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## Interracial relationships from the perspective of Cambodians in western Massachusetts

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Vuthy Chhum  
Interracial Relationships  
from the Perspectives of  
Cambodians in Western  
Massachusetts

## ABSTRACT

A qualitative study was done in Western Massachusetts of how Cambodian people view interracial relationships. A total of 12 participants were involved consisted of seven men and five women. All participants had grown up in Cambodia, but were currently living in the U.S. This project explores traditional views some participants had and the role assimilation had on some of the participants. There are many factors discussed in this study involving participants' thoughts on interracial relationships, as well as anecdotal experiences.

INTERRACIAL RELATIONSHIPS  
FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF  
CAMBODIANS IN WESTERN MASSACHUSETTS

A project based upon an independent investigation,  
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2008

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank God for blessing me with the opportunity to experience this process. I would also like to thank my family for providing me with the opportunity they never had. Thank you Dr. Roger Miller, my thesis advisor, for your guidance and direction. Special thanks to the participants involved in this study and everyone else who supported me throughout these past years.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Relationships among people of color have always been an issue of debate. The ideas and issues around race in this project will be discussed from the perspectives of the Cambodian community. I will examine the trends and perspectives that I have noticed through my own experience.

I am considered to be a first-generation Cambodian immigrant. I have spent most of my life in the United States. I consider myself to be a person of two cultures, one Cambodian and American. I want to explore relationships I have noticed within the Cambodian community here in Western Mass. Through these observations, I have found over time more Cambodian identified individuals have become involved during some point in an interracial relationship. A growing number of Cambodians form relationships with people of a different race. What does this mean for the people in these interracial relationships, and what does it mean for people who are not in interracial relationships? Some hypothesis that I have included are younger generations of Cambodian individuals have become more accepting of interracial relationships, while the generations that have not been raised in the U.S. have a different view. What I really want to gather through this research is what groups are acceptable within

relationships, and what are not. I would like to explore heterosexual relationships within the Cambodian community and get an opinion on what makes some groups more acceptable for interracial relationships and what the Cambodian community thinks about other racial groups.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Amongst the data that has been collected in review of interracial relations, not many have specifically been focus on the Cambodian population. Instead these scholars have studied a more general population of races. They have focused on interracial relationships among African American, Asian American, Latino American, White Americans and/or other racial groups (Brunnsma 2005, Cowan 2005, Lewandowski & Jackson, 2001, Littleford et al. 2005, Suzuki-Crumly & Hyers 2004, Qian & Lichter 2007, Vaquera & Kao 2005, Yancey Unknown). Research has brought attention to the important aspects of interracial development. The article *Interracial Interactions at Racially Diverse University Campuses* (Cowan 2005) explores the relationships between many different racial groups and compares the results across ethnic groups. The question that Cowen raises is whether or not these interracial interactions happen at college campuses because the proportion of students is dominated by a particular group (Cowan 2005)? This question brings up issues of selection and what people will find “attractive” in certain cultures. It is hard to dismiss the fact that in most cases, there has to be some kind of a physical attraction in order to build an intimate relationship. Once there is room for personality, the characteristics of



people who interracially date are measured by the success of the individual (Yancey 2002). This then rises up a larger question in regard to stereotypes and biases that are associated with these individuals through the culture and race they are from. Is it that we date interracially because our interest lies in “attractiveness” or do we date interracially because of limited exposure to same race individuals, or do we think of having relationships outside are race to improve on our status in society? I want to explore some factors and commonalities surrounding the themes that arise in interracial relations.

Because I am working on identifying the culture and race of individuals, I first have to explore the much different identities individuals could associate themselves with. Literature suggests that this identity is often determined by parent’s models and the environment in which the child grows up (Brunsma 2005). This also suggests further implications on the amount of comprehension parents are able to offer to their children about race during these important years of development. If a child is exposed to a culture that is more dominant to his/her own, he/she will probably be assimilated to that culture (Brunsma 2005). And do these areas of growth draw on discussions regarding race and ethnicity. The book *Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria? And other conversations about race* (Tatum 1997) focuses on the importance a parent has in shaping the development for a child to acknowledge race and that people are of different races. That focus will lead to the discussion around which races are similar and which are not, and how that emerges in adulthood, specifically in interracial relationships (Tatum 1997).

What are the differences in experiences of the white individuals who have relations with a Cambodian person and how does society view this relation? I think the findings about this issue would be useful. What is the motivation and purpose for a white person having relations outside the race? Does it make a Cambodian better to have a white person by his/her side? And for the white individual, does that make them less because they associate with a person of lesser status as viewed by society?

