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# Understanding Acculturation: An Exploratory Study of Tibetan-American High School Students

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Understanding Acculturation: An Exploratory Study of Tibetan-American High School Students

by

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MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the  
School of Social Work  
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St. Paul, Minnesota  
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Master of Social Work

Committee Members  
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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this research study was to understand how acculturation affects Tibetan-American high school students' ability to develop a new identity considering many variables and how that identity relates to different parts of their life and issues related to that both at home with parents and other significant relationships in life. The aspects explored are the rate of acculturation, age of arrival, familial relationship, community involvement, and level of cultural practice at home. This research paper will integrate past studies about different Asian American communities and specific issues affecting youth in an attempt to understand the current group of Tibetan American high school student's experience with acculturation. Factors such as cultural integration, defining Tibetan cultural identity, managing family roles and expectations, and managing two identities emerged from the data as primary themes. These findings support some of the past research studies about Asian American youths, yet it also shows the differences in cultural specific issues affecting immigrants and refugee populations within same racial background. The major findings indicate the need for further research to assess and understand the needs of cultural specific communities in order to provide effective assessment, service delivery, treatment planning, interventions and resources.

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Finally, special recognition goes out to my family, for supporting me through every exciting and challenging part of life. Thank you for your unconditional love and care. I would like to dedicate this success to my parents who immigrated to this country with nothing. Everything I am today is because of their hard work, struggle, resilience and undying hope to provide a better life for their children. I'm forever grateful to you.

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Literature Review.....	2
History of Tibetans.....	7
Tibetan Cultural Values and Acculturation.....	9
Conceptual Framework.....	13
Methods.....	15
Research Design.....	15
Sample.....	16
Protection of Human Subjects.....	16
Data Collection.....	17
Data Analysis.....	18
Findings.....	18
Cultural Integration.....	18
Defining being Tibetan.....	20
Family Roles and Expectations.....	23
Managing Between Two Identities.....	26
Discussion.....	29
Limitations.....	31
Conclusion and Implications.....	31
References.....	34
Appendix A.....	37
Appendix B.....	39
Appendix C.....	42

Appendix D..... 44

Appendix E..... 45

## **Introduction**

In a 2008 report presented by the United States Department of State to the Congress, UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) estimated that over 15 million people worldwide are not recognized as nationals and are therefore stateless (Proposed Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year, 2008). Many of these people fall under complex refugee-like situations, unable to claim rights or access resources. And without having legal citizenship, many are denied laws, face discrimination and challenging barriers. The United States has worked closely with UNHCR to promote fair citizenship laws and resettlement solutions for stateless persons. In the recent rise in refugee populations, the United States has admitted over 60 nationalities from remote, locations worldwide (Proposed Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year, 2008). Some of the refugees include large numbers of South East Asian refugees, most of whom had been living in camps for decades. With the influx of ethnic minority populations, officials, schools, and other providers are beginning to face challenges in addressing housing, employment, mental health, chemical abuse, medical care, and the most important of all, not having immediate access to someone who is an expert of the dominant language and culture.

With many of the refugee populations coming from various geographic and family and ethnic backgrounds, it is vital for social workers to broaden their cultural knowledge in order to understand and acknowledge the diverse needs of their clients. Extant literature consists of research studies that are primarily comparative works of the experiences of Caucasian and African American or Latino populations. There is little to no knowledge about the newly arrived immigrant and refugee populations from remote

locations. For social workers, developing cultural competency cannot be accomplished through books, trainings and workshops only, but by also using their foundational skills in actual practice such as empathy, non-judgmental practice, compassion, and honoring the client's resistance to help build a strong therapeutic alliance between the client and the social worker.

Current research continues to show disparities in resources in refugee and immigrant communities and its impact on an individual's ability to become successful in their resettlement process. The literature review will further examine and compare past research studies about immigrant and refugee populations, with emphasis on the adolescent population, with the interviewed group of participants for this research study to better understand the implications for social workers and professionals working with immigrant and refugee populations.

### **Literature Review**

Acculturation remains a topic of interest for many researchers and human service professionals. Understanding acculturation helps identify not only the culture and person but also specific issues affecting the minority community. Due to a recent increase in immigrant and refugee populations, many social service agencies, educators and community outreach programs continue to face barriers in effective communication with clients and families and cross cultural practice. To better understand this subject, what is acculturation? Many researchers have continued to generalize acculturation as a common experience faced by immigrants and refugees, when in reality each individual faces their own unique struggle and challenges of assimilating to the dominant culture.



Acculturation is an important issue, not only for communities and individuals but also for the policy makers of the new host country. It is critical that policymakers acknowledge cultural specific barriers faced by new refugees and immigrants. Without access to resources and social services, immigrant and refugee populations continue to remain at-risk for intergenerational poverty, disadvantaged lifestyle, unemployment, violence, and crime. According to Rudmin (2006), “the predominant conception of acculturation has presumed that minorities react to prolonged intercultural contact by assimilating to the dominant society, by separating from it, or by becoming bicultural, either successfully as bicultural integration or unsuccessfully as bicultural marginalization” (p. 3). Serious considerations should be made to applied topics related to intercultural issues of immigrant and refugee populations that play a major role in forming public policies and have a direct effect on millions of immigrant and refugee children and families (Rudmin, 2006). Not understanding the needs of these specific communities can leave many disparities in the areas of healthcare, education, development of immigrant children, and funding of important cultural specific programs (Rudmin, 2006).

The diversity of the United States continues to evolve with continuously changing cultures and ethnic backgrounds. After the American Indian community was already established, the first European settlers began immigrating to North America to discover a new and better life for their families and children. Since then, the concept of the “land of opportunity” emerged and remains a hopeful dream for many people living with limited resources and uncertain futures. However, some may argue with this concept because not everyone immigrated voluntarily. The deep history of slavery and segregation played a vital role in the building of America. African slaves were kidnapped and forced to work

under European American families; their journey holds many painful memories. Refugees and political asylees, who were victims of war crimes and torture, were also forced to leave behind their beloved homeland. They left behind not only their land but part of their identity and heritage. They come from distressed environments, often filled with trauma and many losses. Many refugee and immigrant families sell their land and belongings, and use their life savings in an urgent need to resettle; their best or perhaps only, alternative. Fong (1994) explains how many Asian immigrants and refugees, particularly affected by direct war and violence may often carry “preimmigration trauma” or psychological scar. This refers to specific group of immigrant and refugee populations who may be victims and/or survivors of direct acts of violence, persecution, torture, political imprisonment or faced other life threatening situations in their home country before moving to the United States, which may cause psychological scars resulting in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and/or other mental health issues. For an immigrant and refugee individual with a history of preimmigration trauma, who may or may not have adequate education or understanding of post traumatic like symptoms or mental health in general, can be at greater risk of experiencing a more challenging acculturation process compared to other immigrant or refugee individuals.

