received Jacob with some hesitation (Theme 6b). They are very
kind people but tend to be wary of people outside their intimate social circle; I
know that they were remembering about the spies back in the killing fields. This wariness
compounded with the loss of loved ones during the Khmer Rouge regime makes them
especially protective of us kids. My parents were also doubtful about the ability for White
European Americans to understand Eastern values, appreciate the history of what
happened in Cambodia, and be empathic about what they’ve gone through. Thus, Jacob
met with the Cambodian Inquisition. He was peppered with questions, some of which
were not very subtle: “What do your parents do? Were you a good boy? Did you get good
grades? Are you healthy? What’s your credit score?” As time passed, though, my parents
grew fond of Jacob, although my mom occasionally couldn’t help but to ask, “Are you
sure you don’t want to date someone like us?” I know she meant well but this really hurts my feelings. I felt like saying to her, “Why can’t you just trust me and be happy for me?” If Jacob had heard her ask me this, he would have been so hurt (Theme 5). All I could do was smile and let her know - firmly - that I chose Jacob.

Like I said earlier, Jacob and I rarely spoke about race and culture before meeting my parents; there didn’t seem to be a need. The beginning of our relationship was so focused on getting to know each other, building our friendship, and learning about each other’s quirks. Our differences in terms of race and culture didn’t really enter into our relationship picture until Jacob and I began spending more time with each other’s families (Theme 2e). Our friend circle is so mixed that we never really paid attention to race and culture. As we spent more time with each other’s families, however, these concerns became louder and clearer. For example, when we’re hanging out with his family, I’m usually the only person of color there. It was kind of a revelation for Jacob when he noticed this for the first time; he never realized what it was like to be different until he noticed when I stood out. After that, we started having more talks about other places and situations in which I felt spotlighted because I was different. I think it felt a little weird for the both of us to be having these conversations, but they were good ones to have. I feel like we achieved a different sense of intimacy when we started acknowledging our racial and cultural differences and figuring out what they mean for our relationship (Theme 2a).

We also started noticing other areas in which we stand out as an interracial couple. It’s not like anyone has been blatantly rude to our faces, but now we notice a lot when people look at us and then take that second glance. It’s as if they’re making sure
they’re seeing right. I’m constantly wondering what people are looking at and what they are responding to. Sometimes I feel like I’m going crazy, that I’m just being paranoid when I imagine them thinking, “What are they doing together?” or even worse, “What’s he doing with her?” As if Jacob should be with a White woman instead of me (Theme 5). It can be very dispiriting. There was one time in Little Saigon when we were in a restaurant having lunch. We could tell that the Asian family at the next table over was kind of scrutinizing us. They kept glancing over at our table and it was obvious from the way they sometimes lowered their voices that they were talking about us. We tried to ignore them, but as they left, I heard someone mumbling something that sounded like “She thinks she’s so White,” like I sold myself out or something. That hurt a lot (Theme 2b). I may be with a White man but I certainly am not trying to be White. I know who I am. I’m proud of who I am. I know where I come from (Theme 1a).

There’s another time when Jacob and I were at his company’s holiday party. We were having a good time until I was introduced to his boss’s husband. There was no mistaking the surprise on this man’s face as I was introduced as Jacob’s fiancée (Theme 5). I remember feeling as though a bowling ball suddenly dropped to the floor of my stomach as soon as I registered his look, which silently communicated that he’d expected Jacob to have a White partner. I started to flush and wanted to get away but there was no way I could be so rude in front of Mr. and Mrs. Boss. I hoped and hoped that Mr. Bos wouldn’t ask The Question. I wasn’t so lucky.

“So, where are you from?” asked Mr. Boss (Theme 5).

“Long Beach,” I replied with a strained smile.

“Oh, were you born here?” I exchanged pained looks with Jacob, who looks so
sorry for me that I want to cry.

“Yes. Born and raised.”

“I should have known. Your English is so good! Do your parents speak English?”

I wanted to reply, “They’ve been here for about 40 years. It’s pretty damned decent.” Instead, I gave Jacob The Look (Theme 2d) and he made a graceful excuse to take us away.

Instances like that make me feel so alien and I’m so glad when Jacob recognizes how uncomfortable they are for me. We talked about the incident later on the way home and about how we both felt absolutely powerless to say anything about how offensive that exchange was; however, because we chose not to say anything, how would the man know better in the future? Telling off the boss’s husband didn’t seem like a smart professional move, but neither did it seem right not to say anything. Sadly, Jacob and I encounter this kind of impasse quite a bit (Theme 2b).

In terms of culture, for the most part I feel that I can navigate both the mainstream White American world and the more Eastern-oriented Cambodian world (Theme 1d). At work I can be assertive, run meetings, and being confident gives me credibility. As a couple, though, cultural differences stand out most when we spend time with my family. Since Cambodian is the primary language at my parents’ house, I have to do a lot of translating and explaining to Jacob. I can tell this makes him feel self conscious, like people are talking about him when they’re really not (Theme 4a). He told me once that he gets really embarrassed sometimes and feels “too White” when he’s around my family. I always try to reassure him that my family loves him, that they consider him part of the family (Theme 2d). I especially appreciate that he tries to learn some key Cambodian
phrases so that he can communicate with my grandparents, who have never been able to
learn English. They were even more wary about Jacob than my parents, but the first time
he bowed before them in sampeah and said “choum reap sor” he was as good as adopted
into the family (Theme 6a).

Despite some of the negative experiences I’ve encountered being in an interracial
relationship, the good definitely outweigh the bad. For example, in the process of
exposing Jacob to my Cambodian family, community, and the culture, I have surprised
myself with how much my heritage really means to me (Theme 1a). I find myself eager
to share with Jacob what I know and this makes me proud. I find myself asking my
parents and grandparents more about what certain customs mean. Of course this makes
them absolutely ecstatic, especially given the distance I put between our culture and
myself over the years. I also feel like Jacob tries to share parts of his culture with me
(Theme 2c). It’s funny, it seems that watching me go through my own process of
returning to my culture is actually making Jacob more aware of his. He doesn’t know too
much about his ethnic background, but he tries to explain what he does know and looks
into what he doesn’t. For example, Jacob’s grandparents lived through The Great
Depression and he’s been really interested in learning about this era. He says it explains a
lot about some of his family’s attitudes and traditions. I love seeing him excited about his
history.

Another perk of our relationship is that I’ve become much better at
communicating (Theme 2a). I never used to think this was an issue for me until Jacob
noticed that I tend to bottle things up, particularly things that bother me. I grew up with
the sense that telling other people about your problems is somewhat selfish, like you are
laying your burdens on them. For Jacob, it’s quite the opposite; talking to each other about each other’s problems is a way for us to understand each other better in a constructive manner. I do believe that our cultural differences actually bring us closer together as a couple (Theme 2a).

Like any couple, however, Jacob and I have conflict around certain topics. For instance, Jacob feels a lot more secure about our finances than I do and tends to have a more laissez faire approach to consumption. If he wants something, he’ll sometimes just go out and buy it. I, on the other hand, consider myself to be pretty thrifty. I will save and save and save for something that I want but when the time comes to make the purchase, I’ll start feeling guilty about being frivolous and use every argument under the sun to talk myself out of it. I am sure this is a remnant of growing up watching my parents scrimp and save to support a multigenerational household (Theme 3). They lived in desperate times and knew how to stretch out every possible resource in order to survive. Another example of conflict revolves around food. Jacob hates leftovers. He gets worried about food going bad and making us sick so if we don’t eat everything right away, he prefers us to throw away anything that’s left. This drives me crazy! My parents, who have firsthand experience of starvation, raised me to not waste food and make every possible use of what is available. Thus, I am loathe to throw those leftovers away and will happily pack them up for lunch the next day. You can imagine that Jacob won’t be too happy when he sees last Sunday’s curry on tonight’s dinner menu!

To sum up my experience, I want to share that in a lot of ways Jacob and I are just like any other couple (Theme 7c). We love each other. We fight. We lean on each other. We drive each other crazy. We are in it for the long haul. Race and culture are important
elements of our relationship but they aren’t always at the forefront. When we look at each other we are not looking at the color of each other’s skin. We see the person we love and want to share our lives with.

That’s not to say that we always ignore how race and culture play out in our lives. We don’t like being stared at, as if we are exotic animals in a cage. We are human beings who understand the world around us and see a lot of things people think we don’t notice. We don’t like being judged, as if we don’t belong together. It really hurts our feelings to imagine that there are people who look at us as if we do not feel love and pain very deeply. It would be really nice if people could take a good look at themselves and their preconceptions race, culture, and interracial relationships. I think they would realize that we, all of us, are a lot more the same than we are different. The world would be a lot better place.

**Discussion of Themes in Relation to Current Scholarship**

In addition to the thematic description of the results presented in Chapter Four, the composite case narrative featuring Amara serves as expression of the essence of this study. In the following sections, I discuss this study’s findings that emerged in Amara’s story. I elucidate certain points further with examples from the study’s participants. Additionally, I anchor my findings to relevant literature and illustrate ways in which the themes and subthemes that emerge from the data contrast with, support, and/or extend existing scholarship.

**Results in relation to the Asian American racial identity development (ARRID) model (Kim, 2012).** Amara’s story illustrated the progression of the study participants’ reported reactions to their racial and/or cultural identity through the course
of their personal development and in the context of their IRPs. Many of the negative reactions second generation SEAAs expressed regarding heritage culture illuminated a sense of growing up feeling restricted by cultural expectations or missing out on social experiences with peers due to expectations to attend cultural events and focusing time on family (Theme 1b). Amara’s story highlighted how second generation SEAAs’ developing worldviews, which were influenced by exposure to mainstream American/”White” culture, often clashed with traditional Southeast Asian cultural values.

With regard to positive reactions toward heritage culture, many of these were seated in a sense of pride that was more salient in the present, as opposed to earlier on during second generation SEAAs’ personal development (Theme 1a). Notably, the participants also acknowledged the progression of racial and/or cultural identity awareness through the course of their partnerships (Theme 2e). The case of Amara reflected this evolution by describing the state of her cultural and racial awareness before entering into her IRP with Jacob and during the relationship’s formative moments.

Many of the aforementioned reactions occurred in phases that align with Kim’s (2012) Asian American racial identity development (ARRID) model. Kim asserted that Asian Americans may navigate through as many as five stages in their identity development: *ethnic awareness, White identification, awakening to social political consciousness, redirection,* and *incorporation.* The ethnic awareness stage typically takes place before Asian American children enter school and awareness of their ethnicity is gleaned primarily by modeling demonstrated by family members. Amara’s story, particularly the descriptions about Cambodian being her first language and participating in traditional cultural practices, represented some second generation SEAAs’ early
memories of learning the language of their families and engaging in a world free of outside judgment. Kelly corroborated this experience and stated, “Growing up I never really thought about being Hmong as unique or kind of not the norm.”

It was not until second generation SEAAs entered the White identification stage that awareness of being different became more salient. According to Kim (2012), this stage may begin when Asian Americans enter school and painful encounters, such as teasing and bullying, prompt the internalization of messages that being different is bad. Some Asian Americans may not experience this stage until later in life when significant transitions, such as moving away from home and starting college, serve as triggers. During the White identification stage, being “othered” or made to feel different due to one’s racial identity may result in the desire to escape one’s racial and cultural heritage in favor of adopting White societal values and standards. In the composite case narrative, we see that Amara was unaware of being different until she entered school and her Asianness was pointed out by her White peers. Similarly, Kelly’s relationship with Hmong culture was normalized as a young child; however, rejection by Hmong peers when she began school drew her to socialize with White peers:

When I was younger, I was the one that was called “white-washed” because I just ... I don’t know if it was because I just couldn’t relate to all of my Hmong friends or the people who were in my classroom because I was born here. It was definitely a kind of an invisible block almost between me and my Hmong peers. So I always did kind of gravitate towards my White classmates and I hung out with them (Theme 1c).

Thus, Kelly’s movement into the White identification stage was prompted by feedback
from Hmong peers that she was not Asian *enough*.

In the awakening to social political consciousness stage of the AARID model, increased exposure and awareness to the political impact of racialization (e.g., oppression or inequitable allocation of resources) may prompt Asian Americans to reject identification with White society in favor of identification as a racial minority (Kim, 2012). For Amara, awareness that her IRP with Jacob was scrutinized by others elicited a sense of helplessness, powerlessness, and being viewed as “less than,” especially when she imagined people wondering why Jacob was partnered with a racial minority (Themes 2b and 5). This was the experience of participants who described an array of negative emotional reactions (e.g., anger, weariness, fear, paranoia; Theme 2b) when perceiving the disapproval that society directed toward their IRPs. Before partnering with her WEA spouse, Bryn’s experience of being discriminated against and subsequently oppressed by White society (Theme 5) influenced her decision to primarily date Asian partners:

I know I had a lot of bias toward White people or people of European descent. I feel like growing up in Texas in the communities that I grew up in, I wasn’t treated or I didn’t think I was being treated very nicely by people of European descent. So I didn’t see myself being with someone [who is White].