One study takes a look at dyadic relationships among college students and tries to determine the discomfort around interracial relationships. This study focuses on the idea that whites experience greater discomfort around interracial relationships, compared to the minority population (Littleford et al. 2005). This research was designed to focus on the anxiety during these relations. Again, the question is why there is so much discomfort around interracial relationships

Literature also sheds light on the realities of married couples in the United States and the trends involving racial and ethnic intermarriages. The article by Qian and Lichter report a statistic that in reality supports my theory that interracial relationships occur more frequently. This article takes it one more step and adds the dimension of marriage and the level of commitment associated with this title. This article suggests the increase is largely due to marriage between a white partner and a minority (Qian & Lichter 2007). It also looks at the rapid growth over time of interracial marriages (Qian & Lichter 2007).

I want to look at the views and opinions that Cambodian people believe to be behind this trend towards intermarriage with the white race. Are the same

issues being brought up in the community that these scholars have studied? Where does it become an issue around preserving culture and heritage? As the authors of *Social Boundaries and Martial Assimilations: Interpreting Trends in Racial and Ethnic Intermarriage* (Qian & Lichter 2007) suggest, an increase of bi-cultural relationships will eventually be difficult to determine. But the larger question is now that we have assimilated, where is the uniqueness of the culture we left behind?

Much research has been done among different minority groups engaged in interracial relationships. The most common studies involve the dominate group, (white) and other minority populations such as African Americans (blacks), Latina/Latinos, and Asian. However, using these umbrella group terms does not give a clear picture of those groups that are actually being studied. For example, there are many sub groups that fall under “Asian” such as, Southeast Asians, Indians, Chinese, and people from parts of the Middle East. However, researchers use umbrella terms and categorize groups under these labels to make their larger distinctions and comparisons easier to understand. However, it is important to remember that research on this topic is based on assumptions and is limited. Research first has to explore important findings about the different views of race.

Tatum’s *Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria? And other conversations about race* (Tatum 1997) focuses on the importance a parent has in shaping a child’s development and his or her acknowledgment that people are of different races. That in turn will lead to a more open discussion around

race with parents, specifically a person's attitudes toward interracial relationships (Tatum 1997). Where does racial identity start to form and how does it affect one's choice of a partner?

Yancey (2002) studied the characteristics of those who interracially date. Yancey uses the methods of random phone dialing to sample European-Americans, African-American, Asian-American and Hispanic-Americans. Yancey then compared the groups, and finds the results to predict that people who identify as African, Asian, and Hispanic American, are over 55% more likely to date interracially than do the 35.7% European Americans who date (Yancey Unknown). Qian and Lichter (2007) studied different dating trends among foreign-born individuals in comparisons to native-born individuals. The research studied Whites, Blacks, and Asians. In addition American Indians were also in the study. The researchers looked at trends in the assimilation of people and ways of predicting interracial relationships. The results were similar in percentages of people who interracially date across all groups. In 2000, the range of percentages in these groups was from 33% in American Indians to the highest percentage of Asian (39.5%). All these percentages are from samples that have at least some college education. What is surprising from the results are that the Asian groups are less likely to date interracially if their education level was less than high school, and most likely to date if they hold a college degree or higher (Qian & Lichter 2007). Comparisons were also derived from the native-born population and foreign-born populations.

When examining Qian and Lichter's 2007 study, issues are explored with Asian groups having different cultures. The study focuses on the different cultures within Asia and the differences and similarities cultures have with one another. Mok (1999) examined the important factors Asian Americans individuals consider when choosing a partner. Mok looked at both interracial relations and interracial dating trends and found that the overall rate for Asian Americans in interracial marriages in the U.S. is 24.4% (Mok 1999). Mok also finds that the percentage for Chinese American interracial marriages is 15.7% across the U.S. (Mok 1999).

Mok examined a study done on Chinese Immigrants also empathizes the importance culture has for choosing a partner. All studies mentioned in this report have focused on the predicting factors that come into decision making when choosing a partner. For Chinese individuals, the role of family legacy plays a factor to continuing with family traditions. Along with upholding family culture, parental influence and ethnic identity play roles in the decision one has when choosing a partner (Hynie et al 2006). Many researchers have described that Asian American do not believe they are as physically attractive as White Americans (Arkoff & Weaver, 1966; Chen & Yang, 1986; Huang & Ying, 1991; Pang, Mizokawa, Morishima, & Olstad, 1985; Sue & Morishima, 1982). This lends support to the idea that many Asian American would rather choose a White partner because of their physical qualities (Fujino, 1992; Kikumura & Kitano, 1973; Weiss, 1970).