The stereotypes and myths about Asian Americans as “model minorities” or well-adjusted immigrants emphasize that Asian Americans are financially capable and more successful compared to other immigrants (Kim & Keefe, 2010). This misconception continues to restrict Asian American communities from receiving specific funds, grants and resources, and neglects to acknowledge real barriers causing multiple disparities (Kim & Keefe, 2010). It wasn't until the early 1970's when Asian Americans were

acknowledged as at-risk minorities with mental health and chemical dependency issues. With the growing concern, Asian American social work task force and forums were established to openly discuss such topics (Kim, 1973). Regardless, it is evident that Asian Americans and/or immigrants were put under the false assumption of “model minorities” and therefore faced more barriers. And even today, Asian immigrants continue to face unique barriers and challenges in their struggle to acculturate and assimilate to the dominate culture in the United States.

Acculturation holds a powerful, personal story; a story of history, ethnic preservation and sacred traditional values. Social workers working with immigrant and refugee clients must build their knowledge in the area of acculturation specific to individual culture and background. There are some social misconceptions that attempt to overgeneralize whole populations together and therefore ignore specific issues of marginalized individuals who may be suffering in isolation. According to Sanders (2012) the dominant culture portrays Asian Americans as wealthy, successful and well established people. This mainstream view fails to recognize various backgrounds within Asian American communities who may be struggling with socio-economic issues (Kim & Keefe, 2010). Although researchers in the past have attempted to understand minority communities, the majority of them solely focused on differences between Caucasian Americans and African and Hispanic Americans (Kim & Keefe, 2010). And available research on Asian Americans considers Asian Americans as one group of the population that is more advantaged than the general population (Kim & Keefe, 2010). Researchers have failed to study diverse ethnic/racial communities within the large Asian American community that come from different traditional, religious and educational backgrounds,

creating more barriers for disadvantaged Asian Americans who may lack English speaking skills and therefore be even more isolated (Kim & Keefe, 2010). Therefore, it is evident that past research on Asian Americans has been focused primarily on well-acculturated individuals who speak English and have more education and knowledge than the rest of the underrepresented Asian American community (Kim & Keefe, 2010). This leads to broadening of stereotypes and assumptions about Asian Americans portrayed in movies and on television. For example, Asian Americans are thought of as mathematicians, honor roll students, lawyers, doctors, and other familiar generalizations, when in reality these stereotypes are far from the truth. Some Asian Americans may fall into that category with high stature and successful careers, but the majority of Asian Americans are struggling families who work multiple jobs and live paycheck to paycheck (Kim & Keefe, 2010).

Acculturation also takes place at different rates. Some people are able to balance between both mainstream demands at work and school, and traditional values at home and in the local community while others struggle to find that balance and adopt extreme values in one identity over the other. There is also consideration of language and age. Not being proficient in English can cause barriers in help-seeking, making it difficult for Asian immigrants to make appointments, communicate with providers and develop new networks and knowledge (Kim & Keefe, 2010). Relocating to a new place at a younger age can be beneficial and easier in terms of learning new language and building new identity. It is also important to consider established support systems. Having a support system from the local community can make the transition easier for new immigrants and refugees. Many immigrant and refugee populations have a close community where

people know each other and use friends and relatives for support and guidance. This process helps the preservation of cultural specific communities within large dominant groups. The community provides a sense of identity and unity for people; it allows people to gather, discuss and celebrate their culture and heritage together.

### **History of Tibetans**

Tibet is one of the most remote regions in the world. It sits among the mountains of Himalaya, surrounded by picturesque views and infinite blue sky. However today, when Tibetans talk about Tibet, another image comes to mind: an image of oppression, persecution, cultural genocide, and an uncertain future. Tibet's future changed in the late 1950's when communist China declared war and forcefully occupied Tibetan land. Tibet was seen as a threat to China's political party because of its vast natural resources and minerals. Tibet being a religious nation lead by a lineage of spiritual leaders, there were no armies or weapons in stock; Tibet had no force, and no means of winning any type of war. To protect their beloved spiritual leader, the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, who was in his teens at the time, many monks and brave civilians sacrificed their lives. Soon after, the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, followed by thousands of Tibetans fled to nearby country, India, to seek refuge. Some Tibetans took refuge in Nepal and other parts of the world.

Without a national identity or a country to call home, Tibetans had to acculturate to host cultures in order to survive and maintain a lifestyle for their children and family. Tibetans currently living in Tibet continue to face oppression and persecution. Religious and cultural freedom is prohibited and any self-expression against the communist government can result in arrest, torture, imprisonment and death. Tibetan children are

forced to speak Chinese language and adopt mainstream Chinese culture. With deteriorating issues of cultural genocide, oppression, human rights violations, and harsh treatment of Tibetans inside Tibet, there's more pressure on Tibetan families outside of Tibet to maintain cultural practice. Tibetan parents take pride in teaching their children about the Tibetan culture, language, food, people, tradition, history and most importantly, the Tibetan identity. Tibetan children grow up with these instilled values embedded in them from an early age; they learn to adopt a sense of personal responsibility to practice every aspect of being a Tibetan and uphold cultural and traditional values.

In the 1950's as new refugees in India, Tibetans learned to speak Hindi, took menial jobs to survive, enrolled in schools and formed new relationships with their Indian neighbors and friends. This transition took decades of work to establish. Most Tibetans living in India now call it their new home, a place they know, and have built memories, homes and raised their families. Even with some stability and safe environment in exile, the Tibetan elders and parents worried about their children's future living as refugees in India. It was considered important to put children into schools and provide them with education and skills. And therefore, the new generation became more interested in seeking opportunities in education, business and leadership in Tibetan exile government.