The reader may recall from Chapter Four that Bryn’s experience with her heritage culture was itself painfully oppressive. Thus, it is meaningful that she perceived the threats posed by dating White as outweighing those associated with dating Cambodian.

Participants’ reports of reconnecting with their respective Asian cultural heritages can be classified by the redirection stage of Kim’s (2012) ARRID model. During the redirection stage, it is common for Asian American individuals to re-immers
in Asian culture, history, and environments. In the case of Amara, we see that her movement into this stage was partially motivated by her eagerness to culturally connect with Jacob. Many participants described experiencing an increase in cultural and racial pride as their IRPs progressed with time (Theme 2e). Indeed, the redirection stage is marked by a sense of racial pride and positive self-esteem with regard to identification with Asian heritage. This task was summed effectively by Taylor, who stated, “It’s kinda cool being in an interracial relationship because I really see how Vietnamese I am. And all this time I thought I was White Americanized, but I really do see how strong my upbringing was.”

The last stage of the ARRID model is the incorporation stage. According to Kim (2012), the incorporation stage is marked by confidence in one’s identity that “. . . allows Asian Americans to relate to many different groups of people without losing their own racial identity as Asian Americans (p. 148).” Given the relative youth of this study’s participants (M= 28 years), it would be ambitious for me to assert that any of these individuals have achieved this stage of Asian American racial identity development; however, it is not unreasonable to deduce that some of these individuals may be approaching or in the beginning phases of this stage. For example, my anecdotal experience of Kelly belies any presumptions that could be attributed to her age. The insight with which she described the ongoing process of her identity development and her political understanding of what it means to be Asian American alludes to her trajectory toward an Asian American identity that is positive, comfortable, and blends with the rest of her social identities.

Results in relation to the interracial relationship development model
(Foeman and Nance, 1999). Amara’s story illustrated the second generation SEAA participants’ perspectives on the evolution of their IRPs. Given the relative youth of this study’s participants (M= 28 years) and their respective IRPs (M=4.48 years), it is difficult to compare or contrast these evolutions with existing literature on IRP development. Assessment relative to current scholarship is further restricted by a dearth of literature that explicates IRP development. Within this small body of literature, Foeman and Nance’s (1999) stage model of interracial relationship development is the seminal theory that describes a progressive model for describing IRP dynamics across time and is often cited by scholars of IRP (Sheshadri & Knudson-Martin, 2013; AhnAllen & Suyemoto, 2011).

This model posits that interracial relationship development takes place as a dynamic and sequential phenomenon that is experienced by both partners across the span of four stages: *racial awareness, coping with social definitions of race, identity emergence, and maintenance*. During the racial awareness stage, interracial couples are tasked with developing awareness of how race operates in the relationship. Foeman and Nance (1999) asserted that even if it is not initially discussed, race becomes an increasingly prominent dynamic that compels the articulation of a shared dialogue on the role of race in the relationship. This dialogue is usually focused on understanding the function of race in each partner’s attraction to the other, as well as sensitivity to the racial place of each partner. The composite case narrative represented the participants’ negotiation of this stage by highlighting Amara and Jacob’s initial inattention to matters related to race and culture during the early stages of their relationship, which was followed by their growing awareness of how others perceived them as individuals and as
a couple. Amara’s consciousness of Jacob’s initial discomfort around her family (Theme 4a), in addition to Jacob’s realization of when Amara is the only person of color in a group, are examples of how each partner becomes attuned to each other’s experience as racialized beings.

Foeman and Nance (1999) assert that when an interracial couple arrives at the coping with social definitions of race stage, they must decide how to integrate the information gleaned from the racial awareness stage to cope with society’s responses to the interracial relationship. During this time, the couple learns to protect their relationship by developing strategies for responding to potentially threatening people and situations that question or oppose the union. When Amara and Jacob encountered prejudice (Theme 5) at the restaurant in Little Saigon, potential ways to cope with this assault could have included ignoring the offense, talking to each other about it, or politely confronting the perpetrators. Val stated that when he encounters similar challenges regarding his IRP, he utilizes reframing to cope with potentially painful situations, “I feel sorry for them. And it hurts a little bit but it’s like anything. You always just kind of check yourself and be like ‘You know, if they’re questioning it [then] maybe they’re envying it more so than anything.’”

In the identity emergence stage of Foeman and Nance’s (1999) model, interracial couples learn to embrace a united identity and see themselves as a force to be reckoned with. “Instead of looking at their differences as obstacles to be overcome, interracial couples view the unique racial configuration of their families as a positive source of strength” (p. 553). Val’s stance on IRP expresses the spirit of this stage powerfully:

I think [IRP is] awesome. I think that we represent essentially the future of the
United States and many other countries in the rest of the world as we diversify and pretty much interact with one another. It feels good to be a part of that [Theme 2a]. And I think that helps with overall from a society standpoint. It makes it easier to appreciate and accept and be more unified.

The last stage of Foeman and Nance’s (1999) model is the maintenance stage. The authors present the final stage of their model not so much as a discrete phase as much as to emphasize the importance for individuals and couples to revisit previous stages as needed. This study’s participants were relatively young adults and the mean length of their IRPs was less than five years. Thus, it is not unreasonable to hypothesize these relationships are located in earlier developmental stages of the interracial relationship development model; however, when and if these couples successfully reach the maintenance stage, they “will have more or less need at any given time to focus on race or to evolve as an interracial couple” (p. 554).

The results of the current study digress from Foeman and Nance’s (1999) stage model by illuminating the impact of cultural differences on IRPs. Although Foeman and Nance (1999) developed an effective platform upon which to conceptualize the development of IRPs, they did not address how culture intersects with the experience of interracial romantic partnership. I posit that a comprehensive model for conceptualizing the development of IRPs should address the inextricable impact that partner’s cultural background brings into the relationship. For instance, one who defines his or her cultural background by race and/or ethnic cultural heritage has undoubtedly adopted a normalized way of being. Therefore, it is reasonable that mutual exploration of the role of race in IRPs also requires understanding of each partner’s cultural reality, which begs the need
for a more current and comprehensive theory to describe the development of IRPs.

**Results in relation to scholarship on the lived experience of IRP.** The results of this study contribute to a small body of literature that seeks to understand IRP through the lived experience of interracial partners, particularly through the use of qualitative research methods. AhnAllen and Suyemoto (2011) conducted one of more recent of these few studies, utilizing grounded theory analysis of interviews to understand the influence of interracial dating on the racial and/or ethnic identities of Asian American women and WEA men. One of the authors’ key findings was that through the duration of their interracial dating relationships with WEA men, Asian American women reported that being interracially partnered contributed to the evolution of their identities as individuals of Asian heritage. The authors explained, “. . . this more active exploration heightened [participants’] desire to cherish and preserve their Asian values while recognizing the greater challenge of doing so in an interracial relationship” (p. 66). The results of this study support AhnAllen and Suyemoto’s (2011) findings by demonstrating second generation SEAAs’ beliefs that their IRPs facilitated increased insight into what it means to be a racialized being, increased appreciation and interest to maintain or increase one’s connection with their heritage culture, and growing pride in identifying as an SEAA. The case composite narrative highlights the evolution of Amara’s relationship with her heritage Cambodian culture and how her IRP with a WEA influences this development. Relatedly, Drew shared that her historically negative experience with her Vietnamese culture continues to shift through the course of her interracial partnership, becoming more meaningful with the passage of time and experience (Theme 2c):

I think [how I feel about my culture] morphed . . . In the beginning, parts of
[culture] were still there but more real elements are coming to play, like how we’re gonna raise our kids, like our different our possibly different parenting styles, me wanting my mom a lot closer, maybe having a mother in law unit in my house in the future to help me take care of my kids, wanting to teach them Vietnamese. I think [my partner] is open to all that but it would be really difficult to just do that on my own . . . there’s just more real issues.

The composite case narrative also highlighted participants’ sense of “managing” cultural situations in order to increase relational comfort or curb potential conflict related to cultural dissonance (Theme 2d). This was demonstrated by Amara’s utilization of language translation, explanation of Cambodian traditions, and offers of reassurance when she perceived Jacob’s discomfort in the presence of her family. These behaviors support the findings of Sheshadri and Knudsen-Martin (2013), who used grounded theory analysis of interviews to investigate how couples manage interracial and intercultural differences. The authors found that interracial couples tended to utilize up to four types of strategies to manage cultural differences: a) creating a “we,” b) framing differences, c) emotional maintenance, and d) positioning in relation to societal and familial context. As Amara’s case composite narrative illustrates, second generation SEAAs described various ways in which they manage racial and cultural concerns. For example, Kai shared that though she is aware of the racial and cultural differences that exist in her IRP, she focuses on other components of their relationship (i.e., framing differences):

I do see that there is a big difference in the cultures and I do know that if I was to have married a Hmong guy then my life would be different. But the funny thing is when I look at [my partner] I don’t see a White guy. I just see someone who I
Results in relation to scholarship on microaggression and prejudice. Theme 5 elucidates second generation SEAAs’ awareness of being different. Amara’s story represents a variety of situations during which second generation SEAAs felt marginalized and shamed because of how others perceived their racial and cultural identities. Many of the participants shared experiences dating to childhood. For Amara, the Americanization of her name to “Amy” when she began school is an example of the first remembered experiences in which second generation SEAAs may be “othered” by mainstream, White America. Participants also described being aware of receiving strange or meaningful looks when seen together with their WEA partners (Theme 5). Each of these scenarios is an example of a microaggression, which is defined as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional” that are hostile and derogatory (Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Turino, 2007, p. 273).

On microaggression. Sue (2010) posited that the experience of microaggression occurs as a progression of phases that comprise the microaggression process model. The experiences of this study’s participants are poignantly congruent with this model. During Phase One (Incident), “potential microaggressive incidents set in motion a chain of psychological events within recipients that may directly or indirectly effect their interpersonal interactions” (p. 69). As most microaggressions go, the shortening of Amy’s name was not likely intended to discriminate; however, it covertly communicated that her native identity was unwelcome, if not unusual (i.e., “You and your kind don’t belong here” and “If you’re going to be here, you should be more like us”). Acts such as
these unwittingly trigger the progression of a multiphasic experience that resonates through the cognitions, emotions, behaviors, and relationships of the participants who experience microaggression.

During Phase Two (Perception) of Sue’s (2010) model, recipients of microaggressive acts “attempt to determine whether an event was racially motivated or not” (p. 72). Amara’s ruminations about the behavior of others relative to herself and her IRP with Jacob reflects participants’ reports about incidents in which they often wondered about the intent of the perpetrator and the meaning behind particular looks, comments, and questions. This is followed by Phase Three (Reaction) of Sue’s (2010) model, during which “a more integrated response of the person becomes central in dealing with the offending event, the emotional turmoil, and the need for self-care” (p. 73). Reactions may include healthy paranoia, engaging a sanity check, adopting a position of empowerment and self-validation, or rescuing offenders. Amara’s questioning of her own sanity when feeling scrutinized reflects second generation SEAAs’ common responses to questionable and offending behaviors. Second generation SEAAs also endorsed rescuing perpetrators of dubious behaviors (e.g., looks, questions, and comments) with rationalizations such as, “They’re just having a bad day” or by minimizing the event (e.g., “They just don’t know any better”) (Theme 5).

It is important to note that regardless of the intent, the struggle of managing microaggressive acts lies in the mental and emotional energy that participants were forced to expend when these events occurred. Overt aggressions, such as the bullying Amara was subjected to during childhood, are intrusive; however, the straightforward manner in which they are communicated requires minimal effort to interpret. In other
words, something bad definitely happened. When it comes to microaggression, interpretation of content and intent is much more nebulous. Kelly described the mixture of thoughts she experiences when she encounters microaggressive comments about her Hmong identity:

When it happens, it happens, like, I don’t know if it’s the kind of thing where they have a malicious intent or if they are really are truly happy to have met a Hmong person and are just maybe wording it . . . not the best way. I don’t know what people’s intents are. I always assume the best of people. I accept it with a grain of salt and try to move on. But afterwards I’m like, “Oh my gosh, why didn’t I overanalyze this before?” So that’s been an issue that’s come up and I don’t want to say it happens all the time but it does happen. Sometimes I just don’t know what to do with comments like that.