Dating and marriage trends support this assumption that Asian people have toward their own group with the partner they are involved with. When compared to other ethnic groups, more Asians choose to be with a White person, similar to the notes of a white person choosing to be with an Asian (Mok 1999). This brings up the idea that some groups are perceived to be better than other groups. The selection of a partner is often determined by the likelihood of success. Interracial dating rises with educational level (Qian & Lichter 2007). If a person is perceived to gain an increase in social status by interracial dating, the likelihood increases that person will date outside the race. However, in terms of marriage, American Indians are most likely to get married (73.1%) to different groups, while whites marry only 4.4%, and blacks as 16.3% (Qian & Lichter 2007). What causes these trends in society? Those who date outside their race are not those who tend to marry. When exploring who normally dates outside the race, results differ from who actually become married. What role does society play in structuring norms and acceptance among relationships?

Many studies explore the sample population of college-aged students. Studies done on campuses could help explain the resistance or acceptance when choosing a partner of another race. Again the standard groups being explored are Black, Asian, Whites, and Latino. Gloria Cowan (Cowan 2005) explores six college campuses and concludes that the more diverse the campus is, the more interracial dating occurs. However, if there is a high concentration of the same race, there is a greater likelihood of interracial dating (Cowan 2005).

Cowan uses an observational study to conduct her research. She tries to find different ways groups interact with each other. This study examines the way in which society perceives these relationships and interactions. Cowan finds that white students interact more when compared to the other three groups. The interactions of whites are 69.5% compared to the 30.5% from the other three groups (Cowan 2005). One limitation to this study is the depth and intimacy aspect of these relationships. Social gathering were not explored, such as parties, and/or after school hours, etc. All data were collected from observations and classroom settings.

Elizabeth Vaquera and Grace Kao (Vaquera & Kao 2005) examine the amount of public displayed affection among adolescents who intra-racially date compared to the couples who interracially date. Vaquera and Grace explore the differences in affection while in public. Although the authors conclude that the level of intimacy in public and private are the same, there is hesitance to displaying these affections in public for both groups. The authors make the argument that social barriers against interracial dating still exist, and people are less comfortable displaying their feeling in public (Vaquera & Kao 2005).

Where does society play a major role in determining an “ideal” partner? From the research derived, it is clear that if you were going to date, or even be close to someone, it should be someone of the same race. If you were going to date someone from another race, it should be white (Mok 1999; Lewandowski & Jackson 2001; Qian & Lichter 2007; Yancey Unknown). Lewandowski and Jackson uses a 7-point Likert scale and asks four questions in regards to the

person's perception of their partner. The partners were asked to rate on the scale where the higher the number meant greater comfort with the partner, and further distance from social views. The author's hypothesis predicted that interracial couples were perceived as less compatible than intra-racial couples, but only when the opposite partner was African American, not Asian American (Lewandowski & Jackson 2001).

Research has been done with interracial coupling, but not specifically Cambodians. This study will examine the interracial relationships among the Cambodian population, and views that Cambodian people have on these relationships. I noticed trends in the interracial dating among the Cambodian people from Western Massachusetts. Once I gather data from this population, I will compare those results with other studies on the societal views on couples that date outside their race. Three groups I will compare with are Chinese, White, and African Americans. My hypothesis is that views on Cambodians dating all three of these populations will vary in acceptance. How do Cambodians from the Western Massachusetts community perceive interracial relationships?



## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

The design of the study was to gather 12 Cambodian immigrants who were currently living in the Western Massachusetts community. I used a one-hour interview with each participant listening to their views and perceptions about interracial relationships.

The sample included people who self-identified as Cambodian. This project explores the perceptions of first generation Cambodian people who grew up in Cambodia. The sample consisted of men and women who were affiliated with Buddhist practices. Participants were given the option to speak in their preferred language of Khmer or English. Participants had to have grown up in Cambodia. The method used to obtain participants was a “snowball” method that started from contacting a reliable Cambodian liaison from the Western Massachusetts community and having a preliminary interview to evaluate the effectiveness of questions. More names and phone numbers were then obtained from the participants to locate other potential participants. I then initiated contact with potential participants and scheduled a neutral meeting place to screen out participants who did not meet all necessary criteria.

If participant met all necessary criteria, then a one-hour interview session was scheduled. During these one-hour interviews, participants were asked about

their views and perceptions on interracial relationships. As shown in the appendix, a guideline of sample questions was used to ensure consistency. However, many times during these interviews, the participants would use anecdotes and personal experiences to describe their views and how they supported these ideas. During the interviews I would ask participants for permission to take notes. An Informed Consent Form was also given by this writer which explained the risk and limitations associated with this study.

