

What's Agent Orange?

Second-Generation Vietnamese-Americans and Agent Orange/Dioxin

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ABSTRACT

The second-generation Vietnamese-American community lacks a collective voice to advocate for redress from the United States government for the impacts of Agent Orange, an herbicide contaminated with the carcinogen dioxin used during the Vietnam War to defoliate forest cover and destroy enemy crops. To understand how second-generation Vietnamese-Americans can become engaged around the issue of Agent Orange/Dioxin (AO/D) through education, I ask three questions: (1) What do second-generation Vietnamese-Americans know about AO/D? (2) If they are educated about AO/D, how likely are they to support policies promoting U.S. financial responsibility for current and past AO/D issues? (3) What influences their support for policies, and how can we best frame educational efforts that address these factors? Through interviews with 20 second-generation Vietnamese-Americans, I evaluated their pre-existing knowledge about AO/D, gave them information about AO/D, and then inquired about how they understood AO/D in relation to their identity, barriers to their knowledge about AO/D, and their opinion on U.S. accountability. I found low levels of pre-existing knowledge about AO/D; 65% had never heard of AO/D. After reading about AO/D, 100% believed the U.S. should be held accountable for past and current impacts of AO/D, suggesting that this group may become mobilized around this issue through education. I conclude with recommendations on how to engage this group: politicizing Vietnamese-American identity, directing educational efforts to frame AO/D as an urgent issue relevant to all Vietnamese peoples, moving past a Cold-War ideology, addressing the generation gap, and situating AO/D as a contemporary environmental justice issue.

KEYWORDS

Vietnam War, environmental justice, political mobilization, generation gap, education

INTRODUCTION

Agent Orange, an herbicide used during the Vietnam War to defoliate forests and destroy food crops, has impacted millions worldwide. Between 1961 and 1971, 11-12 million gallons of Agent Orange was stored and sprayed in Vietnam (Martin 2009). The herbicide was contaminated with dioxin (2,3,7,8- tetrachlorodibenzo para dioxin), an environmental pollutant associated with cancer, reproductive and developmental issues, and disruption of hormone behavior and immune systems (Stellman et al. 2003, Schechter et al. 2006). During the war, an estimated 4.5 million Vietnamese and 2.8 million Americans were directly exposed to Agent Orange/Dioxin (AO/D), with an estimated 3 million Vietnamese suffering adverse health effects including congenital and developmental defects (Stellman et al. 2003).

Since the end of the Vietnam War, the U.S. government has not sufficiently acknowledged and addressed the environmental health effects of AO/D, especially for Vietnamese-Americans. After the war, thousands left Vietnam for the U.S as refugees and immigrants; there are an estimated 1.55 million Vietnamese-Americans currently in the United States (U.S. Census 2010). Many of these Vietnamese-American refugees may have been exposed to AO/D whether or not they were directly in the war; some refugees fought in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam alongside U.S. troops and handled AO/D directly (Martin 2009). Vietnamese-Americans who lived in Vietnam may have been exposed by being sprayed, eating contaminated food, or consuming contaminated meat, poultry, or fish (CGFED 2003; Schechter et al. 2001). Exposed parents can also transmit dioxin to their children through conception or through breast milk (Schechter et al. 2001; Dwernychur et al. 2002). Yet, the U.S. government has not officially recognized possible AO/D-related health conditions for Vietnamese-Americans. For example, a 1985 out-of-court \$180 million settlement with the companies that manufactured Agent Orange only applied to U.S. veterans, not Vietnamese or Vietnamese-Americans (Sand 1985). And the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs gives U.S. army veterans proven to be exposed to AO/D billions of dollars every year in compensation for medical expenses (Birman 1990).