In the early 90's, under President Clinton's administration a number of immigrants and refugees from different regions of the world were granted resettlement in the U.S. Due to the overwhelming number of people interested, a lottery system was put in place. Thousands of Tibetans rushed to sign up but only one thousand names were picked. One thousand Tibetans resettled in different parts of the U.S. Some were lucky

enough to have a sponsor family who helped with resettlement and finding resources. Soon the families arrived and reunited with each other and the community started to grow. Tibetan Americans faced yet another challenge of cultural preservation, especially the younger generation. Moving to a Western society, completely different from East Asian culture, is often a “culture shock” for many immigrants and refugees coming from third world countries; there is a vast difference in food, language, dress style, politics, entertainment, traditional vs. non-traditional family values, family roles, gender roles, living space, schools, mainstream vs. traditional culture, self-expression, demand on time, fast paced lifestyle and race and ethnicity. With an increasing number of younger Tibetans adapting to American culture and society, there is growing concern about how acculturation affects Tibetan youth’s ability to maintain both identities in balance.

### **Tibetan Cultural Values and Acculturation**

In order to understand some of the specific issues affecting Tibetan youth, one must first understand some of the important concepts that have significant influence on Tibetan culture, values, traditions, family dynamic and various family and community expectation and roles.

**Interdependence-** Koh, Shao, & Wang (2009) explain that East Asian families place high value on interdependence and familial relationships, and children often struggle between adopting new mainstream values and preserving ethnic identity. Ringel (2005) makes an important distinction between Western culture encouraging individuation, autonomy and independence and Asian cultures valuing familial relationships and interdependence. For example, Asian immigrant fathers often take the

role of disciplinarian, placing value and authority over children. The father also teaches his children values and traditions. The immigrant mothers may take the role of building love and relationships. There is an emphasis on individualism in the area of achievement but more interdependence in the area of maintaining familial relationships. With each parent playing a critical role in the child's life, identity development in both areas plays a critical role in child's ability to achieve successful social achievements and relationships in the future (Koh, Shao, & Wang, 2009). There is often a higher expectation for immigrant daughters to uphold cultural preservation and traditional values so the lineage remains strong and can be passed on to her offspring and so on (Koh, Shao, & Wang, 2009). Even with acculturative stress, Asian American parents continue to remain very cultural and traditional even with the intergenerational gap and have been successful in instilling important values in their children (Koh, Shao, & Wang, 2009).

**Intergenerational Conflict-** Lorenzo, Frost, & Reinherz (2000) explain that some researchers may draw an inaccurate conclusion that Caucasian and Asian American adolescents suffering similar emotional and behavioral challenges. In reality the struggles of individuals in the two groups are very different, due to many factors. Older Asian American adolescents often struggle with depression and emotional issues due to having to acculturate at a faster rate than their parents, which can result in a difficult relationship with their parents due to a shift in values (Lorenzo, Frost, & Reinherz, 2000). Researchers further state that in order to understand the relationship between Asian American adolescents and their parents, providers treating Asian American adolescents should focus on cultural and family expectations and develop interventions involving not only the client but also the family and parental figure (Lorenzo, Frost, & Reinherz, 2000).



Also, there is a difference in family roles and expectations. Kim and Keefe (2010) explain how children of recent immigrant families often are burdened with family duties and responsibilities. Children are often expected to become translators during important family issues and carry great responsibility being the family representative for their elder members, creating uncomfortable feelings and anxiety within the children (Kim & Keefe, 2010).

**Acculturative Stress**-Thomas and Choi (2006) studied a group of Korean and Indian adolescents across the U.S. using the Acculturation Scale for Asian American Adolescents and Social Support Scale. The findings identified families and adolescents who struggled with coping with acculturation related stress faced more conflicts in their relationships with each other. The adolescents felt more pressured to do well in school because of their Asian background, and to be obedient and do as told without question when directed by their parents. The acculturative stress had no significant difference between the Korean and Indian adolescents. Both Korean and Indian adolescents experienced the most stress when discussing obedience, discipline, and pressures to behave in a socially accepted manner. With many stressors and a lack of external support, the findings indicate that social workers working with immigrant adolescents should encourage social support and activities for adolescents, and also develop social support for parents to help reduce acculturative stress and better coping mechanisms (Thomas & Choi, 2006).

Ringel (2005) also explains how Western youth's struggle to find identity is often different than the struggle of Asian youth. For example, a Caucasian and an Asian

immigrant youth may be suffering from depression due academic issues yet for the Asian immigrant youth there is the addition of acculturative stress related to interpersonal conflicts due to his/her immigration experience (Ringle, 2005). Considering the difference in cultural values and beliefs about mental health services, therapists should be mindful of these cultural differences when assessing client behaviors (Ringel, 2005). Differences in beliefs about psychopathology between Asian and Western cultures could be assessed during diagnostic assessment (Ringel, 2005). It is also important to keep in mind the contributing factors, in this case, cultural specific issues that may play a role in a client's mental distress. It is also possible that an Asian immigrant youth may also suffer from depression due to academic issues but due to social stigma, cultural differences in beliefs about mental health, pressure and expectation from immigrant parents wanting their children to achieve high academics and successful careers, may also be the considering factors that discourage or prevent Asian immigrant youth from seeking mental health services, or other resources.

Fong (1994) explains how misleading stereotypes often portray Asian Americans as "model minorities" yet they continue to face discrimination and prejudice. For Asians Americans, family is an integral part of survival. Immediate or extended, family often takes on the role of advisor, counselor, therapist, and mediator. Family is the primary source of support and there is an unspoken expectation to be there for each other during difficult circumstances. Fong (1994) further explains the difference in values among Asian American immigrant and refugees and American-born Asian families. According to Fong (1994), "Immigrant families tend to bring with them and rely on the traditional values of their culture. Refugees may have to struggle to preserve their culture in their

new land of residence. By contrast, American-born Asian families struggle with different problems, such as establishing and maintaining their identity” (p. 333). Within the Asian family values, there are different family roles and expectations. For example, the eldest son is expected to provide for his parents and take on the family leadership. Women are expected to be good wives and be submissive, and daughters are expected to uphold traditional values. Children are expected to be obedient and dependent on their parents. There are also expectations about how people should act in order to keep the family pride and respect within the community. Asians often appear reserved in order to avoid behaviors that would bring shame to the family (Fong, 1994). The term “loss of face” or loss of pride, and social stature, encourages Asian families to keep the problem within their nuclear family. And in some cases using extended family as a resource to seek support and guidance. The concept of “losing face” refers to Asian individuals acting in ways that would bring shame or dishonor to the family name (as cited in Fong, 1994). Often to avoid shame, Asian families keep their problems within their nuclear family. Seeking outside help and discussing family issues in the open to an outsider is considered shameful and humiliating for the father, the authority figure (Fong, 1994). Fong (1994) further explains how social workers should highly consider the father figure in any decision made in the treatment process.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The Tibetan people’s history of Chinese occupation, being displaced from their home country, and having a refugee status, have all contributed to having a strong belief in traditional values, importance of family loyalty, respecting and trusting elders and parents in order to maintain a cohesive family structure. The interdependency framework

explains how Asian families view themselves as interdependent rather than codependent, which is often looked upon as individual failure and being dependent on others for your needs.