All participants were accepting of me taking notes during the interview and were assured of proper care of the material. Although each participant permitted note taking, I often would limit my note taking to ensure full attention to the participants. At the end of the hour, I gave each participant an Identifying Information (see appendix) sheet that listed age, gender, and necessary requirements to be involved in the study. Along with the identifying information, seven questions were asked to be rated on a *Likert* Scale of 1-7 to describe their feelings on interracial relationships. This method of having each participant fill out a questionnaire was to measure views about interracial relationships.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

In the obtained sample, each interview was scheduled to be approximately one hour in length. An initial phone contact was made and to determine that all screening requirements were met. The interview usually took place at a neutral setting of the participants choosing. The interviews were at the local Buddhist Temples, or at a local library. The first three participants were referred to me by a reliable Cambodian Liaison who was familiar with the Cambodian community. After each individual interview was over, a demographic sheet was given. The other nine participants were collected from referrals by other participants in the study. Out of 22 names given in the course of the study, only 16 accepted the initial requirements to participate. Four of the 16 people were ineligible; they consisted of 3 women and one male who did not spend their childhood growing up in Cambodia. This left a sample of 12 eligible participants.

The 12 participants sampled had all spent the majority of their life in Cambodia. The participant's age ranged from 21 years old to 56 years of age. The median age of 28 gives the most accurate description of the sample. Seven men were involved in the study along with five women. All participants identified as heterosexual. All of the participants gathered were from the Western Massachusetts area. The youngest of the participants was a male and the oldest participant was a female. All of the participants self-identified as practicing

Buddhist traditions. Within the sampled group, six participants who were above the age of 28 had spent the majority of their lives in the culture in Cambodia and continued to practice more traditional customs here in the United States. The six participants under the age of 28 also spent their childhood in Cambodia, but admit that acculturation is more prevalent in their lives today.

In the obtained sample, the seven men ranging in age from 21-44 years of age had a median age of 25 years of age. Overall the sample consisted of younger adults who have been “Americanized” by their time spent in the US. Importantly the men who were sampled spent the most crucial time of development in the US where they were becoming adults in a new environment. The chance to adapt to the culture at hand was more relevant for these people than for the ones who came later in their adulthood.

Out of the seven men who were sampled, five have been involved in relationships with a person other than Cambodian. One man was married with a Cambodian partner while one other had not had sexual relations with any person. In the obtained male sample, three out of the four oldest in age had at least one child. The oldest male had two children with his Cambodian partner while the other two fathers in the group had children with white partners. Only the oldest male was married, and one father was divorced and the other five had never been married.

Five female participants ranged in age from 23-56 with the mean of the group at 38 years of age with a median at 34. The median is a more accurate number to use, but the similar ages of the mean and median are much closer

compared to the men. All five women participants had at least one child. None of these women had children with a partner of a different race. All of the partners to these women identified are Cambodian. Four out of the five women were married to their partner while the youngest of the group at age 23 was engaged to be married.

There was a large difference in age between men and women. The median age for the men is 25 while the median age for the women is 34. The average time for men growing up in Cambodia was 15 years, compared to the 26-year average for the women. This explains the assimilation the men have been exposed too compared to the female because of the lesser time men had grown up in Cambodia compared to the women.

The women were drawn toward choosing of a partner with the same beliefs and culture they held. One woman who was 34 said that she wanted the child to grow up knowing the Cambodian culture. She said that there was never a thought that she would not have a partner that was not Cambodian, never mind a child who was not. There were similar responses to these from those women; they described the culture, the importance to continuing the race, and not knowing any other culture. The oldest of all the participants has six children, one of them was married to a Caucasian woman. She described her disappointment at first in having her son marry outside the race, but the joy of having grandchildren and seeing her son happy. She explained that her preference was to find someone for him who was Cambodian and even wanting to arrange a marriage in Cambodia. She reported her frustration with two of her sons with

them not finding a wife and having grandchildren. She explained to me the importance of having a large family where there is a strong sense of community and culture. She said that she did not want to die until she could see her grandchildren. They would be an extension of her. She concluded that the problem came from the lack of partners in their local community. There are not enough Cambodians to choose from. She reported feeling excited that her son finally had a wife and gave her grandchildren.

Many of the obtained sample held views and perspectives on the importance of race and culture and finding someone Cambodian. There was one who particularly strongly opposed the idea of marriage outside the race. The 44-year-old male was strongly opposed to the idea that people should marry outside their race. He described growing up in Cambodia and moving to the States when he was 20 and already married. He said that it was already unfortunate for him to leave his native country because of war and genocide, but to lose the sense of his culture would be worse. He reported that having a partner who was not Cambodian would dilute the culture and it would eventually vanish. He reported having a Cambodian wife similar to all eight of his siblings who had Cambodian partners. He is the second oldest child in his family and did not report any of his siblings having any interracial relationships. He described his parent's views on this issue and reported his sibling's involvement with finding a partner who is Cambodian. Out of the eight siblings, five marriages were arranged in Cambodia with his parent's approval. It is important to mention that arranged marriages are common in the Cambodian culture, but not so much for Cambodians in the US.