During the Phase Four (Interpretation) of Sue’s (2010) model, participants attempt to ascribe meaning to microaggressive acts, which includes an act’s “significance, intension of the aggressor, and any social patterns related to it” (p. 77). Some participants reported picking up on subtle messages underlying these behaviors and which with some common microaggressive themes highlighted by Sue (2012): “You do not belong,” “you are abnormal,” and “you are not trustworthy.” If we return to the beginning of Amara’s story we can see that although Amara was unaware of the meaning of the shortening of her name as a child, it does not escape her now: “Teachers and friends began to call me ‘Amy;’ I find it hard to believe that Amara was too difficult to pronounce correctly.” Returning to Kelly’s experience of microaggressions, she reflected on a moment of similar clarity when she and her WEA partner encountered
microaggressions about their IRP:

I don’t know if I’m just being paranoid and being [in] my minority mind frame thinking that way. But it’s so difficult and . . . so mentally exhausting. And of course, I’m such an analyzer and I’m like, “Okay, so what are they staring at?” And of course I’m like, “Are they staring at me? But wait - our friends who are both White . . . [are they getting] the same reaction?” And I really don’t think they [are].

The final phase of Sue’s (2010) microaggression process model, the consequence phase, is best described as “how the microaggression impacted the individual’s behavioral patterns, coping strategies, cognitive reasoning, psychological well-being, and worldview over time” (p. 80). According to Sue (2010), consequences of microaggressions may include powerlessness, a sense of invisibility, feeling as though one must comply with the status quo, or pressure to be the token representative of one’s racialized group. Alex’s experience with microaggression reflects a sense of powerlessness experienced at the time of perpetration. She shared that it was not until she processed the following incident with her WEA partner that the underlying racism that she, a U.S.-born and educated American, received in the feedback about her writing skills:

When I was in college my faculty advisor and another faculty of mine said that they think the reason for why I had such problems in terms of my writing skills was because I was ESL student by her definition. You know my parents were not native American speakers and therefore you know I was not speaking proper grammar because of that. And if I am looking at it in an academic sense I’m like, yeah it makes sense. That by its pure definition of English as a second a language
it comes down to . . . clearly, the English I learned wasn’t necessarily the best English when you’re talking [about] my family, who doesn’t speak correct, perfect English . . . I mean let’s face it.

**On prejudice by intimates:** Notably, another prominent experience shared by second generation SEAAs was the perception of scrutiny and/or alienation by members of one’s own heritage culture or the Asian/Asian American community at large. Many participants described acts of both direct and indirect discrimination directed toward their IRPs by peers or elders with the same or similar cultural background. Amara’s incident of overhearing an Asian family’s implication that she “traded up” by partnering with a WEA is just one example of such judgment that second generation SEAAs may encounter. Study participant Kai shared that her own mother expressed concern regarding the choice to partner interracially:

She said, “The reason why I want you to marry a Hmong guy is because he already knows the culture. He already knows that if you were to help your family, he won’t question you because he already knows that when you marry your wife, you marry her family and when you marry your husband, you marry his family. And if they need help it shouldn’t be questioned.”

For Kai’s mother, dating interracially posed a perceived threat to Kai’s willingness or ability to demonstrate a culturally-expected degree of dedication to her family. This scenario corroborates literature reporting that refugee parents who sustained significant losses prior to and during the immigration process may be especially pained by perceived threats to family cohesion and dilution of culture (Ying & Han, 2007a; McKenzie-Pollock, 2005; Boehnlein et al., 1995). Moreover, this aligns with the observations of
Hibbler and Shinew (2002), who noted that interracial couples are often subjected to prejudice, discrimination, and/or racism within their own families. Although seemingly benevolent, the implicit disapproval communicated by significant others (i.e., family, friends, community) of this study’s participants regarding interracial partner choice contributed to emotional distance and a sense of alienation that shares some threads with the aforementioned othering directed by critics of American/“White” culture.

**Results in relation to scholarship on bicultural identity.** Threaded throughout Amara’s story is perhaps the most salient essential component of the lived experience of second generation SEAAs: the desire to be accepted. More specifically, second generation SEAAs described a collective desire to be honored as human beings, as well as the wish to be honored as members of the genuine family units they have created with WEA partners. Second generation SEAAs’ active search for acceptance can be best exemplified by the actions engaged toward bridging perceived social gaps between one’s identity and the norms prescribed by mainstream society. The complexity of their experience with this navigation was illustrated by Amara’s intrapsychic responses to juggling the values of the vastly different cultures in which she lived (her Cambodian/home world versus her White American/school/work world). Theme 1d (Awareness of being bicultural) sheds light on this struggle. As indicated in Chapter Two, LaFromboise’s (1993) model for bicultural competence was used as a framework to conceptualize how this study’s participants negotiated involvement in both heritage culture and mainstream American or “White” culture. This involves the extent to which bicultural individuals have knowledge of cultural beliefs and values, positive attitudes toward both the minority and majority cultures in which they live, bicultural efficacy,
communication ability, role repertoire, and groundedness in stable support networks in both cultures.

One of the ways in which second generation SEAAAs managed being bicultural in their IRPs was observed in the accommodative or “managing” behaviors they reported in the context of their interracial romantic partnerships. In the effort to increase comfort and decrease cultural dissonance, participants described engaging various behaviors that attempted to ameliorate conflict arising from the challenge of a cultural crossroads. Vance, whose experience was highlighted in Chapter Four, admitted to “managing” discomfort with cultural ambiguity in his interracial romantic partnership by avoiding conversations about cultural altogether. Other participants endorsed perceiving WEA partners’ discomfort in culturally ambiguous situations and responding with offerings of reassurance (e.g., “My family does love you”), cultural explanations (e.g., the symbolism of rituals), or language translations (e.g., at events when English is not the primary spoken language). These situations were illustrated by Amara’s response to Jacob’s self-consciousness of being “too White” when interacting with her family. These experiences substantiate the findings of Yum (2004), who evaluated the impact of culture and self-construal on responses to accommodative dilemmas in dating relationships. Yum found that among four self-construal types (bicultural, marginal, independent, and interdependent), bicultural individuals were most likely to approach relational concerns in a manner that is other-centered, relationship-enhancing, utilizes effective communication, and aimed at helping partners to save face. Relatedly, Alex described her response to husband’s bewilderment with her mother’s role in managing the guest list for their wedding:
I bring my wedding up a lot because I think there’s a lot of negotiation that goes on. That’s where I feel like you want to take a prime example of how do you navigate through this difference in terms of culture and race and everything to a whole bunch of people. I remember my husband and I were having dinner one time and he got kind of mad. “Your mom seems to be taking over this. Who are these people and why are they here? Why do we have three hundred invitations? Why two hundred-some people? Who are they?” If it was a monoracial couple both people would understand these are the customs and these are the rules and the expectations.

Alex recognized the cultural expectations that needed to be fulfilled while being sensitive to her husband’s unfamiliarity with Vietnamese traditions (e.g., the roles of family members, what determines who gets an invitation). One way in which culture is managed in her IRP is through communication of cultural explanations. In the instance of their wedding, humor was a way for Alex to facilitate this communication and she laughed even as she described mitigating her husband’s discomfort by explaining the customary wedding gifts (e.g., red envelopes containing good luck money for the newlyweds):

I’m not gonna fight over this because I am going to lose. And I understand that So-and-So has to be invited even though I have no idea who they are because they’re old friends, blah blah blah, you know, whatever. The joke of it is I have to go through it but in the end you also realize that we’re just getting envelopes and if that makes it better for you, just think of it that way.

The results of the current study are further corroborated by the findings of Vasquez (2014), who extended the limited research on the impact of biculturalism on
IRPs and engaged qualitative research methods to understand the lived experience of Latino/non-Hispanic White couples. She theorized that biculturalism is the chief cultural consequence of ethnic intermarriage and in her study, found that among four types of biculturalism (everyday biculturalism, leaning White, selective blending, and leaning Latino), everyday biculturalism was the most commonly utilized mechanism by which couples navigated ethnic identity in their relationships. Indeed, most participants in the current study who endorsed biculturalism as an active dynamic in their personal identities and their IRPs can be classified as aligning most closely with everyday biculturalism, which “is the effortless result of conjoined ethnic lives where partners casually meet in a cultural middle” (p. 395). The sharing of cultural explanations during the course of a conversation (such as the exchange between Alex and her WEA partner regarding wedding invitations) or casual engagement in ethnic cuisine and music are examples of casual, low-commitment ways in a couple participates in everyday biculturalism.

Most notably, Vasquez’s (2014) study challenged dominant discourses on race relations, particularly those within assimilation literature that reinforce ideas that ethnic identity is dichotomous (an individual can only be either American or ethnic) and that ethnic identity development is a process primarily experienced by non-Whites. The findings of the current investigation support Vasquez’s (2014) assertions by highlighting that biculturalism, as opposed to “social whitening,” is the most common outcome of interracial romantic partnership. In fact, “social browning” is a more frequent outcome that is illustrated by participants’ reports that their WEA partners value and actively seek to understand SEAA family and heritage culture. Notably, this also challenges discourse suggesting that White partners are untouched by intercultural relations. Indeed, my
findings compliment the results of Vasquez’s affirmation that for the majority of non-Hispanic White partners, “interracial relationships more often destabilize racial/ethnic boundaries as whites migrate into ethnic territory and gain racial literacy” (p. 403).

The story of Amara underscores that second generation SEAAs participants’ experience of being bicultural in the context of IRP with WEA partners is not limited to time, space, or individual experience. Rather, it is a dynamic and rich composition of events (e.g., parental refugee experiences) and individual development (e.g., early critical incidents) that preceded the relationship before evolving across time (e.g., identity development through adulthood) and situations (e.g., relationships). Moreover, participants’ awareness of their IRPs was not limited to individual experience. White European American partners were inexorably drawn into SEAAs’ racial and cultural realities. Not only did they serve as players in the personal development of the participants, it seems that they themselves undergo their own development process.

**Implications for Counseling Practice**

The results of this study offer several valuable implications for the context of counseling practice. The findings provide clinicians with a frame of reference for understanding the first-hand experiences of second generation SEAAs within several dimensions in addition to the context of IRPs with WEAs. Although this study focuses on the experience of second generation SEAAs, a very particular group defined by specificity in generational status, the youth of its participants, the immigration status of participants’ parents, and parents’ country of origin, its implications for practice with other second generation and racialized groups are valuable.

With regard to the cohort represented by this study’s participants, multiculturally
competent counseling professionals would benefit from conducting some background research on the culture and history of SEAAs. In addition to awareness of the differences between Asian American culture and mainstream White American culture, it is also prudent that counselors be aware of what makes Southeast Asian cultures different from other Asian cultures. As the results suggest, this is especially salient in terms of historical context and how parental refugee experiences potentially influence second generation SEAAs relational experiences, particularly in IRPs. Similarly, it is prudent for counselors to have an understanding of what it means to be a second generation individual; that is, a U.S.-born individual whose parents immigrated from another country. As discussed in Chapter Two, intergenerational and cross-cultural conflicts are not uncommon in refugee families and it is reasonable to predict that these conflicts may manifest in IRPs.

Effective counselors should be sensitive to where clients are located in their racial and/or ethnic identity development. The results of this study suggest that is critical for counselors to acknowledge how this may be especially salient for clients in IRPs. The occurrence of racial and/or cultural negotiations contribute to unique relational experiences that are not typical to same-race or same-culture romantic partnerships. Thus, the racial and cultural realities operating for each individual and how these may impact relational dynamics in an IRP begs for open acknowledgement and ongoing discussion.

To look only at the impact of racial and/or ethnic identity runs the risk of overlooking other elements that significantly shape a client’s identity and relational experience; identity is not confined to the intrapersonal and is sensitive to context. Effective counselors also will seek to understand clients within a historical context. Again, refugee parents’ immigration experiences had significant impact on the
participants of this study, particularly with regard to the intergenerational transmission of values that may be unique from those experienced by families of voluntary immigrants. Moreover, these historically and culturally loaded values may clash with those of WEA partners who have little to no understanding of SEA history or family context. Helpful therapeutic interventions will facilitate communication about the role of diversity in the relationship such that partners in IRPs can effectively construct a framework for navigating their differences and honor both sets of identities.

My findings also suggest that counseling professionals be sensitive to biases and stereotypes associated with IRP. Participants of this study expressed the desire for their IRPs to be accepted by society. Experiences of being perceived as different were often emotionally charged and negative. This begs for clinicians to exercise prudence in checking in with one’s own awareness of presumptions about interracial relationships, racism, and how power and oppression dynamics impact IRPs. Given that couples may exist in a context where culture differences amplify the perception of relational gaps, it will be especially important for counselors to attend carefully to how couples experience others’ perceptions about their union and to promote a therapeutic environment that supports growth and validation.

Study Critique

This study is the first known empirical exploration of the lived experience of second generation SEAAs in IRPs with WEAs and contributes to a small body of scholarship that has utilized qualitative methods to better understand IRP in general (e.g., Killian, 2013; Sheshadri & Knudson-Martin, 2013; AnhAllen & Suyemoto, 2011). This section discusses four areas that illustrate both weaknesses and strengths of this research
study: the tradeoffs associated with qualitative research methods, tradeoffs associated with the participant inclusion criteria, development of the interview protocol, and analysis of the interview data.