In first generation Tibetan American families, older children in the family often take on many adult responsibilities to help their parents and elders transition to the new home country. The concept of interdependence explains how Tibetan families have maintained support networks, close relationships, trust and personal responsibility to depend on each other for help. There are vast differences in views of self and family structure. In most Asian cultures, adulthood is defined as being able to establish harmony within the family and social structure (as cited in Ringel, 2005). In Western culture, individuality and independence is highly encouraged and valued, whereas in Asian cultures, family relationships and interdependency is considered primary and the individualized self is less emphasized and even discouraged (as cited in Ringel, 2005).

Asian family values play a critical role in maintaining cultural identity and traditional values. Many of the traditional family values come from Confucianism, with two major principles: filial piety and loss of face. Filial piety refers to “traditional patterns of social relations” which defines specific roles for men and women and each member of the family (as cited in Fong, 1994). The oldest son is expected to take the leadership role, make important family decisions, carry on the family name, and take care of the elders. Parents expect respect from their children and maintain authority in the family. Children are expected to be respectful and obedient (Fong, 1994). Respecting

parents and elders is considered one of the most important values taught and instilled in children.

With high interdependency in Asian families, the worker should expect to treat the whole family as the client (Fong, 1994). Understanding Asian family values and expected family roles and obligations can help educators, social workers and other providers deliver effective services specific to the client's culture.

## **Methods**

### **Research Design**

The purpose of this study was to explore how Tibetan high school aged students experienced acculturation at school, home, with friends, parents and other significant relationships in life. Acculturation rates were studied through generational status, language ability at arrival, family dynamic, extended family support, and family roles and expectation considering sibling ranking, between participants based on their length of time in the United States. This study contributes to the field of social work and education by identifying cultural specific issues affecting Tibetan youth through their own lens and perspective.

This qualitative study consisted of one focus group interview with Tibetan youth in order to target a large number of participants during one single event. This method was the most effective way to discuss common issues among the targeted group in this study because of their introverted personalities and not being familiar with this researcher. There were twenty one interview questions (see Appendix A) regarding the acculturation

experiences of the participant and its effect on their identity development. I received approval from President of the Board of Education Committee at the Tibetan American Foundation of Minnesota to interview Tibetan high school students who were part of a mentoring program led by a group of young Tibetan college graduates.

### **Sample**

This study used a convenience sample of Tibetan high school students who were participating in a free mentoring program at the local Tibetan Community Center. The participants included three males and one female. Three participants were 16 years old and one participant was 15 years old. This researcher gained access to this sample after previously receiving a special invitation to speak to the students about her experience as a social work graduate student.

### **Protection of Human Subjects**

This study was conducted with the approval of the University of St Catherine's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The President of the Board of Education Committee of the Tibetan American Foundation of Minnesota approved students to participate in this research. This researcher met with the President to explain the consent form (see Appendix B & C) and answer any questions or concerns. The consent form included the risks, benefits, confidentiality and voluntary nature of the study. The participants had the option to leave the study or skip interview questions at any time they wished without any consequences. To recruit participants, an informational flier (see Appendix D) explaining the nature of the study was made and distributed to individuals who frequent the

organization. A voice recorder was used with the participants' permission. After completion of the research, the data was erased from the voice recorder.

### **Data Collection**

A recording device was used to collect qualitative information regarding participant experiences. A semi-standardized interview was used to allow less structure and more flexibility in interview questions (Berg, 2012). This researcher met beforehand with both the Education Board and mentoring program staff to discuss the nature of the research and have consent forms signed. After receiving the agency's approval and parental permission, this researcher scheduled a date to meet the students at the Tibetan Community Center to introduce my research and generate interest. This researcher wanted the students to have enough information to go home and discuss the research study with their parents. Once the students were introduced to the research study, this researcher returned a few weeks later to collect the consent forms. The focus group interview took place in a private conference room to insure confidentiality. The group interview took approximately one and one half hours. The participants were asked to discuss their challenges of being bi-cultural, personal struggles and experiences related to acculturative stress and its impact on their identity development, and family story of relocating to the United States. The participants had the option to end the interview or skip questions at any time during the meeting. After the focus group interview, this researcher transcribed and decoded the data to find emerging themes.

## **Data Analysis**

To analyze the data, a conventional content analysis was used to find emerging themes. The data collected was further analyzed for surface and deep structural meanings to examine manifest and latent content (Berg, 2012). With participants' permission, a digital audio recorder was used to record the interview for transcription and content analysis. Approximately twenty one interview questions were asked during the focus group interview. To find emerging themes, both the interview and transcription were thoroughly analyzed by this researcher to find multiple or repeated themes or categories. Each theme was further explained by using direct quotes from the participants. This researcher was the sole person involved in transcribing of data.

For coding, this researcher requested Dr. Pa Der Vang's supervision to complete reliability check. Dr. Pa Der Vang reviewed the initial round of themes for this paper. The identity of the participants and the name of their school were kept confidential. The feedback and reviews were considered in the final codes and themes formed in this research study.

## **Findings**

### **Cultural Integration**

The first theme that participants discussed and surfaced from the transcripts centered on integration of two cultures and being ci-cultural. The following quotes from the participants are examples of this theme.