This family with their views on interracial relationships chooses to seek out Cambodian relationships and will probably continue this choice through generations.

When comparing the differences of the men and women, one important theme continually came up. For men, the idea was that having interracial relationships are okay because they do not involve marriage. Six of the seven men said that having relations with a person who is not Cambodian is okay. The idea was to have relationships that are in the moment and not necessary for love, but pleasure. These men described the sexual motivation as well. The gender differences between men and women are also evident in the American culture. Because the median age of the men is 25, much of their development is associated with American culture and societies gender roles. It is more acceptable for men to “fool” or “mess” around with women and to do so with many as possible.

The views for both men and women reflect the Cambodian culture. Cambodian traditions have associated gender roles for both sexes that are more restricted for women than men. A similar problem holds true for women in other cultures. Men seek multiple relationships, while women are held to the standards of having only one partner and not being labeled as a “whore”. With five women participants, only the youngest women had been in another relationship than her current one. The other four women describe having only one partner and never being involved with another person. All seven of the men describe having views

on trying out different relationships and being “experienced”. This is the idea of having knowledge around sex, performing in bed, and providing a suitable home.

It is important to also examine the idea of having relationships compared to finding a life long partner as in marriage. All the men admitted to wanting a wife who was Cambodian. They all describe feeling that it was the right thing to do and to preserving the Cambodian culture. However, many factors come into play when choosing a partner. As one of the men with children said, “I was in school and there were not many Cambodian women around so I found a White girl”. The reality of not being exposed to Cambodians is a real problem for many. In reality the family who went to Cambodia and arranged marriages took a lot of planning and time. Not to mention money and resources to complete such a task. Is it really worth it, asked the male participants? For some it is, and for this particular family they made it happen.

The responses from men and women become increasingly different when discussing Cambodian men who had interracial relations. One male who was 24 years of age reported being involved with a person not Cambodian. This individual was currently living with his girlfriend and said that it was just whom he fell in love with. When asked if he found Cambodian women as attractive, he responded “sometimes”. He reported that there is a difference to what kind of individual he is involved with. He reports that his parents view certain races differently. In the literature, many of the authors report a status associated with the race of the individual. This one individual reported his choice of a white partner before an African American or Spanish partner. He reports that his family



believes there is a status associated with the color of the skin. Of course there is a difference with class and race, with the dominant group. But it was surprising to even hear the prejudices from one culture to another.

In the literature, there is explanation for the hierarchy of race even after the dominant group. Along with the not having a greater population of Cambodian partners to choose from, this one individual reports a system in which he feels is acceptable. To him and his family, choosing a partner could affect his relationship with his family. He says “coming home with a black person is different than coming home with a white person”. He then went on to explain the differences between the two races and concluded that it will ultimately reflect on his family as much as himself. There was some discussion around why this was a reality for this individual. He is well educated, brought up in a generation where interracial relationships are common. He did not consider himself racist or prejudice, just a “preference”. This kind of preference is also displayed with whites choosing Asian partners before Blacks or Spanish (Mok 1999). Why is it that this reality holds true? Along with the choosing a partner, the issues of class come up.

For the six people (two men and four women) who have been fortunate enough to go back to Cambodia and visit, they all report a desire for the younger generation there to seek partners who live in America. They all report feelings of secondary gain in addition to finding love. The love might come after one is brought back to America and living comfortably. The idea that America is the land of opportunity and freedom for the Cambodian people is widely held. It is

very common to see young Asian women in Cambodia dating foreigners. The participants who have been back to Cambodia describe acceptance there for these women because they are trying to better themselves in addition to helping their families.

One important theme that was reported from these participants was that the women were making sacrifices to then try and help their family by sending money home and eventually bringing them to the US. However, this is not the reality here for the current Cambodian individuals. With five of the women sampled, they all report choosing a Cambodian partner. Six of the seven men prefer a Cambodian partner, but are less likely to hold true to this belief. The women report their concerns over making sure they can provide for their immediate family here in the States, but also giving back to their family in Cambodia. The men reported wanting to find a life partner who is Cambodian, but settle with different races because they view it as status, sex, attractiveness etc. The women hold stronger beliefs about the ideas of culture and race. When the women were asked about their feelings of seeing Cambodian men in relationships with white women the responses are very similar. The five women felt that interracial relationships were temporary, and not for the long-term. They explained that men would probably prefer to marry Cambodian women, but choose to have relations outside the culture. The woman believed that eventually men would come around and chose a Cambodian because of the social pressures. There are enormous pressures from some families, such as

the 44-year-old man. Having Cambodian people marrying Cambodians is generally preferred in the culture.