Despite this lack of attention, advocacy groups are currently promoting policies that could address past and current impacts of AO/D. However, in order to advance this agenda, Vietnamese-Americans need to be personally engaged in the issue. For example, a Plan of Action proposed by the US-Vietnam Dialogue Group on AO/D calls for "help to eliminate the public health threat of dioxin hot spots, improve the lives of people with disabilities, and restore the defoliated lands (US-VN Dialogue Group on Agent Orange/Dioxin 2012)." In addition, the *Victims of Agent Orange Relief Act of 2011*, a bill currently in the House of Representatives, could for the first time assist Vietnamese-Americans affected by exposure to Agent Orange (United States Congress 2011). Vietnamese-Americans are a potentially powerful group of stakeholders to push for these policies, both of which could be funded by the U.S. government, as Vietnamese homeland issues have been a powerful platform for Vietnamese-American engagement (Ong and Meyer 2008). However, this community's popular focus on an anti-communist agenda complicates addressing issues of AO/D, as Vietnamese-Americans may be reluctant to collaborate with or assist the current Vietnamese government (Le 2011). It is still important to move past this potential division, given the particular influence of this group; Vietnamese-Americans can influence this movement not only because members may be direct or indirect victims of AO/D exposure, but also because they may have identity-based interests, and can leverage power as a diasporic community to act as a bridge between America and Vietnam (Rowley and Moldoveanu 2003).

Although some Vietnamese-Americans are currently engaged either in organized efforts or as individuals, there still lacks a collective voice to advocate for AO/D-related restitution or remediation. This may be due to a lack of awareness about the history and impact of AO/D on Vietnamese-Americans. Both VIET Fellows, a non-profit dedicated to Vietnamese-American leadership, and the Vietnam Reporting Project, which funded several Vietnamese-American journalists' special coverage on AO/D, use education as a tool to engage Vietnamese-Americans (Ha 2012). For example, during the past two years, VIET Fellows has engaged over 20 young Vietnamese-Americans through a fellowship program in which they learn about AO/D through service-learning and educational tours in Vietnam. Despite the apparent success of these educational programs to promote

advocacy, there still remains no published literature on whether and how education can be a spark for political mobilization of young Vietnamese-Americans.

To understand how second-generation Vietnamese-Americans can become engaged around the issue of AO/D through education, I ask three questions: (1) What do second-generation Vietnamese-Americans know about AO/D? (2) If they are educated about AO/D, how likely are they to support policies promoting U.S. financial responsibility for current and past AO/D issues? (3) What influences their support for policies, and how can we best frame educational efforts that address these factors?

METHODS

I interviewed 20 self-identifying second-generation Vietnamese-Americans. For the purposes of my study, I used the term second-generation to include both those who immigrated to the United States from Vietnam before their young teenage years (commonly referred to as 1.5 generation) and those who were born in America. Most of my interviewees grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area and were between the ages of 19 and 30. I recruited my interviewees through personal connections and snowball sampling. To ensure an equal representation across age groups, I interviewed seven people between the age ranges of 19-23 and 26-30 and six people between 23-26. As an incentive, I compensated each interviewee with a \$10 gift card. To ensure privacy, all subjects were assured of their confidentiality; they were not asked to provide their name, although I did record contact information for possible follow-up questions. I only interviewed one person face to face; the other 19 interviews were through online video-chat or by phone.

Demographics

At the beginning of the interview, I documented socio-demographic information, including gender, income level, education level, and current city of residence. I also collected information about country of birth; if respondents were born in Vietnam, I asked them to state the age at which they came to America.

Identity and Personal Experiences

I documented whether and how Vietnamese-Americans may be particularly attached to the issue of AO/D due to their identity and personal experiences, such as family history or relation to Vietnam. I first asked interviewees questions about what being Vietnamese-American means to them, such as whether or not they feel closely attached to this identity and what type of activities or actions make them feel Vietnamese-American. Second, I asked participants questions about whether they had family members who participated directly in the war, if they had family members in Vietnam, and if they had ever visited Vietnam.

Pre-existing Knowledge of AO/D and Sources of Knowledge

To document participants' knowledge of AO/D before the interview, I asked open-ended questions such as "When I mention Agent Orange, what do you think of? What was it? What image comes to mind?" This method was well-suited for my study, as many participants were completely unaware of Agent Orange, while others had a basic misunderstanding of the topic. If the participant showed some level of knowledge, I asked more specific questions about current health impacts or where the herbicide was used. I also asked questions about their sources of knowledge, inquiring if they had heard or discussed AO/D with family, friends, at school, or through popular media such as websites, magazines, or television.