Participant 1: *Our school is very diverse so I have every race. Everything is half and half, Mexican, Black, White so I just take pieces of each culture. Black culture...their music, a lot of the music. White culture, probably how they dress. Mexicans, I don't know about Mexicans...I just pick up on their slangs, word choices.*

Participant 2: *I came from a mostly black and Mexican elementary school. I went to [my school], there wasn't like ghetto Black either. So I don't think there is any different kind of Black but...it was mainly Somali and Mexicans that lived nearby in [my] area. And then I went to [my middle school] mostly all White and three or four Black people in your grade and one or two Mexicans and I was like third or fourth Asian in my grade so it changed a lot. I'm comfortable with every race. Because I can go to the gym and see a Mexican guy and sit next to him and we can have a conversation and I wouldn't have trouble with that. I can also do that with any other culture, ethnic background because I have been with all these diverse people before and then I go here at Tibetan American Foundation of Minnesota, and that's all Asians, kind of mixture of all these people.*

Participant 3: *...hmm when I was little like I went to all white school and my neighbor...I have taken a lot of the White culture...I learned about Christianity too because when I was little I used to go to church with my neighbor every Sunday and I was learning all that stuff. And it's like it's more comfortable with White people...taken most of the culture and everything.*

Researcher asked: *Did you feel comfortable at the church?*

Participant 3: *Not at first...because I didn't know anybody but then I made friends.*

Participant 1: *Did they try to convert you?*

Participant 3: *...hmm no, I just learned a lot about Christianity and Bible and all those stories. I just learned...I didn't really take it all in.*

Participant 4: *I go to [my school] which is one of the most diverse schools but I don't feel like we learn much about other cultures except for like White. I feel like it's mostly the American culture other than food obviously. I feel like we mostly learn about White culture, White history, and not about other races. And we hear everything from the White point of view.*

The participants felt it was important to welcome and respect all cultures regardless of race or ethnicity. This theme identifies the importance of cultural celebration, diversity and acknowledgement by school faculty and staff.

### **Defining being Tibetan**

The second theme that emerged from the data was the challenges faced in defining Tibetan identity at home with parents and with peers in the dominant culture.

The following quotes from the participants are examples of this.

Participant 2: *... hmm I think defining yourself is mostly about who you are as a person so you can easily make friends so you can be like I'm Tibetan, and they're like oh what's that? Tibet was a nation that got taken over by China and we're*

*Buddhist. So people will drop the subject unless it came up in some way. At home it's easy because you speak Tibetan.*

*Researcher: So you are strongly attached to your Tibetan identity and feel proud to explain to people?*

*Participant 2: Yes because when I play sports, in football our coach made us pray, we prayed so we'll all pray and he'll come say a prayer and then one day he tried to make us all go to this Christian thing and that's where it first came up. He asked what religion am I. And I said I'm Buddhist, and he said would you still like to come? And I said, I would if you would like me to, I would come if you want me to but if you don't then I don't know if I would or not because usually I have plans and stuff. So I went and it was 2-3 hours of them talking about the Bible and stuff. It's easier to say oh you're from this culture and this is what you do.*

*Participant 3: My challenge would probably be like speaking and more understanding fully in Tibetan like our parents... hmmm otherwise I would know most of the culture and like what we do because my dad, he was a monk. He would always do his regular thing. My challenge, the hardest for me is speaking it clearly and understanding more.*

*Participant 1: When I went to [my school], the first thing they would ask me is what are you? So I'll say Tibetan, and they'll say "where's that?" that'll be the hardest part, explaining the whole history. They'll ask where is it on the map, I'll be like, its right here. Then they'll say "that's where China is" then you have to*

*go even more deep. But then like, the hard thing is well, there's a lot of racism at school but like, it's not heavy but like if you're close with someone, you know how you just joke around with them but then it's like that so I guess the challenging part is being like learning to know if it's a joke or like if they're actually serious about it. For example, we were taking a test and I'm not going to say I cheated but I was hinting what the answer was and then he said that he ate a dog and I didn't know he meant it as a joke because you know how I'm Asian and they consider we eat dog every time so yeah and then another trouble would be is at home which would be because I mean like for 6 years I spent in Nepal, my Popo (grandfather) would hammer these prayers into me and I come here, I forget them all so now when he visits it's like what happened to all those prayers? I would like I never recite them and I forgot them, that would be another trouble and another trouble is like speaking Tibetan to my parents. I could speak it but it's just like when you get home you spend like 8 hours speaking English to your friends so it's like getting accustomed to switching back into Tibetan mode.*

The participants felt it was important yet challenging to define and practice Tibetan identity. The participants expressed it was difficult to interact with dominant culture all day and then to come home and be expected to completely transform into Tibetan. The switch between the identities created internal conflict and strain on some significant relationships. The participants also acknowledged challenges of being a minority in the dominant culture and facing common stereotypes and generalizations from peers. The participants felt more value being placed on White culture in various ways through history lessons in class, religious event in the community, and choice of fashion style.

## **Family Roles and Expectations**

The third theme that emerged from the data was having to fulfill various family roles and expectations at home. The following quotes from the participants are examples of this.

*Participant 4: Every time we get mail and stuff and doing our taxes...they're like oh what does this say? Because they don't know, obviously they know how to speak little English but when mail comes they don't know much. And then they expect you to know everything. So I have to do a lot. I don't do much household stuff but I have to help them more with financial stuff and other stuff and sometimes they have to set up appointments, they're like oh come over here and help us out. They expect you to know everything, even though it's like you haven't learned about that yet because they expect you to know everything because they're like oh yeah you go to school you should know everything.*

*Researcher: And how does that make you feel?*

*Participant 4: I mean I don't mind doing it. But it's weird, I'll be like oh I don't understand this and they'll be like what, stop lying, stop being lazy. It's the fact that you go to school, you should help your parents but I don't know everything.*

*Participant 1: Being the oldest I have to cook, clean. My brother doesn't mow the lawn, or cleans barely. Especially after my dad had surgery on his left arm I had to do most of the heavy work...like taking out the trash and everything. But like my little brother does work actually...I'll give him credit. He is 13; he's starting to learn how to cook. My mom taught me how to cook because she said how are*

*you going to get a girl if you don't know how to cook? So she's like a girl won't cook for you so she'll just leave you.*

Participant 3: *Yea that's what my mom says...you have to learn how to cook for yourself, you're not going to expect a woman to cook for you.*

Participant 1: *...So it's not like how here in America where girls are expected to cook and guy works....well Tibetan I guess both have to do all the work.*

Researcher: *Do you think it has changed from your parent's generation maybe your mom was the only one who cooked?*