One man 25 years of age was married to a Caucasian woman and had a child. He reported similar views to the perspective these women shared. Currently this young man was in the process of getting a divorce and was currently looking for a Cambodian partner. This man was involved with his child's mother for seven years and was now questioning his relationship to her with comparisons to his friends. He also reports that he felt disconnected from the culture in which he was raised. He described receiving therapeutic services to deal with his divorce and issues around his identity. He described growing up with a rich culture of traditions, family, and religion and then leaving it behind because of his partner.

Currently, he was in the process of getting a divorce and evaluating his relationship. He struggled with being unhappy during the seven years in a relationship where he was assimilating to another culture and not preserving his own. He reports feeling guilty and making a conscious effort to find a partner who is Cambodian, describing someone who can understand his culture and has empathy. His guilt was with himself and feeling empty for leaving his culture and not expressing his true personality because the fear of being alone or losing what he thought was love. In this particular case, his past began to play a crucial role in his development as an adult. What he was so accustomed to in his past, he needed in his future. Could this hold true for his ex-wife? Did she not fully engage or understand the expectations or traditions of the Cambodian culture?

And why did he have to feel that he needed to put his culture second while conforming to his wife's culture?

Interestingly two men age 25 were both involved with Caucasian women and had children with them. One man described seeking a Cambodian partner while the other was now engaged to be married to a Cambodian partner. Their responses were similar. Both reported difficulty in adapting to two different cultures. Not only for the men involved, but their partners as well. Members of a minority culture probably experience pressure to adapt to the dominant culture when they enter relationships. Both men reported having discussions with their white partner about the roles and traditions expected by their parents and families. It became much easier for the two men to feel safe with their culture and have an identity before the relationship. The two men report having fewer arguments about gender roles and norms associated with the different cultures. It is important to acknowledge that these past relationships have been in a period in time where adult development was still forming. They could have been bored in the relationships, and needed a change. There are many factors that could contribute to this breakdown in the relationship, but the common perceptions from these two men are that Cambodian partners will be accustomed to the traditional values and beliefs similar to them.

A 24-year-old man who was living with his non-Cambodian girlfriend explained his relationship. He reported seeing an increase of interracial relationships among the Cambodian community and felt like it is more common today. He reports having more discomfort accepting his girlfriend's family

because of the differences in culture. He described his discomfort as a personality issue with his girlfriend's family, not about race. He admitted to thinking about the impact of being with a white woman and being judged and viewed by others. However, his views are similar to other men. He felt there is nothing wrong with interracial relationships. The men report the desire to be involved in a Cambodian relationship, but said that love is unpredictable.

These men related to their current situations to interact with others when forming relationships. Many times the men described situations they experienced in the past, which were in pleasure seeking experiences, more so than future oriented views. The two men ages 25 both reported being in long term relationships with their child's mother but never planning on marriage. One man was married because he was expecting, while the other man was never married.

In the obtained sample, all 12 participants had views on interracial relationships and how they could be damaging to the culture. However, the responses became more forgiving of these relationships as the interview continued. At first, many of the participants were in favor of dating someone who is Cambodian. As each interview progressed, anecdotes and personal experiences began to come up qualifying their perceptions about interracial relationships.

All the participants gathered have been exposed to interracial relationships. All but the gentleman who holds the strongest views on interracial relationships had a family member or close friend who had been intimately

involved with someone interracial. Therefore, the personal views and perceptions have been influenced through direct experiences. As with each participant, there was a sense of obligation for not letting go of the culture. All participants had a sense of continuing the Cambodian culture and race by having within group relationships. The preference to have a relationship with a Cambodian person was there. It then breaks down to the many factors and experiences that people have that shape their view on whether different relationships are acceptable or not.

The obtained sample had a perception that interracial relations were more common than earlier. However, the views on this are not ones of disappointment as much so as personal. Each participant gave an experience in which they believed other relationships were appropriate. Through the eyes of each participant, interracial relationships are becoming more common and forcing acceptance. In the close-knit community of the obtained sample, it then becomes a personal preference to find the right partner no matter what race that partner is. Many of the sampled participants had been directly involved with situations of interracial relationships. Whether through their own involvement or indirect contact with one, they could change their views. Not to say that the culture will die, but evolve. All the participants had made a conscious effort to accept these changes, even if it was not their preference.

Overall, the obtained subjects were very open to the subject of the study. Not only were my observations supporting that interracial relationships were becoming more common in Western Massachusetts, but the participants recalled

individual experiences and illustrations to support those trends. All 12 participants were excited about and interested in the discussion around interracial relationships. There were many participants who had experiences in this area, and felt comfortable discussing their views about them. In the Cambodian culture, the myth that Asians are passive and quiet did not hold true when I was sitting one on one with them. The honesty and passion with all 12 participants displayed a sense of caring within the culture.