A qualitative research approach was deemed most appropriate for understanding the essence or meanings the participants made within this context. More specifically, the phenomenological approach facilitated a naturalistic and exploration-oriented milieu in which participants had the freedom to share stories seated in personal meaning, language, and context. Although this manner of research elicited rich and descriptive data, the very nature of subjective experience limits the ability to generalize my findings to other populations. Despite this limitation, the qualitative data serves as a valuable resource to inform future studies that may be more quantitative, and thus more generalizable, in nature. Furthermore, several verification strategies utilized through the course of the research process ensured that this study’s findings were as “trustworthy” as possible. These strategies are highlighted in the Review of the Study’s Rigor section of Chapter Three.

Another critique of this study lies in the diversity of its participants. Although the participant sample did not lack in diversity per se, disproportion of diversity was evident in the areas of gender, age, and LGBTQ identity. The representation diversity in the current participant pool had benefits in yielding shared experiences across all the participants; however, this begs questions about what the data would look like if participant diversity was different. For example, most of the participants (eight of 11) identified as women. Although I did not analyze the data with gender differences among participants in mind, it was interesting as an interviewer to experience the differences
between the male and female participants’ manner of response to the interview protocol. More specifically, I experienced the female participants as demonstrating greater comfort and confidence in discussion of topics related to racial and ethnic identity development relative to some of the males. Female participants also seemed to utilize more sophisticated language around these topics. I find myself wondering if different themes would emerge if the participants were all male or all female.

Disproportion in diversity was also evident in the variation of ages represented by all 11 participants. Specifically, there is a 16-year age gap between the youngest (age 21) and eldest (age 37) participant. I am compelled to speculate how the data might look differently if the participants were closer to each other in age. Notably, two of the three male participants were also the youngest of the 11 participants. It is possible that the seemingly less introspection with which these male discussed racial and ethnic identity development, as compared to their older female counterparts, was a reflection of their relative youth and paucity of relational experiences.

A diversity skew was also apparent with regard to sexual orientation. One participant identified as being “not heterosexual” while the remainder identified as being in other-sex partnerships. Although I did not analyze the data with sexual orientation differences among participants in mind, it is interesting to speculate if different themes would emerge if the participants were all sexual minorities or individuals with multiple identity intersections. Given that a single individual identified as being a partner in a non-heterosexual relationship, it is reasonable to wonder if a heterosexist skew exists in the data. Overall, these skews in diversity suggest that future renditions of this study may benefit from stronger participant recruitment to organizations in which underrepresented
populations participate (e.g., LGBTQ support groups, APA’s Society for the Psychological Study of Men and Masculinity).

Another element of this study that may benefit from ongoing development is the interview protocol. As I progressed through the interviews with the participants, it became clear (via real-time evaluation as well as participant feedback) that the wording of some questions was too broad or vague, making it difficult for some participants to interpret and respond in a focused manner. Chambliss and Schutt (2010) described a process called “progressive focusing” wherein the interview protocol is refined over time. The authors posit that the process of conducting interviews offers insight into which questions are more relevant than others, which should be reworded, and the types of questions that should be added to in order to access pertinent themes. Through the course of data collection, I was increasingly surprised to find that fewer participants than expected endorsed the influence of their families’ refugee backgrounds on their IRPs with WEAs. I had also expected participants to speak about the experience of perceiving racism in the context of their IRPs (i.e., intrarelational racism). In retrospect, progressive focusing would have been especially valuable tool for exploring these facets of the phenomenon of interest more closely, particularly with regard to the addition of process questions or syntax that can increase personal safety around discussion of potentially raw topics. Future endeavors to extend the current research study may benefit from engaging this process of refinement toward the goal of gleaning more specific and detailed responses from the participants.

The critique of the study I would like to emphasize is related to the process of data analysis. The processes of reflexivity and bracketing are valuable tools that help
researchers to contain connections to the phenomenon of interest toward the goal of seeing everything “freshly, as if for the first time” (Moustakas, 1994). The nature of my connection to the phenomenon of interest required diligent attention to ensuring that my interpretation of the data was reflective of participants’ experience and not my own biases. My personal relationship to the phenomenon studied in this investigation may be revisited in Chapter Three within the section entitled Reflexivity. In a concerted effort to minimize personal bias, I regularly checked in with participants during their interviews to verify that my interpretations of their statements were accurate. Moreover, I utilized the assistance of an external auditor who reviewed my initial data analysis for accuracy and clarity. Despite all care, it is difficult to affirm that I was 100% successful at adopting the role of “outsider” to the participants’ experiences. It may be useful to utilize the services of an external auditor through the entirety of data analysis, as opposed to just the initial stages, during potential future renditions of this study.

**Future Directions for Research**

This study is the first known empirical exploration of the lived experience of second generation SEAAs in IRPs with WEAs. It contributes to a surprisingly small body of scholarship that has utilized qualitative methods (e.g., Killian, 2013; Sheshadri & Knudson-Martin, 2013; AnhAllen & Suyemoto, 2011) to better understand IRP in general. Serving essentially as a pilot study, this dissertation is an effective launchpad for further inquiry including the importance of acknowledging how IRP dynamics impact the conceptualization of racial and/or ethnic identity development. The preceding critique of this study effectively sets the stage for a complementary study focusing on the lived experience of White European Americans in IRPs. There has been little research that
seeks to understand the perspective of WEAs in IRPs, particularly in regard to their own racial and ethnic identity development. Replication of the current study (correcting for its limitations and minding the new phenomenon of interest) would effectively contribute to scholarship in this regard.

My findings also compel continued exploration on the intersection of racial and cultural identity with gender. Although no overt gender-related themes emerged from the data, it was interesting as an interviewer to experience the differences between the male and female participants’ manner of response to the interview protocol. More specifically, I experienced the female participants as demonstrating greater comfort and confidence in discussion of topics related to racial and ethnic identity development relative to some of the males. Female participants also seemed to utilize more sophisticated language around these topics. As indicated by my earlier critique of the current study, however, a significant gender skew was evident in the participant pool. It will be interesting to continue the current research protocol and to sample additional men or to replicate this study utilizing a participant sample containing equal numbers of men and women.

Relatedly, although themes related to sexual orientation did not emerge from the data, it is relevant to note that the participant sample was mostly comprised of heterosexual-identified individuals. Extension of the current research to include more LGBTQ individuals will be invaluable in the potential to clarify issues related to the intersection of multiple identities.

Another point that is worthy of further exploration is broader understanding of the experience of second generation individuals in interracial partnerships with WEAs in the context of being U.S.-born children of refugees. More specifically, a study that is more
inclusive of People of Color who are second generation children of refugees from other international locales would offer rich information that may be more generalizeable across diverse groups of second generation individuals.

A final suggestion for future research is intrarelational experiences of racism (racism experienced within IRPs). Research consistently reflects the experience of racism, prejudice, and discrimination that occurs from without IRPs (directed from the general public or from within individuals’ social circles); however, no known scholarship has studied how these dynamics may manifest between partners in IRPs. Although intrarelational racism did not emerge as a notable theme in this study, the development of more specific interview questions may have supported more dialogue about this phenomenon. It would be particularly interesting to conduct a qualitative study that explores specifically how intrarelational racism may impact the racial and ethnic identity development of people of color in these unions.

**Final Reflections**

This study offers insight that contributes to scholarly literature regarding the experience of IRPs. The participants candidly shared incredibly rich and often painful stories about the journey of being second generation SEAAs in IRPs with WEA partners. These stories were threaded with joy, pain, and self-discovery. Even as I write on this reflection, I find myself tearing as I recall the intimate conversations shared with each participant, or rather, each *person*. Every individual honored me with his or her story and elicited a deep sense of shared understanding within me. In many ways, their stories were also my stories. In other ways, their stories put words to salient personal experiences I had yet to verbalize. I am moved.
My participants were also moved and I am humbled by this knowledge. The least expected outcome of this study was that the individuals contributing to this research would, through the very process of their participation, also be moved. This dissertation concludes with the voices of some of the study’s participants, who shared the following final thoughts with me during our final meetings together. These participants shared that they, too, were irrevocably changed by the process of this research. If this study serves as a tapestry that tells a story, the following thought-strands weave together to form the binding edge of its fabric.

Bryn described how her participation in this study transformed her reluctance to engage with her heritage culture. Since our first meeting, Bryn has since married and traveled to Cambodia with her partner and his family:

I feel like I’ve changed in my openness about learning about my culture since we last spoke. When we first talked, I was at a place where I was very closed-off from knowing about my ethnic culture. I wasn’t very interested and I wasn’t really very proud of my culture. Now - and I think this is related to visiting Cambodia - I’m definitely a lot more open and proud. And I have a new sense of appreciation for my family and their experiences back in Cambodia and in moving here and so that’s been a big shift big. And I feel excited that I had this experience. I think about my culture differently now. I understand our relationship differently, too. And it was even more powerful that my partner and his parents were able to experience that too. I am realizing how our relationship is impacted by culture and how we’re not alone in these experiences. That was cool. Your research and [my] participating in the interview has definitely integrated into my
own self-awareness, and that’s been really helpful to my personal growth and my professional development, too.

After reading a synopsis of the findings of this study, Kai said, “I feel lucky to be a part of this. It’s helped me to reflect and go deeper with experiences, to try to see things more accurately, to see my progression and progression of my family.”

Taylor shared that the process of sharing her story for this study helped her to find the language to describe meaningful experiences in her IRP:

It was a revelation to learn that about myself through exposure to another culture. And I didn’t even have the ability to verbalize this until the interview [with you]. This process was really impactful. The interview helped me to verbalize my realization how strong my culture was.

For Alex, participation in this study evoked a process of self-reflection on what it means to be an Asian American woman:

One thing that has come up since last I last spoke to you . . . is the idea of who we are as Asian American women and what does that mean? How does that, in turn, reflect back onto how we identify as Asian American women, the meaning of this and how this impacts how we identify or more specifically, who we are individually within that [label].

These are things I never thought about before. How do I look at myself as being an Asian American woman in this marriage? How is being part of this interracial relationship impact how I identify, especially now that I have a biracial child?

What that mean in terms of how we will help our children identify who they are? In our last conversation, Val said, “I’m glad this story is being told, that our
voices are being heard.”

Tory said simply but wholeheartedly, “I’m glad you’re doing this.”
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Appendix A

Network Contact Email Text
Dear (Name of Contact)

My name is Sophia Rath and I am a doctoral candidate at Western Michigan University studying counseling psychology. I am conducting research for my dissertation about U.S.-born Southeast Asian Americans’ experience of interracial partnerships with White European Americans. This is a new area of research in which I am eager to learn more about what it is like for U.S.-born Southeast Asian Americans to be in a relationship with a partner of White European American background. I am also interested in how factors related to being a U.S.-born Southeast Asian American influence one’s experience of the partnership.

I am looking for participants who meet the following criteria:
1. Identify as Southeast Asian American of Cambodian, Vietnamese, and/or Hmong/Mien heritage.
2. Both parents are Southeast Asian refugees of Cambodian, Vietnamese, and/or Hmong/Mien heritage. *By refugee, I refer to individuals who left their home country due to dangerous and/or persecutory circumstances.*
3. Are at least 18 years of age.
5. Are currently in a committed interracial partnership (dating, cohabitating, or married) with a White European American and have been in this partnership for at least one year.

If you know any individuals who fit these criteria and may be interested in participating in this research, please share the attached invitation. It contains information about how this study will be conducted. Also, feel free to distribute this invitation widely. You may post and/or forward this invitation to any relevant newsletters or websites, print the invitation and post it as a flyer, or to make copies for distribution.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me by email (sophia.k.rath@wmich.edu) or phone (269.870.0778).

Thank you for your time and support,

Sophia K. Rath, M.S.
Doctoral Candidate and Student Researcher
Western Michigan University
Department of Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology
Appendix B

Recruitment Invitation
Greetings!

My name is Sophia Rath and I am a doctoral candidate at Western Michigan University studying counseling psychology. I am conducting research for my dissertation study about U.S.-born Southeast Asian Americans’ experience of interracial partnerships with White European Americans. I am eager to learn more about what it is like for you to be in a relationship with a partner of a different racial and ethnic background (i.e., White European American). I would also like to learn how factors related to being a U.S.-born Southeast Asian American influence your experience of the partnership. I myself am a U.S.-born Southeast American whose parents were refugees from Cambodia. I often wonder if my own partnerships with White European individuals have been significantly impacted by experiences I’ve had growing up and as an adult who identifies as a U.S.-born Southeast Asian American from a refugee family.