Participant 1: *I guess now she wants the guys to learn how to cook. And maybe she doesn't have a choice because she got both boys.*

Researcher: *When did you start cooking?*

Participant 1: *Like 2-3 years ago...but I can only make like 4 things...still learning.*

Participant 3: *I'm the oldest out of my three brothers. And I have to do a lot because in the beginning it was mostly my parents until 12-13 and then I started mowing the lawn, doing the dishes, cleaning, cooking and then hmmm I try to get my little brother to do it but like because I have to do all the things, he's more relaxed and he feels that he doesn't have anything to do except giving me more dishes to do. He is very annoying; he got totally into that little brother, annoying little kids.*

Researcher: *How often do you cook?*

Participant 3: *Well when I'm home the whole day, I always cook breakfast, tea and whenever my parents make momo (dumpling), I have to help and then I always clean the dishes. So whenever I'm home. When I was younger, my parents knew more than me. My dad also came here before me, got a job. My mom, she would know better Math than me when I was little because she went to school and learned the basic stuff. She would teach me how to multiply and add. They're more independent now but maybe 4 years ago, I had to help them with basically everything. My dad still makes me read the mail that we get, when he speaks, it's funny because they don't understand everything so I have to help understand some things but now they're more independent and know more stuff.*

Participant 2: *In my household, I have so many people. I have my mom, dad, my grandma, my grandpa, my uncle, and then me and my two little sisters. And me being the oldest, all I have to do is I need to get good education so I do my homework, try to make my life better as in my body, fitness and then protect my little sisters, and try to teach them to not makes as much mistakes as I did when I was small. Because when I was small, I would bounce off walls, I scrap up my knees and broke my collar bone, dislocated my shoulder. I rode my bike so hard, I decided to jump off and I hit a pole. I did so many dumb stuff. I got an electric scooter for my grandma on my 7<sup>th</sup> birthday. I drove that around and I killed my knees. I tried to make sure my sisters wouldn't make that mistake so like when they go out, I make my sister wear knee pads because I don't want her to mess up*

*her knees right now. I never really had to cook but when I do I would cook because I learned by watching my parents and my grandmother. When I was small, I didn't have anything to do and TV got boring, I tried to find companionship and my friends weren't around, I just sit in the kitchen, probably how I got big too, sit in the kitchen and watch my parents do the cooking and I'll be like oh smells so good and my grandmother does most of the cooking and she does a lot of prayers. All I have to do is take care of my sisters and set a good example which I'll try to do but a lot of times, we're all people, we're all human.*

The participants felt being the oldest child, they had the responsibility to take care of their younger siblings and prevent them from making mistakes. Most of the participants knew how to cook because they were taught by parents from an early age; cooking was considered a life skill. Some participants had more responsibility than others because of their age and lack of adult figures in the family for help and support; rather students felt they provided support for their parents. For example, the participants expressed extra responsibility of helping their parents through appointments, meetings, income tax and mail; the participants themselves didn't understand English well at times but had to interpret somehow and make sense out of it for their parents. The participants lacked resources and took mature roles in the family.

### **Managing Between Two Identities**

The fourth theme that emerged from the data was managing between two identities in two different cultures. The following quotes from the participants are examples of this.



Participant 1: *Yes, it was difficult because my mom picks me up from school and right in the car she expects me to talk in Tibetan and if I talk in English, she would be like, why are you talking in English to me? She's like you have no trouble speaking English so try to work on your Tibetan. And then like for culture wise, I would have to do the prayer bowl where you have to put water out. So if I forget to do that, she scolds me for that. They try their hardest every weekend. So my dad has this new thing, everything weekend like Saturday morning, we'll have to wake up and pray with him so he like copied the Tibetan prayer thing, he would try to explain every part because we had no idea what we were reading and he tried to teach us how to do the Losar (Tibetan New Year) things too. So like in the future we would know how to set up everything. The funny thing is, my younger brother does all the cultural stuff. If you go into his room he has the prayer bowls and everything. He asked our parents for cultural stuff and then whenever he comes to the community center for prayers, he demands to wear chupas (Traditional Tibetan dress).*

Researcher: *Where do you think he gets that from?*

Participant 1: *Probably my dad because he just grew up with my dad. I don't know what happened to me; I just soaked in the American culture.*

Participant 2: *I don't think it's that hard for me because my dad he has accepted the White culture now. When I was small, when I went to my elementary school, I used wear, baggy pants, baggy clothes, it wasn't because I was big, it was mostly because like everyone else did it there so my dad bought them so he was like "at*

*your school I can see what they're wearing" I do wear a lot of suits and stuff, I do thing that looks better on people but back then I used wear baggy sweatshirts. My dad tried to let me fit in. He didn't want me to stick out because it was already hard because I was the only Asian. I went to Tibetan cultural school, dance and a lot of other stuff. And I have my grandma and grandpa who still speak Tibetan every day. My grandpa still doesn't know good English so he'll just sit there at the dining table with tea, bag of nuts and reading a book. He likes Tibetan newspaper. He kept reading them and I just sit there and he'll tell me because for some reason a lot of people like our culture is going to die out within this generation because you always see people say, don't lose your cultural background because the first thing that goes is your language.*

*Participant 4: I can relate to that too. My parents like I tell them, like I have to convince them that extra curriculum activities are good and they're the same as education and you know how Americans are like it's good to have social life as long as it doesn't get in your way, I don't think my parents see the importance of that either. They're like you have to get your education, when you get older you can have your social life then, that's the time but right now education, education, education, and education.*

The participants expressed frustration and misunderstanding with their parents. The participants felt their parents only wanted them to strictly focus on Tibetan culture with little regard to their social life with peers. The participants also felt that their parents considered education as a key factor to success; they failed to understand the importance

of school activities, social network, and enjoying similar interests as their peers from the dominant culture. The also participants expressed added complexity of cultural identity during adolescent years, which is already a challenging time of finding one's own identity and fitting in with peer groups.