Introducing Knowledge about AO/D

In order to evaluate the opinions and attitudes towards AO/D, I ensured that my interviewees all had a base-line level of knowledge about AO/D. All participants read a one-page summary about AO/D and its use in Vietnam (see Appendix A). The summary was a slightly altered version of one used by the Communications Consortium Media Center's 2009 focus groups on addressing the impact of AO/D in Vietnam (Belden Russonello & Stewart 2009). I attempted to provide objective information about Agent

Orange usage, dioxin contamination, environmental/health impacts, and current information about compensation for different groups affected by AO/D. In video-camera and phone interviews, I e-mailed the document to them during the interview to ensure that they did not read the information beforehand.

Assessing Attitudes To Introduced Knowledge

General Opinion

In order to understand interviewees response to the introduced information, I asked about how they initially felt, and if in general AO/D seemed like a big problem or a minor problem. Then I asked participants to identify the AO/D-associated issue they found most important to them and identified themes. To explore how AO/D fits in the context of respondents' personal identity and history, I asked respondents whether or not the issue of AO/D related to them as Vietnamese-Americans, and if so, how.

Barriers to Knowledge

To identify barriers to knowledge about AO/D among second-generation Vietnamese-Americans I asked respondents why they have not heard more about AO/D through sources such as family, school, media, and friends.

Assessing Support for Restitution and Remediation Policies

I then asked participants three questions to ascertain their opinion on what should be done next. First, in order to evaluate whether or not participants believed the U.S. should be held accountable, I stated, "Some people say that the U.S. should pay for AO/D remediation and services for those affected, but some people say the issue of AO/D was not their fault and it is a legacy of war." Then I asked, "What do you think?" Second, I described the *Victims of Agent Orange Relief Act of 2011* as an "act that proposes to provide health care compensation for those affected by AO/D including but not limited to

U.S. veterans, Vietnamese-Americans, and Vietnamese citizens." I then asked participants whether or not they would support such a bill based on my description and whether or not they had any concerns about the bill that might prevent their full support. Third, to ascertain my respondents' perspective on the anti-communist sentiment in the Vietnamese community, I stated, "some Vietnamese-Americans may feel betrayed if we help the people who drove them out of their country, whereas others may believe that political differences should not interfere with this issue." Then I asked, "Is this a reason not to provide monetary assistance? Why or why not?" Although this phrasing may introduce bias given the words "fled" and "help," I phrased my question to avoid the phrase "anti-communist," which some pilot study participants did not understand.

RESULTS

Demographics

Twelve participants were female (60%). Eight emigrated from Vietnam at an average age of five (Table 1). Eighty-five percent of participants had some college education or more. Additionally, 70% of participants identified their political leaning as either moderate or liberal.

Table 1. Respondent demographics

Gender	Male	Female			
	8	12			
Age (Years)	19-23	24-27	27-31		
	7	6	7		
Highest Level of Educational Attainment	High school degree	Some college	College graduate	Post-grad	
	3	5	11	1	
Country of Birth	U.S.	Vietnam			
	12	8			
Political Orientation	Very liberal	Somewhat liberal	Moderate	Somewhat conservative	Very conservative
	2	7	7	4	1

Pre-Existing Knowledge

Most respondents had never heard of AO/D, and those who did either had limited knowledge or were misinformed. 65% had never heard of Agent Orange, and 19 (90%) never heard of dioxin (Table 2). Of the 35% who had prior knowledge of Agent Orange, most identified it as a dangerous chemical sprayed during the Vietnam War. Of these seven participants, two associated AO/D with images of severe birth defects in young Vietnamese children and three others knew of the ongoing impact of AO/D in Vietnam. One participant misinterpreted Agent Orange as a sort of napalm. Interviewees had far less knowledge of dioxin, with only two respondents having previously heard of it.