I am looking for participants who meet the following criteria:

1. You are a Southeast Asian American man or woman of Cambodian, Vietnamese, and/or Hmong/Mien heritage.
2. Both your parents are Southeast Asian refugees of Cambodian, Vietnamese, and/or Hmong/Mien heritage. By refugee, I refer to individuals who left their home country due to dangerous and/or persecutory circumstances.
3. You are at least 18 years of age.
4. You were born in the United States.
5. You are currently in a committed interracial partnership (dating, cohabitating, or married) with a White European American and have been in this partnership for at least one year.

Regardless of whether or not you meet the criteria, please consider forwarding this message to others you know who do meet the criteria and may also be interested to participate.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be involved in two meetings. The first meeting will consist of a screening interview, background questionnaire, and an audio and/or video recorded in-depth interview. These activities will last approximately 1 ½ - 2 hours. The second meeting will occur a few months later and will last approximately 1 hour. This second meeting will involve a follow-up interview during which we will discuss the results of my initial data analysis. You will also have the opportunity to share additional thoughts and feelings you have had since the first interview. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may choose to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or prejudice.

Individuals who complete participation in this study will be offered a $25 gift card to a local restaurant at the end of the second meeting. Individuals who do not complete the study will not be offered compensation for their participation.

If you would like to be considered for participation in this study, please send me an email expressing your interest at sophia.k.rath@wmich.edu as soon as possible. We will then
set up a convenient time for me to call you so I can personally introduce myself to you. Please also feel free to distribute this email to anyone you think might meet the aforementioned criteria and may be interested in participating.

Thank you for your time and support,

Sophia K. Rath, M.S.
Doctoral Candidate and Student Researcher
Western Michigan University
Department of Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology
Appendix C

APA Division Contact Person Email Text
Dear (APA Division Contact)

My name is Sophia Rath and I am a doctoral candidate at Western Michigan University studying counseling psychology. I am writing to request the contact information of the moderator for your division’s listserv. I am currently in the participant recruitment stage of my dissertation study about U.S.-born Southeast Asian Americans’ experience of interracial partnerships with White European Americans.

I have determined that your division membership may be composed of individuals who would be interested in participating in my research as participants, or who know other individuals who might be interested in participating. I would like to consult your division listserv moderator about distributing a recruitment document to your division membership. The document contains an invitation and information about how this study will be conducted. It is my hope that individuals who fit my inclusion criteria will contact me about participating in my research.

If you have any questions or concerns about this message, please feel free to contact me and I will be happy to speak with you. You can contact me by email (sophia.k.rath@wmich.edu) or phone (269.870.0778).

Thank you for your time and support,

Sophia K. Rath, M.S.
Doctoral Candidate and Student Researcher
Western Michigan University
Department of Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology
Appendix D

Listserv Moderator Email Text
Dear (Listserv Moderator)

My name is Sophia Rath and I am a doctoral candidate at Western Michigan University studying counseling psychology. I am conducting research for my dissertation study about U.S.-born Southeast Asian Americans’ experience of interracial partnerships with White European Americans. This is a new area of research in which I am eager to learn more about what it is like to be in a relationship with a partner of a different racial and ethnic background (i.e., White European American), and how factors related to being a U.S.-born Southeast Asian American influence one’s experience of the partnership.

I have determined that your division membership may be composed of individuals who may be interested in participating in my research as participants, or who know other individuals who may be interested in participating.

I am looking for participants who meet the following criteria:
1. Identify as Southeast Asian American men or women of Cambodian, Vietnamese, and/or Hmong/Mien heritage.
2. Both parents are Southeast Asian refugees of Cambodian, Vietnamese, and/or Hmong/Mien heritage. By refugee, I refer to individuals who left their home country due to dangerous and/or persecutory circumstances.
3. Are at least 18 years of age.
5. Are currently in a committed interracial partnership (dating, cohabitating, or married) with a White European American and have been in this partnership for at least one year.

I am hoping you may assist me in my participant recruitment process by disseminating information about my study to the members of your division’s listserv. The attached recruitment document contains an invitation and information about how this study will be conducted. I would appreciate if you would copy this information into a message and post it to your division’s listserv.

If you have any questions or concerns about this message, please contact me by email (sophia.k.rath@wmich.edu) or phone (269.870.0778) and I will be happy to talk with you.

Thank you for your time and support,

Sophia K. Rath, M.S.
Doctoral Candidate and Student Researcher
Western Michigan University
Department of Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology
Appendix E

Schedule Phone Introduction Email Text
Hello (Prospective Participant Name),

Thank you so much for your interest in participating in my dissertation study about U.S.-born Southeast Asian Americans’ experience of interracial partnerships with White European Americans. I would like to set up a convenient time for me to phone you so that I can introduce myself to you more personally. We will also talk about my study in more detail if you are still interested in being a participant and schedule our first interview.

For your convenience I have attached an Informed Consent Form to this message. It contains information about my study, explains the potential the benefits and risks associated with participation, and information regarding the protection of your confidentiality. Do not sign this form until we have a chance to discuss it at our first interview.

Please respond to this message by emailing me to let me know what day(s) and time(s) work best for us to chat for about 20 minutes on the phone. It would probably be easiest on you to give me a few time options to choose from. I will then email you back with a day and time that seems to work best for both of us to talk on the phone. My email address is sophia.k.rath@wmich.edu.

I look forward to hearing from you,

Sophia K. Rath, M.S.
Doctoral Candidate and Student Researcher
Western Michigan University
Department of Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology
Appendix F

Informed Consent Form
INFORMED CONSENT

Project: Understanding U.S.-born Southeast Asian Americans’ Lived Experience of Interracial Partnerships with White European Americans

Principal Investigator: Dr. James M. Croteau, Ph.D.

Student Investigator: Sophia K. Rath, M.S.

You have been invited to participate in a research project titled “Understanding U.S.-born Southeast Asian Americans’ Lived Experience of Interracial Partnerships with White European Americans.” This project will serve as Sophia K. Rath’s dissertation for the requirements of the Ph.D. in counseling psychology. This consent document will explain the purpose of this research project, the time commitments, the procedures used in the study, and the risks and benefits of participating in this research project. Please read this consent form carefully and feel free ask any questions if you need more clarification.

What are we trying to find out in this study?
Although a growing body of scholarship exists about interracial partnerships, there is limited research that asks individuals about their personal experiences of these partnerships in a qualitative, open-ended manner. Even less is known about the experiences of U.S.-born Southeast Asian Americans in interracial partnerships. This study seeks to explore these gaps by asking you, a self-identified U.S.-born Southeast Asian American, questions about how you experience being in an interracial relationship with a White European American and what factors may impact your experience.

Who can participate in this study?
In order to be eligible to participate in this study you must meet ALL of the following criteria:

- You are a Southeast Asian American man or woman of Cambodian, Vietnamese, and/or Hmong/Mien heritage.
- Both of your parents are Southeast Asian refugees of Cambodian, Vietnamese, and/or Hmong/Mien heritage. By refugee I refer to individuals who left their home country due to dangerous and/or persecutory circumstances.
- You are at least 18 years of age.
- You were born in the United States.
- You are currently in a committed interracial partnership (dating, cohabitating, or married) with a White European American and have been in this partnership
for at least one year.

You are not eligible to participate in this study if you do not meet the aforementioned criteria, or if you have a current hierarchical relationship with the investigators (e.g., supervisor-supervisee, instructor-student, etc.).

**Where will this study take place?**
Your participation will occur in a mutually agreed upon and private location where you will be comfortable doing an audio and/or video-recorded interview with me. Based on our agreement, data collection interviews will be either in-person, via Skype (an internet-based application that allows for video conferencing), or via phone.

**What is the time commitment for participating in this study?**
Participants will be involved in two meetings. The first meeting will involve an in-depth, open-ended interview that will last approximately 1½ - 2 hours. A few months later after the preliminary data has been collected and analyzed, you will be invited to a Follow Up Meeting to go over my findings and share any other information related to your experiences. The follow meeting will last approximately 1 hour. Overall, I estimate that you will be offering approximately 2.5 - 3 hours of your time, in addition to any time spent corresponding with me through email or phone about scheduling.

**What will you be asked to do if you choose to participate in this study?**
During our first scheduled meeting I will verify that you meet the aforementioned criteria to verify your eligibility to participate in this study. If you fit the inclusion criteria and consent to participate in this study, I will continue by asking you some background questions. I will then conduct an in-depth, open-ended interview that will be audio and/or video recorded for transcription purposes. This first meeting will last between 1½ to 2 hours. During the interview you will be asked to respond openly to a series of questions that will help me to understand your experience of being a U.S.-born Southeast Asian American in an interracial partnership with a White European American. Some of the things I am trying to understand are: What it is like to be in your relationship, how you understand yourself/your partner/your environment in the context of this relationship, what kinds of meaningful interactions occur between you and your partner, what kind of meaningful reactions occur within yourself, and how you perceive these experiences to be influenced by your identity as a U.S.-born Southeast Asian American. I will also ask if your partner might be interested in being a part of a potential future study focusing on White European Americans in interracial partnerships.

A few months later and after the data from your first interview has been initially analyzed, I will invite you to a Follow Up Interview to go over my findings. This meeting will last approximately 1 hour. Three things will happen during this meeting:

1) We will go over my overall findings derived from all of my participant interviews to capture as accurately as possible the important aspects of being U.S.-born Southeast Asian Americans in interracial partnerships with White European Americans.
2) You will have the opportunity to provide corrections or additional clarification regarding these findings. You will also be welcome to offer new information about your own experience that may have surfaced since our first meeting. You might also have some reactions to my presentation of the data during the Follow Up Interview and I will welcome you to share those thoughts as well. The Follow Up Interview will be audio and/or video-recorded as was our Interview Meeting.

3) I will ask you if you partner has expressed interested in taking part in a potential future study focusing on White European American participants. If so, I will collect your partner’s contact information if it is offered with your partner’s consent.

**What information is being measured during the study?**
The data collected through individual interviews with each participant will be used for data analysis.

**What are the risks of participating in this study and how will these risks be minimized?**
There are a few risks associated with participation in this study. First, strong feelings may arise when reflecting on your partnership, and some of these feelings might be uncomfortable. You may also have difficulty discussing personal experiences with someone you do not know well. If at any time during the interview process you become uncomfortable with particular questions, you may choose to not answer at your discretion. Furthermore, if you decide that you no longer wish to participate in the study, you are entitled to discontinue participation, without penalty, at any time.

Additionally, participating in this study requires your time and may be considered an inconvenience. I welcome you to contact me if the need arises to reschedule or cancel any of our meetings. Finally, there is an intention that this research will contribute to the greater body of scholarship. Any presentations and/or publications resulting from this research may include elements from individual participant responses. If, for any reason, other individuals become privy to these presentations/publications (e.g., if your partner reads about the study after its completion), there is a minimal chance that they may be able to make inferences to the identities of participants. The researchers will take great care to remove any identifying information used in a public forum to minimize the chances of participant identification.

**What are the benefits of participating in this study?**
You may find your participation in this study to be personally beneficial. It is possible that answering interview questions will help you to learn more about yourself, prompt you to reflect more deeply about your experiences, and see things from a new perspective. It is also possible that you may not benefit in this way. The primary benefit of your participation is to help the researcher learn more about what it is like for U.S.-born Southeast Asian Americans to be in interracial partnerships with White European Americans. This research may be a significant contribution to the literature on interracial partnerships. This research may also have implications for counselors-in-training.
Additionally, this research may benefit clinicians who work with individuals and couples in similar relationships.

**Are there any costs associated with participating in this study?**
There is no financial cost associated with your participation in this study.

**Is there any compensation for participating in this study?**
Individuals who complete participation in this study will be offered a $25 gift card at the end of the Follow Up Interview. Individuals who do not complete the study will not be offered compensation for their participation.

**Who will have access to the information collected during this study?**
Careful consideration will be exercised to ensure that your identity and all data related to your participation in this study will be kept confidential. Your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law and the Code of Ethics for Psychologists (American Psychological Association, 2002). The only limit to this confidentiality is if you report being a danger to yourself or others, or if the release of information is required by a court of law. If this information is disclosed, the proper individuals will be notified as specified by legal and ethical codes.

To protect your identity, all data will be de-identified and your identity will not be connected to your responses in any way. For example, any information containing your real name will be replaced with a pseudonym and any other potentially identifiable information will be replaced by general descriptors. Thus, in the event that exact quotations are be used when the study’s findings are reported (e.g., dissertation manuscript, other published manuscripts, and/or poster presentation form), the ability to identify you is minimized.

Any collected data (e.g., tapes/recordings, field notes, and transcripts) will be stored in a locked container housed in a secure, confidential location. Informed consent documents and documentation that connect your real name with your pseudonym will be stored separately from the data materials in a separate secure location before data analysis begins. These will be stored in a sealed envelope in the office of my advisor Dr. James M. Croteau; his office is securely locked when he is not present.