Not two interviews were the same. Every participant had a view about interracial relationships. All the male participants drew on themes of culture from both Cambodian and American traditions. Women would use their Cambodian past and upbringing to describe their views about interracial relationships. The interviews became a place to share ideas and views on a community that was experiencing change. Many times, the individuals experiencing interracial relationships are ignored, but when it was becoming more apparent for this small culture, their views were being heard.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

I would first like to consider the relevance this project has for the Cambodian population in Western Massachusetts. This study was not an attempt to generalize the Cambodian people, but a curiosity about a subject of personal interest. Although I have tried to remain out of process, it is hard not to acknowledge my own prejudices and bias as a Cambodian. This study also has some other limitations. Because I only gathered participants from a specific small population like Western Mass, specific family ties within the community were also inherent in the responses given by individuals.

This study has provided current individual responses that could be used in follow-up studies. A later study done on the views and opinions of Cambodian people could then be done to see the impact of assimilation onto dominant groups over time. Further studies could examine different relationships, acculturation and how they change over time.



My feelings for doing this study were ones of personal interest. Having been involved with interracial relationships, I was interested in thoughts other Cambodian people had about this issue. Cross culture relationships may change the views held by Cambodians.

Some limitations associated with this study include my gender as a male. It is not known whether the responses would be different if there was a women interviewer. Although the participant's were asked to be honest and truthful, that does not preclude limitations on their responses. My role as the interviewer was to ask for needed information, but the responses and experiences given ranged in substance and depth. Women could have felt more comfortable to speak with a female researcher. However, I believe that the views from both genders were honest and truthful. It appeared that all participants were comfortable with the questions being discussed with me. I am sure the responses would differ from those elicited by a Caucasian or African American investigator because of their ethnic background. I believe that the responses given were honest and truthful.

If this study were to be conducted again, more time would be allotted. One hour only got into the surface of the ideas and views of the sample. A different population could also impact the responses participants had. If this study were done in Lowell MA, I am sure that the participant's responses would be different because of the number of Cambodian people in that community. This study was done on a very limited population and sample. A larger number of participants would also be an asset to studying this population.

The ages and duration of time Cambodian people spent in Cambodia

could also affect responses. The differences between generations of Cambodian's will give a clearer picture of the types of people who have not been exposed to interracial relationships compared to the ones who have experienced one. It would be important to gather all information from both perspectives, for and against interracial relationships, to understand the evolution of this group.

The most interesting finding of this study was the more traditional views the women had compared to the men. It is fascinating to listen to the views Cambodians had when they have been involved in interracial relationship compared to the ones who have not.

Observations suggest that Cambodian people living in this specific area of Western Massachusetts had a culture that was already their own. Out of the five women participants, four were already married to their husband before coming to the States. For these women in Western Mass, their roles had been established and influenced mainly by the Cambodian culture. For the women spending the majority of their life in Cambodia, there was less of a need to adapt and assimilate to the culture here. Women in this area came to the U.S being married, practicing Cambodian traditions, and residing in an area that was predominantly Cambodian. Therefore, the study supports the idea that women had more conservative ideas about the interracial relationships and it is understandable why they might hold these views. For women, they are less impelled to navigate outside the culture because of there needs. Cambodian people find communities that support one another and share similar practices.

For women, their ideas about interracial relationships further suggested that they do not care for these relationships because they did not impact them directly. In addition, the reality is that women who come to the U.S already have been married to a Cambodian person and were not looking for a partner here. The option for men to find a Cambodian partner become increasingly smaller if not found in Cambodia.

Observations suggest that men in this area are faced with the reality that having a Cambodian partner here is unlikely. The majority of women had come to the U.S with Cambodian partners and did not leave their partners. Men are faced with having interracial relationships and the Americanization of adapting to the culture at hand. As evidence from the study, the average time men spent in Cambodia was 11 years less than the women. In addition, women already come to the U.S with an identity with Cambodian culture. Men are more forced to adapt to American culture and influenced by the media, neighborhoods, work, and their direct contact with socialization to the American people. There is a need for men to become accustomed to this culture because of their needs to progress in society. Women may be comfortable with their situations at home which limits their direct exposure to the American culture because it does not force them to adapt. Their views and responses support the culture that is here in this community. It is understandable to have responses like the ones given from the participants. There are many things to consider in addition to ones preference, the culture in which they were raised, the culture they are assimilating to, and the beliefs they carry with them from their past.