### **Discussion**

A major life change often creates some type of ripple effect in a person's life. One is expected to adapt, comply, integrate and move on without causing too much disruption in daily routine or significant relationships. A person's ability or inability to manage change becomes a judgment of their character. This can also be said about the experiences of immigrant and refugee populations. When immigrant and refugee populations face a major life change of moving to the U.S., they're also expected to quickly adapt, process, and welcome this change; there is little or no understanding of previous circumstances or traumatic experiences that brought them to their current location. Acculturation becomes one of the biggest challenges in an immigrant and refugee person's life. Through this qualitative study this researcher learned that with loving, caring, family support and extended social network, acculturation can also be a positive change in a person's life. It is also evident that this researcher found common experiences shared by immigrant and refugee youth living with two cultures that clash with each other. A majority of the participants in this research expressed struggles of switching between identities at home and with peers at school. The challenges came from having high expectations at home to maintain strict traditional culture and values yet also equally to participate in the dominant culture and acquire success. The participants stated they felt pressured to know it all in English and maintain high academic achievement

because that was their parent's dream and hope for them; their focus was becoming successful through attaining higher education and a high paying career. The participants displayed a sense of dilemma being expected to fully understand and navigate the dominant culture yet simultaneously be expected to maintain that adherence to the traditional culture. There was also role reversal in which the participants felt more responsible to manage family finances, income tax, and become involved in important adult decisions; the participants were expected to take on mature roles in the family.

From a cultural perspective, the participation in the mentoring program with other Tibetan students, having to speak Tibetan language with parents and elders, maintaining traditions at home, and attending community events with other Tibetans is vital for ethnic preservation. The research participants being one, three and seven years of age at the time of arrival, had easier experiences learning to speak English and acculturating than their parents and elders. When asked to rate self as Tibetan considering practice of Tibetan culture, language, tradition and values, on a scale of 1-10, the average score was 7. When asked if it's more comfortable to speak English or Tibetan, the average response was both. While each participant was a unique individual with unique personality and interests, their involvement in variety of community activities and cultural practice at home reinforced their Tibetan identity and restored their sense of belonging. All participants shared they spoke Tibetan at home with parents, ate Tibetan food at home and practiced Tibetan traditional values at home. The participants expressed their frustration about having high expectations at home but they also expressed understanding their parents' concern about losing language and culture and agreed that without having their parents teach them about Tibetan culture, traditions, customs and history, they may

not be able to pass it on to the next generation and may risk losing their identity and culture. Many Tibetans in Minnesota are active members of the local community and often remain involved in regular meetings, fundraisers, prayer service, and other community activities. And it is through activities like the mentoring program, Tibetan culture school, and other community events, first generation Tibetan American youths maintain and strengthen ethnic preservation and identity.

### **Limitations**

It is important to consider the limitations of this research study as only having youth participants. At times it was difficult for this researcher to schedule an appropriate time and date for the interview. In this case, the participants had difficulty remembering to bring the signed consent forms, which further delayed the research process by three weeks. In the future it would be beneficial to offer stamped envelopes addressed to the researcher in order to expedite the data collection process. This research lacked some diversity in terms of family background and relationships; all participants came from two-parent household and both parents being of traditional Tibetan background. Therefore, it would be important to also consider other diverse family structures and backgrounds of single parent households, interracial relationships, different sibling ranking and other valuable factors.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

It is important to understand Tibetan family dynamics, diverse family roles, and background history of life before and after immigrating to the U.S. Future research should include the differences and similarities in Tibetan immigrants and refugees

compared to other ethnic minority groups. To understand the current situation of Tibetans living in the U.S. and other parts of the world, it would be absolutely necessary to understand the impact of post Chinese occupation and cultural genocide inside Tibet. For social workers and other professionals working with Tibetan immigrant and refugee populations, it would be important to understand this research topic through Tibetan individual's perspective rather than generalized anecdotal theories about Asian immigrant and refugee populations. The cultural specific understanding of Tibetan individuals will further help social workers to effectively assess and treat issues impacting this specific community.

In conclusion, it would be beneficial to continue this study in order to understand the evolving differences, and similarities between the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and the future generations. Future research should include a larger pool of participants from various age groups and diverse family and educational backgrounds. With a growing community of diverse immigrant and refugee populations, it would be important to expand future research to specific minority communities whose existence may not be as obvious and consequently may lack advocacy and resources. Understanding of more cultural specific minority communities will provide social workers with greater knowledge, culture competency skills and opportunity to develop alliance with the different communities. Social workers having knowledge of micro, mezzo and macro can play a critical role in helping refugee and immigrant populations become successful in their host country. In some cases, social workers end up becoming an important agent that manages between different systems and advocates for client's rights. Although sometimes it's easier to focus on the individual client or micro work, the impact of macro practice cannot be undermined or ignored.

Social workers can not only perform individual micro work but they can also advocate on a macro level, creating greater change for the immigrant and refugee community at large.

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## Appendix A

### Research Interview Questions

1. What culture do people adopt? White/dominant culture? Black-American? Asian Pacific American? Latino?
2. What challenges have you faced in defining your *true* identity to your family, school, and peers? Do you fit the definition of a "Tibetan"?
3. Considering your gender, family values and sibling ranking, what are some of your responsibilities at home?
4. How do you manage between school life and being Tibetan at home with parents and family?
5. Do you lose culture when you don't speak Tibetan, practice certain traditions, or merge them with new ones?
6. How can one maintain one's own ethnic heritage and acculturate into the dominant culture?
7. What differences do you notice between older generation of Tibetan young adults and your current generation?
8. Who do you consider as your support system?
9. What are some of the main concerns of your parents and conflicts that arise?
10. Is there anything you would like to change about your culture?
11. Do you see your culture as a strength or weakness as you continue to develop your identity?
12. Growing up in U.S., what has been the biggest challenge, most stressful for you? How do you deal with it?
13. What role does education play in your life?
14. In future, how do you see your role impact your culture, family, community and younger generation?
15. What is your age and grade level?

16. Male or Female?
17. Where were you born?
18. If born outside of U.S., at what age did you immigrate to U.S.?
19. Who do you live with at home?
20. How do you rate yourself as a Tibetan, considering practice of Tibetan culture, language, tradition and values? 1-10 scale 1 being None, 10 being Always
21. Do you feel more comfortable speaking English or Tibetan?

## **Appendix B**

### **Parent Information and Consent Form**

#### **Understanding Acculturation: An exploratory study of Tibetan-American high school students**

#### **INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM**

##### **Introduction:**

Your child is invited to participate in a research study investigating how Tibetan-American high school aged students experience acculturation or living in between traditional and mainstream cultures at school, home, with friends, parents, and other significant relationships in life. This study is being conducted by Kunga Norzom, a graduate student at St. Catherine University under the supervision of Dr. Pa D Vang, a faculty member in the Department of Social Work. Your child was selected as a possible participant in this research because of his/her Tibetan dissent. Please read this form and ask questions before you agree to be in the study.