Additionally, all transcription documents will be encrypted throughout the entire research process to ensure the safety of the data. Access to any research-related materials will be limited only to me, my advisor, an auditor, any authorized research assistants, members of my dissertation committee, and the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB).

Pending the successful completion of this study, all transcription documents originally stored and encrypted on my computer will be transferred to a password-protected flash drive; this flash drive will be stored along with the informed consent documents in the office of Dr. Croteau. In accordance with federal laws and the Code of Ethics for Psychologists (American Psychological Association, 2002), data will be retained for at
least 3 years after the study has been completed. However, after transcription has occurred the recorded media will be erased immediately.

**What if you want to stop participating in this study?**
Your participation in this research is completely voluntary and you are under no obligation to participate. You also have the right to withdraw your participation from this study at any point in time without prejudice or penalty by contacting me by email at sophia.k.rath@wmich.edu or by phone at 269.870.0778. The investigators can also decide to stop your participation in the study without your consent.

**Contact Persons**
If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please contact the principal student investigator by email (sophia.k.rath@wmich.edu) or phone (269.870.0778). You may also contact my advisor, Dr. James M. Croteau, at james.croteau@wmich.edu. You may also contact the chair of Western Michigan University’s Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at 269.387.8293 or the Vice President of Research at 269.387.8298 if questions or problems arise during the course of the study. The HSIRB at Western Michigan University has approved this consent document for use for one year, as indicated by the stamped date and signature of the board chair in the upper right corner. Do not participate in this study if the stamped date is older than one year.

**What To Do With This Consent Form**
If you have read the contents of this form and are willing to volunteer for this research, please sign and date below when you are instructed to do so. You may keep a copy of this form for your records. Email this document as an attachment directly to:

Sophia Rath, M.S.
sophia.k.rath@wmich.edu

Or, you may mail a hard copy to:

Sophia K. Rath
3015 Staten Avenue #2
Lansing, MI 48910

I have read this informed consent document and the risks and benefits of participation in this study have been explained to me. I agree to take part in this study.

__________________________  ________________________
Signature                        Date
Printed name
Appendix G

Confirm Scheduled Phone Introduction Email Text
Hello (Prospective Participant Name),

Thank you for getting back to me about scheduling our phone introduction.

Based on your availability, it looks like (insert date and time) is the best time for us to talk. This conversation should take approximately 20 minutes. During this time I will introduce myself and talk in more detail about my study. If you are still interested in participating, we will also schedule the day and time of our first interview.

If for some reason you must reschedule this phone introduction, feel free to email me at sophia.k.rath@wmich.edu and I will be happy to set up another time with you. Otherwise, I look very forward to our phone introduction.

Warmly,

Sophia K. Rath, M.S.
Doctoral Candidate and Student Researcher
Western Michigan University
Department of Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology
Appendix H

Phone Introduction and Scheduling of Interview Meeting Script
Hello (Prospective Participant Name),

My name is Sophia Rath and I am a doctoral candidate at Western Michigan University studying counseling psychology. Thank you for your interest in participating in my dissertation study about U.S.-born Southeast Asian Americans’ experience of interracial partnerships with White European Americans. I am eager to learn about what it is like for you to be in a relationship with a partner of a different racial and cultural background (i.e., White European American). I would also like to learn how factors related to being a U.S.-born Southeast Asian American influence your experience of the partnership. I myself am a U.S.-born Southeast American whose parents were refugees from Cambodia. I often wonder if my own partnerships with White European individuals have been significantly impacted by experiences I’ve had growing up and as an adult who identifies as a U.S.-born Southeast Asian American from a refugee family.

First of all, let me ask if you have reviewed the inclusion criteria in the Informed Consent Form I sent to you. Do you meet the list of requirements for participation in this study?

1. Are you a Southeast Asian American man or woman of Cambodian, Vietnamese, and/or Hmong/Mien heritage?
2. Are BOTH your parents Southeast Asian refugees of Cambodian, Vietnamese, and/or Hmong/Mien heritage? By refugee, I refer to individuals who left their home country due to dangerous and/or persecutory circumstances.
3. Are you at least 18 years of age?
4. Were you born in the United States?
5. Are you currently in a committed, long-term interracial partnership (dating, cohabitating, or married) with a White European American and have been in this partnership for at least one year?

[If criteria are met] It sounds like you would be a great candidate for my study. Let me continue explaining the process to you. [Proceed]

[If criteria are not met] Unfortunately, you do not meet the eligibility requirements for participation in this study. I would like to thank you very much for working with me up to this point. I wish you the best and hope you enjoy the rest of your day. [End call]

If you are still interested, the research process will involve two interview meetings. I would like to set up the first meeting with you at the end of this phone call. I want you to know that even if you confirm a meeting with me today, you have the choice of withdrawing from the study at any point in time if you so wish.

I will begin the first meeting by reviewing the Informed Consent Form that I sent you before. This form describes the purpose and goals of the study, the details about your
participation, what I will do to protect your confidentiality, and potential risks and benefits of your participation. You are welcome at any point during the research process to bring up any questions/concerns you might have.

If you consent to participate, I will then turn on my audio and/or video-recording equipment. I will ask you some background questions and then begin the in-depth interview. During the in-depth interview I will ask you some open-ended questions about your experience of being a U.S.-born Southeast Asian American in an interracial partnership with a White European American. I anticipate that this first interview will last between 1½ and 2 hours.

A few months after the first interview and after I have completed my initial data analysis, I will contact you to schedule a second interview. This second interview will also be audio and/or video-recorded. During this interview I will present my initial data analysis so that you might add any clarification about the data and/or share additional thoughts and feelings you have had since the first interview. The second interview will last approximately 1 hour.

Before I continue, can I answer any questions and/or concerns you have at this point?

[If no, proceed to next question]

[If yes, address questions/concerns. Proceed to next question.]

At this time, are you still interested in being a participant in this study?

[If no] Thank you very much for taking the time to talk to me. Enjoy the rest of your day
[End call]

[If yes] Thank you. I would like to schedule a day and time for our first interview. First of all, where are you located?

[If prospective participant lives within driving distance] It sounds like you are within driving distance of me and would be happy to travel to where you are and meet with you in person. Where would you like to meet that will be comfortable for you to do a recorded interview with me? [Confirm address and contact information]

[If prospective participant does not live within driving distance or prefers Skype or phone interview] It sounds like meeting by Skype or phone might be a good option for us. Do you have reliable access to a computer/laptop with a camera and Internet access at a location where you would be comfortable to do a recorded interview with me?

[If yes, proceed with scheduling and ask for Skype contact information. Confirm that I]
will initiate contact.]

[If no, schedule interview via phone and confirm phone number. Confirm that I
will
initiate contact]

Thank you for taking the time out of your day to talk to me. Two days before our first
interview I will email you a reminder to confirm the day and time of our appointment. In
the meantime I will email you a Study Information Bundle that contains another copy of
the Informed Consent Form and an Opt Out Form. Please read the instructions I will
include with these forms. You must have the Informed Consent form on hand during our
first meeting.

I look forward to speaking with you again.
Appendix I

Study Information Bundle Email Text
Dear (Prospective Participant Name),

Thank you for expressing interest to participate in my dissertation study about U.S.-born Southeast Asian Americans’ experience of interracial partnerships with White European Americans. Attached to this email is the Informed Consent Form that I discussed with you during our last phone conversation. Also attached to this email is an Opt Out Form.

Please take a moment to read the Informed Consent Form. You will have the opportunity to address any questions and/or concerns during the Interview Meeting. If you have any questions/concerns you would like addressed before this meeting, please feel free to contact me.

If we have planned to meet in-person, I will bring a hardcopy of the Informed Consent Form for you to sign and submit to me if you choose to participate in my study.

If we have planned to meet via Skype or phone, at our meeting please have the Informed Consent Form open on your computer. If you choose to participate in my study, I will be asking you to type your name onto the form where indicated, save the document, then email it to me as an attachment to sophia.k.rath@wmich.edu.

If at any time you decide that you are no longer interested in being a part of the study, you may opt out by using the enclosed Opt Out Form. Just copy and paste the text to an email, type your name in the blank, and send to me at sophia.k.rath@wmich.edu. You can also call me at 269.870.0778. This will communicate that you wish to cancel any scheduled meetings and that you do not wish to be contacted any further.

Again, thank you for your interest and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Sophia K. Rath, M.S.
Doctoral Candidate and Student Researcher
Western Michigan University
Department of Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology
Appendix J

Opt Out Form
To use this form, please type your name in the blank. Then copy and paste the paragraph onto an email that you will send to me at sophia.k.rath@wmich.edu.

I, (printed name) ____________________________, no longer wish to be considered for participation in the study titled “Understanding U.S.-born Southeast Asian Americans’ Lived Experience of Interracial Partnerships with White European Americans.” Please cancel any scheduled meetings and do not contact me further.
Appendix K

Reschedule Phone Introduction Message Script
Hello (Prospective Participant Name),

This is Sophia Rath and I am calling for our scheduled phone appointment to talk about my dissertation study about U.S.-born Southeast Asian Americans’ experience of interracial partnerships with White European Americans. I am sorry to have missed you. If you could please call me back at 269.870.0778 or email me at sophia.k.rath@wmich.edu I would appreciate the opportunity to reschedule our appointment. I look very forward to speaking with you.
Appendix L

Reminder About Scheduled Informed Consent/Interview Meeting Email Text
Dear (Participant Name)

This is just a quick reminder that we are scheduled to meet (insert date; time; and if in-person, Skype, or phone) to discuss my dissertation study about U.S.-born Southeast Asian Americans’ experience of interracial partnerships with White European Americans. If you consent to participate, we will also do an interview. Please have the Informed Consent Form, which was sent to you in a prior email, on hand during this meeting. If we are meeting in-person, I will bring you a hardcopy. If we are meeting via Skype or phone, please have the document open and ready to access on a computer. I look very forward to speaking with you.

Warmly,
Sophia K. Rath, M.S.
Doctoral Candidate and Student Researcher
Western Michigan University
Department of Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology
Appendix M

Interview Meeting Script
Introduction

Hello (Potential Participant Name),

First of all, thank you for your interest in participating in my study titled “Understanding U.S.-born Southeast Asian Americans’ Lived Experience of Interracial Partnerships with White European Americans.”

Before we begin, I would like you to know that if you have any questions or concerns that I can address at any point during this meeting and the remainder of the study, please feel free to let me know.

Do you have the Informed Consent Form with you? Let us go over it together. [Review document. Occasionally ask if there are questions/concerns and again at the end]

Now that we have gone over the Informed Consent Form, do you consent to be a part of this study?

[If yes and meeting in person] Then please sign where indicated at the bottom of the Informed Consent Form where indicated. [Collect signed copy and give the participant his/her own copy for their records.] We will now continue with the next portion of the meeting.

[If yes and meeting via Skype or phone] Please type your name and date in the boxes indicated on the form. These boxes will expand as you type. Then save this form and send me a copy as an email attachment to sophia.k.rath@wmich.edu. We will now continue with the next portion of the meeting.

[If no] I would like to thank you very much for working with me up to this point. I wish you the best and hope you enjoy the rest of your day. [End call/meeting]  

We are now at the point where I would like to begin recording our meeting. If you don’t mind, please give me a moment to set up my equipment.

[Begin recording]

Today’s date is (date). (Participant’s name) and I have just completed the informed consent process. (Participant’s name), please affirm that you have signed the form electronically or in person, have submitted it to me, and that you agree to being recorded by stating, “I agree.”

If at any time you feel uncomfortable with being recorded, please let me know and I will stop recording immediately. I would also like to remind you that if at any time you become uncomfortable with particular questions, you may choose to not answer questions at your discretion. Furthermore, if you decide that you no longer wish to participate in the study, you are entitled to discontinue participation, without prejudice or penalty, at any
time.

Background Questionnaire

I am now going to ask you some questions to understand your background. I am interested in having a diversity of participants in my study. In a few sentences, please me how you would describe your multicultural identity.