Future research could focus on the development and history behind the Cambodian culture. Where are some of the influences in the Cambodian culture that arise in the past and how has that translated to the future? Where do we see a pattern not only with the Cambodian population but other ethnic groups involving interracial relationships? Additional research should involve a larger sample of first generation Cambodians who are still practicing Cambodian traditions in the US. This would provide a clearer picture both for the Cambodian people living longer in the U.S. and the ones who have spent more time in Cambodia.

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## APPENDIX A

### Informed Consent

My name is Vuthy Chhum. I am a Graduate student at Smith College. I am working towards my Masters of Social Work (MSW) degree. I am conducting a research study on interracial relationships among the Cambodian community. I am looking for your views and perceptions around these issues surrounding interracial relationships. This research will be used in my MSW Thesis, and possible presentation and publication.

My goal in this research thesis is to gather information first hand from participants such as yourself. I would like to interview you about your perceptions involving issues of interracial relationships. I would like all participants involved with the interview process be from a Cambodian decent. Participants would have to have had grown up in Cambodia. The amount of time needed for participants is only one hour. I will have a few questions I would like to gather, but should not go beyond one hour of discussion. If permission were granted, I would like to audiotape the interview to ensure proper ideas and quotes that might be important.

During the interview process, little if any physical risk will be associated with the process. However, because of the issues being discussed, there sure will be times of personal discomfort and emotional distress. You could chose at anytime not to answer the question, or to end participation. If you feel further discomfort after the interview, I will provide a list of social workers and other mental health professionals to help with the discomfort.

Participation in this research is voluntary. All of the information you share will be greatly valued and appreciated. With the personal opinions and views you chose to share, it will help provide a foundation to exploring interracial relationships from this particular yet personal community. There will be no financial benefit to this study, however the information gathered will be used to its furthest extent to understanding Cambodians and their views on interracial relationships.

I would like to ensure all participants that confidentiality will be provided. In exception to the researchers involved with the project and advisors, names, places, and other identifying information will be hidden unless stated. I will use much of the interviews from the participants. All of which will be generalized and confidential. In the event I use a specific quote, it will be carefully disguised. Due to Federal requirements, all audiotapes, and other materials will be kept in a secure place for at least three years. For however long I need to keep the data and material, I will ensure proper methods of storage. Data will also be destroyed when no longer needed.



Please remember that participation in this research is voluntary. You may refuse to answer any questions at any point during the interview. Participants may withdraw from the study at any period of the time up until May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2008. If you chose to withdraw, I will immediately destroy all information from you. If there at any point you need clarification with anything, you can reach me through my office. If there are concerns about this research you could also reach the Chair of Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee at (413) 585-7974.

***Your signature indicates that you have read and understand the above information and that you have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study, your participation, and your rights and that you agree in to participate in the study.***

**Vuthy Chhum**

**Participant**

***It is encouraged that you keep one copy for your own records to refer back to.***

## APPENDIX B

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- 1) Do you know any Cambodian who dates other people that are not Cambodian?  
Follow up: If any, what would be the problem associated with that?
- 2) More specifically, what do you think about a Cambodian dating someone who's Black, Chinese, or White?  
Follow up: Do you think there is any benefit to dating someone who is white?
- 3) How would you feel about a family member dating outside the community?
- 4) Have you noticed a trend in the past years with dating outside the community?
- 5) Do you think there should be a concern?
- 6) Do you think there is something lost if people don't date their own race?  
Follow up: What is being lost?
- 7) Do you think there will still be people dating outside the community if there were more Cambodians?
- 8) Now that I understand your views, could you please tell me why you feel that way?

APPENDIX C  
DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS

*Identifying Information:*

Age:

Gender:

When you first came to the U.S.?

Do you have any children?

If so how many, and were they born here?

*Likert Scale: 1-7 (seven meaning strongly agree)*

On a scale from 1-7 please rate your **feelings**.

- 1) Do you think its okay for a Cambodian to date someone not Cambodian?
- 2) Do you think its okay for a Cambodian to marry someone not Cambodian?
- 3) It's okay for a Cambodian person to be involved with someone who is Black?
- 4) It's okay for a Cambodian to be involved with someone who is Chinese?
- 5) It's okay for a Cambodian to be involved with someone who is White?
- 6) Would you still accept this person in the family if they had kids that are not 100% Cambodian?
- 7) Will the Cambodian culture die if everyone is involved outside his or her race?

## APPENDIX D

### HUMAN SUBJECTS REVIEW COMMITTEE APPROVAL LETTER

March 31, 2008

Vuthy Chhum

Dear Vuthy,

*Please note the following requirements:*

**Consent Forms:** All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

**Maintaining Data:** You must retain signed consent documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

*In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:*

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

**Renewal:** You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

**Completion:** You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your project.

Sincerely,  
Ann Hartman, D.S.W.  
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Roger Miller, Research Advisor