##### **Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is to understand how acculturation affects Tibetan high school students' ability to develop a new identity and how that identity relates to different parts of their life and issues related to that both at home with parents and other significant relationships in life. Approximately 20-25 participants are expected to participate in this research.

##### **Procedures:**

If your child decides to participate, he/she will be asked to participate in a group interview. This group will take place at the Tibetan American Community Center in St. Paul. This will be a group interview with other local Tibetan high school students. This study will take approximately one and half hours over one single session.

##### **Risks and Benefits of being in the study:**

The study has minimal risks. Your child will be asked about his/her personal experience living in between traditional and mainstream cultures at home and outside of home. This study does not put your child at any psychological or physical risks. This study will be voluntary and your child

will have the option to discontinue this research or skip group questions any time they wish without any consequences.

There are no direct benefits to your child for participating in this research.

**Confidentiality:**

Any information obtained in connection with this research study that can be identified with your child will be disclosed only with your permission; the results will be kept confidential. In any written reports or publications, no one will be identified or identifiable.

I will keep the research results in a locked file cabinet in my office and only I and my advisor will have access to the records while we work on this project. I will finish analyzing the data by April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2013. I will then destroy all original reports and identifying information that can be linked back to your child. The voice recordings will be deleted completely.

**Voluntary nature of the study:**

Your child's participation in this research study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to have your child participate will not affect your future relations with Tibetan American Foundation of Minnesota and St. Catherine University in any way. If you decide to have your child participate, you are free to stop at any time without affecting these relationships.

**Contacts and questions:**

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me, (763) 438-5175. You may ask questions now, or if you have any additional questions later, the faculty advisor, Dr. Pa D Vang, (651)690-8647 will be happy to answer them. If you have other questions or concerns regarding the study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you may also contact Dr. John Schmitt, Chair of the St. Catherine University Institutional Review Board, at (651) 690-7739.

You may keep a copy of this form for your records.

**Statement of Consent:**

You are making a decision whether or not to participate. Your signature indicates that you have read this information and your questions have been answered. Even after signing this form, please know that you may withdraw from the study at any time.

---

I consent to participate in the study. I consent to allowing my child to be audio-taped.

---

Signature of Participant

Date

---

Signature of Parent, Legal Guardian, or Witness

Date

---

Signature of Researcher

Date

## **Appendix C**

### **Assent Form**

#### **Understanding Acculturation: An exploratory study of Tibetan-American high school students**

#### **Assent Form**

My name is Kunga Norzom. I am trying to learn about Tibetan-American high school students' experience living in United States because it is important to understand how one's culture plays an important role in developing their identity(s). If you would like, you can be in my study.

If you decide you want to be in my study, you will be asked to receive your parent's permission first, and then sign the appropriate consent forms. After your parent's approval, I will schedule a group interview with other Tibetan-American high school students in the local community. This group interview will take place at Tibetan American Foundation of Minnesota in St. Paul, MN. This interview will take approximately one and half hours over one single session.

The study has minimal risks. You will be asked about your personal experience living in a different culture in United States. This study does not put you at any psychological or physical risks. This study will be voluntary and you will have the option to discontinue this study or skip group questions any time you wish without any consequences.

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this research.

Other people will not know if you are in my study. I will put things I learn about you together with things I learn about other teens, so no one can tell what things came from you. When I tell other people about my research, I will not use your name, so no one can tell who I am talking about.

Your parents or guardian have to say it's OK for you to be in the study. After they decide, you get to choose if you want to do it too. If you don't want to be in the study, no one will be mad at you. If you want to be in the study now and change your mind later, that's OK. You can stop at any time.



My telephone number is (763) 438-5175. You can call me if you have questions about the study or if you decide you don't want to be in the study any more.

I will give you a copy of this form in case you want to ask questions later.

### Agreement

I have decided to be in the study even though I know that I don't have to do it. Kunga Norzom has answered all my questions.

---

Signature of Study Participant

---

Date

---

Signature of Researcher

---

Date

## **Appendix D**

### **Informational Flyer**

The purpose of this study is to understand how acculturation affects Tibetan high school students' ability to develop new identity(s) and how that identity relates to different parts of their life and issues related to that both at home with parents and other significant relationships in life. You are invited!

Research is always voluntary!

#### **Would the study be a good fit for me?**

The study has minimal risks. You will be asked about your personal experience living in between traditional and mainstream culture. This study does not put you at any psychological or physical risks. This study will be voluntary and you will have the option to stop this study or skip group questions any time you wish without any consequences.

#### **What would happen if I took part in the study?**

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to attend a group interview for one and half hours long. This interview will be audiotaped to collect important data for research study. The data will remain confidential and you will not be identified or identifiable. This interview will take place at Tibetan American Foundation of Minnesota in St. Paul. This group interview will consist of other Tibetan-American high school students.

**To take part in Understanding Acculturation research study or for more information, please contact Kunga Norzom at (763)-438-5175**

The principal researcher for this study is Kunga Norzom, a graduate student at Saint Catherine University under the guided supervision of Dr. Pa Der Vang, a faculty member in the Department of Social Work.

## Appendix E

### Field Notes

April 12, 2013

I drove to the Tibetan Community Center. This was the choice of location by the participants because each Friday they attended the mentoring program, therefore it was an easy location to meet the participants. I scheduled the focus group interview time at 5:30 PM. I was the only one there until the first participant arrived around 5:40 PM, and then slowly the other participants came. The focus group interview didn't start until 6:10 PM. The participants apologized for being late. I brought chips, cookies and soda for refreshment. The participants were quick to eat and talk with each other. The participants also seemed bit nervous and anxious about the questions. I explained to them the purpose of this research and confidentiality guidelines. Before beginning the research I asked the participants to respect individual perspectives and ideas. The participants genuinely agreed and displayed respect for each other. The participants appeared relaxed during the interview. As they began to talk more and share their experiences, they seemed to realize the similarities they all shared with each other. This connection seemed to have empowered the participants to open up and speak up about their individual experience. The interview was casual and informal which helped ease any anxiety or fear. At the end of the interview, the participants stated they enjoyed the discussion and focus group interview process.