Current relationship
How long have you been in your current partnership [year(s)/months]? ________________

What is the nature of your partnership?
☐ Dating
☐ Cohabitating
☐ Domestic partnership
☐ Married/civil union

Do you and your partner consider yourselves to be in a committed partnership?
☐ Yes
☐ No

Have you met your partner’s friends?
☐ Yes
☐ No

Have you met your partner’s family?
☐ Yes
☐ No

Demographics

Age: ________________

How do you describe your gender?
☐ Male
☐ Female
☐ Transgendered
☐ Other:
How do you describe your sexual orientation?:
☐ Heterosexual
☐ Gay
☐ Lesbian
☐ Bisexual
☐ Other

Ethnicity: ____________________________

Parents’ country of origin: ____________________________

Conditions surrounding parents’ refugee status upon entry in the U.S.: __________

☐ I don’t know

Year your parents arrived in the U.S.: __________

Where were you born (city/state)? ____________________________

Please describe your employment status or describe what you do: __________

What is your highest level of education?:
☐ Did not complete high school
☐ Completed high school
☐ Completed 2-year/Associate’s degree
☐ Completed undergraduate/Bachelor’s degree
☐ Completed graduate/Master’s/Doctoral degree
☐ Currently a student (what year of study are you in): __________

Estimated household income (please check one):
☐ Under $10,000
☐ $10,000 - $19,000
☐ $20,000 - $29,000
☐ $30,000 - $39,000
☐ $40,000 - $49,000
☐ above $50,000
In-Depth Interview

I am now going to begin the in-depth interview. I am going to ask you some open-ended questions about your experience of being a U.S.-born Southeast Asian American in an interracial partnership with a White European American. Feel free to respond to my questions as openly as you wish. There are no right or wrong answers. I am interested in you reflecting on what is meaningful for you in the context of your own awareness and experiences. During the course of the interview I might make comments or ask clarification questions meant to help deepen your reflection on our conversation.

Let’s begin.

1. What is it like to be you, a U.S.-born Southeast Asian American, in an interracial partnership with a White European American?

Possible probes/process questions
• What are your feelings associated with being in this relationship? How may have these feelings evolved/changed through the course of your relationship?
• How do you think about yourself in the context of this relationship? How have these thoughts evolved/changed through the course of your relationship?
• How do you think about your partner in the context of this relationship? As you think of this question, you might consider how you feel impacted by what you think it is like to be him/her in this relationship. How have these thoughts evolved/changed through the course of your relationship?
• How do you think about your environment in the context of this relationship? As you think about this question, you might think about how you think your family, friends, community, and/or society experience your relationship. How have these thoughts evolved/changed through the course of your relationship?

2. What kinds of meaningful experiences, events, or stories come to mind as you reflect on your interracial partnership with a White European American? As you consider this question, you might think about the challenges and/or rewards you have experienced through the course of your partnership.

Possible probes/process questions
• Tell me more about what has come up for you personally.
• Tell me more about what you feel has come up for you as a couple.

3. How do you think that being a U.S.-born Southeast Asian American from a refugee family has impacted your experiences within your interracial partnership?
Possible probes/process questions

- How do you feel that your experiences might be different from those experienced by people who are not U.S.-born Southeast Asian Americans from refugee families?
- How do you feel that your experiences might be different than those experienced by other types of couples?

4. What would you like to share with other U.S.-born Southeast Asian Americans who are in interracial partnerships with White European Americans?

5. What would you like to share with others at large about the experience of being a U.S.-born Southeast Asian American in interracial partnerships with White European American?

6. Is there anything else you would like to share with me that we have not talked about? To really understand your experience, what do you feel is the most important thing about our discussion that I should focus on?

7. There is a possibility that I will conduct a future study that focuses on White European American partners in interracial partnerships. If your partner might be interested in participating in this potential study, please feel free to forward share my email and/or phone number so s/he can forward me their contact information, if they wish. You can also share your partner’s contact information with me at our next meeting, if s/he consents.

This concludes our interview and our first meeting. During the next few months I will analyze the data from this interview. After my initial data analysis I will mail you a synopsis of my findings and contact you to schedule a Follow Up Meeting to go over these findings. The Follow Up Meeting will conclude your participation in this study. I would like to thank you very much for working with me up to this point. I look forward to speaking with you again and hope you enjoy the rest of your day.
Appendix N

Collective Themes and Essence Synopsis
Collective themes represented across the study sample of 11 U.S.-born Southeast Asian Americans in interracial romantic partnerships with White European Americans

I. **Reactions (e.g. thoughts/feelings/behaviors) about racial/cultural identity (11)**

In the context of their interracial partnerships, U.S.-born Southeast Asian Americans:

- Positive feelings about identifying with heritage and placing value on aspects of heritage culture (8). For example:
  - “I consider myself Asian American. Specifically, Vietnamese American.”
  - “I’m trying to record my mom’s sayings on my MacBook because I feel like it’s part of the culture, the various adages. And I feel like it’s missing in our American culture, not teaching adages to the kids nowadays.”
  - “[My culture is] something that I wish I did know and hang on to. I do wish I knew my culture better, I wish I knew my language better.”

- Feel negatively about identifying with heritage and struggle with expectations of heritage culture (7). For example:
  - “I was very, very disappointed and upset about my culture. The reason why we have so much drama in the first place is because we have these expectations that we need to meet and if they’re not met then all hell breaks loose.
  - “I think my experience with the culture is associated more with trauma than it is with something that I would be proud of because my experience with Cambodian culture, I felt, was too restricting for me as an individual.”

- Feel positively about identifying with mainstream American culture and value parts of being culturally American or “White” (6). For example:
  - “I consider myself Americanized because I was, you know, born here. I guess that might be why I identify the most with the culture my [partner] comes from.”
  - “American culture [taught] me also that I do have voice, I do have a choice. It has made me a more uh open person and a stronger woman too. I am aware that I am confident . . . able to speak my mind and stuff like that. I wouldn’t be where I am today if I wasn’t to have been born in the United States.”

- Are aware of being bicultural and managing expectations of both heritage culture and being culturally American or “White” (6). For example:
  - “I immediately identify with being a Hmong woman. Of course, with also being an American there are times when there are some conflicting, I guess, issues that may like kind of be on the border of both worlds.”
  - “You’re almost living, like, a dual life. You have to be Hmong but at the same time, you have to be American.”

2. **Common relationship experiences (11)**

In the context of their interracial partnerships, U.S.-born Southeast Asian Americans:

- Experience specifically advantages and gains that are perceived as personally and/or relationally enhancing (8). For example:
“When I think of evolving in our relationship, I think most about how I’ve opened up with communication. For the past few years when we first started dating I wasn’t really big on communication unless I was upset. I didn’t really like to talk about it and even when I was really excited or happy about something I couldn’t really talk about that either or talk about emotions.”

“It’s kinda cool being in an interracial relationship because I really see how Vietnamese I am and all this time I thought I was White, Americanized. But I really do see how strong my upbringing was and I do like I really like the way we respect our elders and parents. I think that that’s lost a lot, that kind of thing is lost in our society.”

- Have experiences that are challenging and elicit negative feelings (9). For example:
  - “When I was first introduced to [my partner’s] family . . . I was very concerned about how they would take it that I wasn’t White.”
  - “I’d say a lot of couples . . . they have the same beliefs, they’re from the same culture. But being in a relationship where two cultures are totally different . . . I think that’s one of the biggest challenges I think that we face compared to other couples.”

- Believe that each partner’s culture is valued and actively integrated into the partnership (6). For example:
  - “If my parents have a ritual or a gathering . . . I expect him to be there. [My partner] still has a role. I expect him to be with the guys. I expect him to cut the meat, because that’s the guys’ responsibility and I expect myself to be cleaning the vegetables, and, and you know, attending to the glassware, and, and you know things like that too. Even though he’s Caucasian I made sure I married someone who would to help me and my family, who would accept my family.”
  - “Overall I think that we’ve had a lot of good understanding of each other and that’s kind of one of the pluses that I’ve enjoyed. We tend to be pretty open-minded now, too. We’re willing to try new things that we’ve never done before with each other’s families and stuff like that.”

- Feel the need to “manage” parts of the partnership to increase comfort and decrease cultural dissonance in the relationship (8). For example:
  - “I’ve held [culture] off, like I haven’t really dealt with that issue yet. So like I don’t know how to mingle the families together, I don’t know how to . . . what to expect like in terms of actual ceremonies and what not. Like, do we follow the old ceremonies, or do we go just for the new? Do we actually try to combine them? So I guess at this point I’m just kind of like just letting it go and hoping that one day I don’t have to deal with it.”
  - “I do try to make [my partner] at ease, so I think even when they speak Hmong in front of him I think he may assume they’re talking about him, when they’re really not. How I respond to that is that I tell him all the time that my family does love him. I try to put him at ease as much as possible. I do try to help him as best I can by telling him that he doesn’t have to worry about that. That I love him, my brothers and sisters love him, my
nephews love him, my parents love him, but then again I don’t know if he truly believes me or if he thinks I’m just being the nice fiancé, telling him that he doesn’t have to worry.”

- Racial and cultural awareness has progressed with the partnership (6). For example:
  - “In terms of dating, [My partner] being White never crossed my mind. I think for us, the friendship, it just bloomed. It took awhile for differences to come up. Cultural differences and interracial relationships, it takes me awhile to think about that because for our friendship and our whole relationship, cultural differences weren’t factors. It was more of being there for him and vice versa, and really just getting along with each other. But getting to know each other at the intimate level, it seemed like cultural differences, you know, they, they’d come up naturally.”
  - “I think in the beginning it was great. I mean him and I just really hit off from the very beginning. And at that point it wasn’t an issue of ‘oh, my gosh, he’s White, how are my parents going to deal with this?’ But I think that once it got serious it was, ‘okay how are we going to do this?’’”

3. Having a refugee family background directly impacts the interracial partnership (6). For example:
   - “I’m very family oriented and I think that comes from my background as being from a refugee family from Vietnam.”
   - “I think at the beginning of our relationship there was a lot of um, I don’t wanna say I was frugal but I definitely have the value of not wasting food. If he would not finish his food or not want it anymore um, I was like, ‘wow, that’s a waste.’ And I think that that’s definitely something that’s picked up from my family.”
   - “I think the biggest thing is not to take your relationship for granted and that anything can happen. I mean, my parents were, you know, arranged to be married in refugee camp, and without developing a traditional, like courting kind of situation where they get to know each other and go on dates and what not, you know, they didn’t know each other. But to this day my mom will say he is the love of her life, you know, she had also fallen in love with him. It kind of started my whole view and how it probably kind of started my personally being a hopeless romantic in a sense. You know, understanding their story and coming from a refugee camp and living on nothing but rice, water and sugar.

4. U.S.-born Southeast Asian Americans have an understanding of what it may be like to see the interracial relationship from the perspectives of their White European American partners. (11).

In the context of their interracial partnerships, U.S.-born Southeast Asian Americans . . .
   - Believe that “my partner struggles with my family and norms of my heritage culture” (6). For example:
     - “I feel as though he probably has to be more sensitive to a lot of things.
Like, the way my parents may react to something or the way they communicate is very, they’re a lot more blunt I guess than he’s used to. Also, he doesn’t know much about Vietnamese culture so it’s all very new to him and at the same time he has to keep being sensitive to it. It’s probably a struggle for him too.”

- “I definitely would be overwhelmed if I was him. And so if you are put in to an environment where there are these expectations of how you should act, how you should, you know, where you should be, the man stays there, the woman stays there. You shouldn’t be helping cooking, you should be hanging out with the guys. So yea, I would feel overwhelmed, confused, umm definitely, you know interested, but more overwhelmed. Cause I can see that I do expect a lot of him when it comes to my family.”

- “I’m a 100% percent Hmong and I know this and I think for [my partner] he’s kind of, like, he’s kind of ruining that. He’s coming in and kind of making, I don’t wanna say ruining tradition, but definitely something that unusual and I think it’s something we have talked about especially when we have children. How that’s going to be affected by them or how we’re going to be affected by that. So I think in [my partner’s] case, especially a lot of my family, I think he does feel the need to impress and make a good impression.”

- Believe that “my partner values and actively seeks to understand my family and heritage culture (8). For example:
  - “[My partner] doesn’t speak Vietnamese at all. So he tries really hard to connect with my family and my parents.”
  - “Something that I appreciate in our relationship is that I think my partner is more proud of my ethnic background than I am!”
  - “I think [my partner] was more interested in learning about Cambodian culture than I am. I didn’t really value wanting to get to know the culture very much or even having it a part of our wedding. He wants it a part of our wedding. Like he wants to wear the outfits and everything at the wedding.”

5. In the context of their interracial partnerships, U.S.-born Southeast Asian Americans are aware of subtle acts of real or perceived discrimination in response to their interracial partnerships (4). For example:

- “I have overheard, like you know, I’ve heard in backgrounds like, “Who, what is she doing with him?” or whatnot. You know, nothing to my face, but enough where it’s in my awareness. And you know, and it’s always just been like . . . I feel sorry for them. And it hurts a little bit.”

- “I think another issue that does arise that I think [my partner] and I struggle with that other people don’t is . . . again I know I touched base on this kind of earlier but those stares because we’re not commonplace. Or the looks that are kind of wondering ‘oh, why are they together?’ Because I feel like those are the people I want to prove wrong. It just is so tiring. I just wanna yell to them, “Stop staring at us!”
6. **Perceptions of how intimates (e.g., family and friends) react toward the interracial partnership (8)**

In the context of their interracial partnerships, U.S.-born Southeast Asian Americans . . .

- Feel that their relationship is regarded positively by family and friends (5). For example:
  - “I think I have a pretty positive and supportive environment for my relationship.”
  - “In terms of the social environment in San Diego, it’s definitely and, you know, with my friends here, as well as my family who also here, they really admire us as a couple. And maybe not so much in the physical way that we are an interracial couple but more of . . . a lot of people enjoy our energy together, which I think sometimes comes from our differences from each other.”
  - “My parents have actually responded to him being around a lot more positively than I thought. I was very hesitant to bring him home. I didn’t bring him home until after a year into our relationship almost and when I did they were kind of like relieved I was dating. They saw that he’s a very like kind and gentle person, so they kind of whenever anyone asked in our family, whenever anyone asked them about how he is they gave very positive reviews. So, I mean that’s how he’s considered really affinitive in my family.”

- Shared that there was some initial concern and/or opposition expressed by family and friends about the interracial partnership (6). For example:
  - “From my side I think that the environment was a little weird at first because of the whole, like, interracial was kind of new to my parents. But for us it’s just like, whatever. Like our generations, it’s kind of . . . so I think it wasn't really like that big of a surprise in terms of like friends but in terms of family I think it was like more like “that’s weird.”
  - “There was some opposition with my family at least. His family I don’t think would ever say anything. When my grandma met him for the first time she said, ‘he isn’t Vietnamese’ and my mom said, ‘why didn’t you pick a Vietnamese boy?’

7. **Messages that U.S.-born Southeast Asian Americans want others to know about their interracial partnerships (11)**

Messages for others

U.S.-born Southeast Asian Americans in interracial romantic partnerships with White European Americans . . .

- Encourage other U.S.-born Southeast Asian Americans in interracial partnerships to “hold on” to their heritage cultural roots (4). For example:
  - “I think I’d like those of my generation to younger to be more open to the Vietnamese culture. I think if Vietnamese Americans or Asian Americans in general not just embrace it to learn more about why they do what they do, but also give the other person a chance, whether they’re White, African American, whatever, because they may be more receptive than
you ever imagined. And I think that’s one of the joys I’ve learned from [my partner]. He’s never been to Vietnam, he wasn’t in the war . . . So he’s like, “tell me about it,” that sort of thing. And I think that’s just with people in general, the other party might want to know more about your Vietnamese culture and you might be the best person to tell them.”

- “I guess my advice is don’t disregard your background. I mean, it is who you are. I guess just take it as a reflective way you know? It’s kinda cool being like in an interracial relationship because I really see how Vietnamese I am and all this time I thought I was white Americanized but I really do see how strong my upbringing was and I do like I really like the way we respect our elders and parents.”

- Encourage other U.S.-born Southeast Asian Americans in interracial partnerships to recognize the importance of mutual learning of each partner’s cultural norms and values (6). For example:
  - “Patience. Be open to understanding the other person’s background. Be open to sharing your own ethnic background with the other person so that they know a little bit about the way you see the world, the way you interact with people or have relationships with other people.”
  - “I would say that just be open-minded. Don’t try and close yourself from [your partner’s] beliefs. I think it’s important to understand and kind of accept them, as who they are and what they believe in. Don’t force them to change what they believe in just cause you don’t believe in that.”
  - “You try and do a good job of balancing, you know, being a different couple in America, but also holding onto your cultural backgrounds. Even my wife’s southern background to my Cambodian. She came out and she dressed up in traditional clothing and sat down with the family and did that and respected my half [of the family]. And I went down to the South and hung out with her family and drank and ate food and hung out and had a good time, you know . . . Don’t be afraid to just explore [culture] . . . because if you don’t have that acceptance or that’s beyond just you two accepting each other as a couple, I think ultimately it hurts the relationship.”

- Encourage the general population to overcome biases and stereotypes about interracial romantic partnerships (5). For example:
  - “[Interracial partnership] is the future. This is something that is happening, something that should be happening. It doesn’t need to be forced. It definitely represents the message that we more accepting of individuals, of the individuals around us, no matter their identity or self-identity.”
  - “I guess hopefully people aren’t judging. I hope they’re not stereotyping because like you know the stereotype with Asian girls dating tall white guys? Like no, my boyfriends only like 5’ 5””. For Asians I hope they’re not thinking that I’ve become some white-washed girl that’s dating this white guy . . . I know a lot more about typical traditions than a lot of second generation Vietnamese do. So just hope that me holding hands with this white skin isn’t making them look like I’m a sell out.”
“I just want other people to know that [my partner] and I are just like other couples. He is Viking’s fan, I’m a Packer’s fan, we fight about that all the time. You know we bicker about who’s gonna take the dogs out. We bicker about who’s gonna do the laundry and the trash. I think a race, as big as an individual part to each of us, with the other it’s such a minimal part of who we are as a couple. I just don’t want people to assume that ‘Oh, he’s with that Hmong girl and she’s just with that White guy.’ We both have names. We are both so much more than that what our race or what our exterior is. It would be great if you could acknowledge that.”

The essence of the phenomenon

This study provided an opportunity for 11 U.S.-born Southeast Asian Americans to share stories about their interracial partnerships with White European American partners. These individuals have many powerful reactions about their relationships that significantly influence how they view themselves as racial and cultural beings. Many participants even expressed surprise when they realized how significantly race and culture impacted the experience of being interracially partnered. These stories offered narrative snapshots of a dynamic and complex phenomenon that can be both rewarding and challenging. At the heart of this phenomenon is the participants’ awareness of being perceived as being “different” and the desire to be accepted as valued individuals, both in their romantic relationships and their communities. This message resonated through each major theme that emerged from the in-depth interviews. For instance, many participants described themselves as strongly connected to their heritage cultures; however, some of these same individuals shared a sense of feeling alienated or hurt by these cultures. Indeed, some participants identified themselves as being more culturally mainstream American or “White” than Southeast Asian American. Moreover, factors such as varying levels of bicultural identity negotiation, refugee family dynamics, and “culture clashes” with partners indeed impacted U.S.-born Southeast Asian Americans’ partnerships with White European Americans in meaningful ways.
Appendix O

Schedule Follow Up Meeting Phone Script
Hello (Participant Name)

This is Sophia and I am calling you to follow up with you on my dissertation study about U.S.-born Southeast Asian Americans’ experience of interracial partnerships with White European Americans. As you may remember from our last meeting, I mentioned that I would contact you to schedule a Follow Up Interview after I completed the initial stages of my data analysis. This phase of data analysis is now complete.

You will shortly receive via email a synopsis of my findings. If you are still willing to participate in my study, I would like to schedule this Follow Up Interview with you so that we can go over these findings together. You will have the opportunity to provide corrections or additional clarification regarding these findings. You will also be welcome to offer new information about your own experience that may have surfaced since our first meeting. You might also have some reactions to my presentation of the data during the Follow Up Interview and I will welcome you to share those thoughts as well. The Follow Up Interview will be audio and/or video-recorded as was our first interview.

Before I continue, do you have any questions or concerns that I can address? [Answer questions/address concerns]

Are you interested in continuing your participation and scheduling the Follow Up Interview with me?

[If no] Thank you very much for taking the time to work with me up until this point. I wish you the best and hope you enjoy the rest of your day. [End call]

[If yes] Great! Then I would like to schedule a day and time for us to meet again. Would it be convenient for you to meet the same way we met last time? (i.e., in person, via Skype, or via phone). [Proceed with scheduling. Also confirm that I will travel to them or initiate contact.]

Again, you will receive a synopsis of my findings via email soon. It will be important for you to have this document on hand during our meeting. Thank you for helping me during this final stage of data collection. I look forward to talking with you again.
Appendix P

No Response to Follow Up Interview Request Attempt #1 Message Script
Hello (Participant Name)

This is Sophia and I am contacting you to follow up with you on my dissertation study about U.S.-born Southeast Asian Americans’ experience of interracial partnerships with White European Americans. I am sorry to have missed you.

As you may remember from our last meeting, I mentioned that I would contact you to schedule a Follow Up Meeting after I completed the initial stages of my data analysis. This phase of data analysis is now complete. If you could please call me back at 269.870.0778 or email me at sophia.k.rath@wmich.edu I would appreciate the opportunity to schedule our next meeting. I look very forward to speaking with you.
Appendix Q

No Response to Follow Up Interview Request Attempt #2 Message Script
Hello (Participant Name)

This is Sophia and I am calling you to follow up a message I left last week regarding my dissertation study about U.S.-born Southeast Asian Americans’ experience of interracial partnerships with White European Americans. I am aware that you have not yet responded to my message and would like to check in one final time to ask about your continued participation in this research. If you are still interested in being involved in this research, please call me back 269.870.0778 or email me at sophia.k.rath@wmich.edu, I would appreciate the opportunity to schedule our next meeting. If you do not wish to continue your participation in this study, I respect this decision and want to thank you for your participation thus far.
Appendix R

Reminder About Scheduled Follow Up Meeting Email Text
Dear (Participant Name)

This is just a quick reminder that we are scheduled to meet (insert date; time; and if in-person, Skype, or phone) regarding my dissertation study about U.S.-born Southeast Asian Americans’ experience of interracial partnerships with White European Americans. Please have the synopsis of the data analysis that I emailed to you on hand during this meeting. I look very forward to speaking again with you.

Warmly,

Sophia K. Rath, M.S.
Doctoral Candidate and Student Researcher
Western Michigan University
Department of Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology
Appendix S

Follow Up Meeting Script
Hello (Potential Participant Name),

Thank you for meeting with me again and for your continued participation in my dissertation study about U.S.-born Southeast Asian Americans’ experience of interracial partnerships with White European Americans. Before we begin, I would like to know if you have any questions or concerns that I can address? [Answer questions/address concerns]

A few things will happen during this meeting:

1) We will go over my overall findings derived from all of the interviews conducted with you and my other participants. The purpose of this task is to capture as accurately as possible the important aspects of being U.S.-born Southeast Asian Americans in interracial partnerships with White European Americans.

2) You will have the opportunity to provide corrections or additional clarification regarding these findings. You will also be welcome to offer new information about your own experience that may have surfaced since our first meeting. You might also have some reactions to my presentation of the data during the Follow Up Meeting and I will welcome you to share those thoughts as well. The Follow Up Meeting will be audio and/or video-recorded as was our Interview Meeting.

3) I will ask if your partner has expressed interest in participating in a potential future study focusing on White European American partners in interracial partnerships. If they have consented, you can share your partner’s contact information with me at the end of this meeting.

I am now going to turn on my recording equipment. If at any time you feel uncomfortable with being recorded, please let me know and I will stop recording immediately. I would also like to remind you that if at any time you become uncomfortable with particular questions, you may choose to not answer at your discretion. Furthermore, if you decide that you no longer wish to participate in the study, you are entitled to discontinue participation, without prejudice or penalty, at any time.

Let’s begin.

First we will go over my general findings from all of the interviews I conducted with you and other U.S.-born Southeast Asian Americans in interracial partnerships with White European Americans. The first collective theme is [label for first individual essence]. The meaning I attached to this theme is [describe the meaning I attached to the essence]. What are your thoughts about this theme?

Possible probes
- What do you mean by that?
- Can you offer me another example?
- How could I describe this better?
This concludes my presentation of my data analysis. Do you have any final thoughts about the analysis I just shared with you? Is there anything else you would like to share with me that we may not have had a chance to talk about?

Possible probes
• What do you mean by that?
• Can you give me an example of what you mean?
• How does that make you feel?

This concludes your participation in this research study. I want to thank you very much for your time and willingness to participate and offer you a $25 gift card as a token of my appreciation.

As I have mentioned before, there is a possibility that I will conduct a future study that focuses on White European American partners in interracial partnerships. If your partner might be interested in participating in this potential study, please feel free to forward share my email and/or phone number so s/he can forward me their contact information, if they wish. You can also share your partner’s contact information with me now, if s/he has consented for you to do so.

I know we’ve spent a lot of time talking on the phone and meeting together. I’d like to let you know this has been a very meaningful experience for me and that I wish you the very best. If you should find that you have any further questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me.
Appendix T

HSIRB Research Project Approval Letter
Date:       June 19, 2012

To:         James Croteau, Principal Investigator
            Sophia Rath-Targowski, Student Investigator for dissertation

From:       Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re:         HSIRB Project Number 12-06-20

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled “Understanding
Second Generation Southeast Asian Americans’ Lived Experience of Interracial
Partnerships with White European Americans” has been approved under the expedited
category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions
and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan
University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note: This research may only be conducted exactly in the form it was approved.
You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project (e.g., you must
request a post approval change to enroll subjects beyond the number stated in your
application under “Number of subjects you want to complete the study”). Failure to
obtain approval for changes will result in a protocol deviation. In addition, if there are
any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct
of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the
HSIRB for consultation.

Reapproval of the project is required if it extends beyond the termination date
stated below.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination:  June 19, 2013