Table 2. Pre-Existing Knowledge & Sources of Knowledge of AO/D

	Yes	No
Heard of Dioxin	2	18
Heard of Agent Orange	7	13

Sources of Knowledge

Of those who knew about Agent Orange, they had learned about or discussed Agent Orange in a formal educational setting such as K-12 and college courses (six participants), with family (four participants), with friends (two participants), or through popular media such as movie documentary or newspapers (three participants). Other sources included a cultural parade and a Vietnamese-American radio station.

Table 3. Sources of Knowledge of AO/D

Sources of Knowledge	
Family	4
Friends	2
School	6
Popular Media	3

*7 individuals had prior knowledge of AO.

3 participants learned from AO/D through more than one source.

Attitudes To Introduced Knowledge

General Opinion

Important Concerns. After reading the passage, all participants responded that AO/D "is an important issue." Eleven respondents believed that the lasting impact of AO/D for future generations was the most important issue (Table 4). There was a general shock that new generations are still being exposed to AO/D. Seven participants felt most concerned over the health impact for Vietnamese peoples, and two were most concerned about the environmental damage on forest and croplands.

Table 4. Topics Respondents Found Most Important

Topic	
Lasting Impact for Future Generations	11
Health Impact in Vietnam	7
Environmental Damage	2

Vietnamese-American Identity. All participants identified primarily as Vietnamese-American, not Vietnamese nor American. Participants described the Vietnamese-American experience with a sense of being in between but not a part of either American and Vietnamese mainstream cultures. The eight participants born in Vietnam felt that they would always be Vietnamese-American due to their country of birth. In addition, many participants noted key cultural activities that made them feel Vietnamese-American such as: participating in Vietnamese holidays, speaking some level of Vietnamese, and eating Vietnamese food. Seven participants belonged to Vietnamese organizations such as Vietnamese Student Associations or volunteer organizations.

Most participants felt that, as Vietnamese-Americans, they were inherently connected to the topic of AO/D, but did not feel as though they could be personally impacted. Participants felt connected due to their identity and the possibility that they may have family currently being exposed to AO/D. Five participants voiced concern

about family still in Vietnam, and six felt that as Vietnamese-Americans it is important to be educated about historical events such as AO/D. Respondents did not feel connection due to the possibility of being personally exposed; 18 participants did not view Agent Orange as having the possibility of affecting their family or personal health. Some said this was due to a lack of scientific evidence. One participant said, "I have never heard about people worrying about dioxin in my blood. I have never seen any Vietnamese-American dioxin-blood-testing service. It's hard to believe there's dioxin in me." Another explanation for this dismissal of possible exposure was that participants associated AO/D with severe physical disability. For example, one interviewee said, "Nobody in my family in Vietnam or in America has any severe disability, like the people that I think of in the pictures of Agent Orange victims. I mean, maybe even if we were exposed it wasn't that severe anyway."

Barriers to Knowledge

Family. When asked why they did not learn more about AO/D through family, nine participants mentioned barriers between themselves and members of the first-generation, including their parents. Respondents felt their elders did not talk about the experiences of the Vietnam War in general. One interviewee, whose father fought in the war said, "I don't know if my dad knows about Agent Orange. Even if he did know, he wouldn't tell me anyway. He survived through years of re-education camps. I know for sure he was affected by the war, but he never tells me anything about it." Four participants said this generational gap was exacerbated by a language barrier; one interviewee who was born in Vietnam said, "I can't believe I came here when I was seven and now my Vietnamese is nowhere near the level it would need to be to talk to my parents about something like Agent Orange."

Education and Media. Only six participants (30%) discussed or learned about AO/D in their formal educational experience or through a media outlet. Interviewees said that even if they learned about the Vietnam War in their classroom, the knowledge was limited to basic facts rather than the implications of war. Some believed this might be due to a

shame that the U.S. government may harbor for these actions. For example, one participant said about their experience learning about the Vietnam War, "In my high-school class...When we learned about Agent Orange, I just assumed it was an issue of the past. I don't think the U.S. government likes people to know how they go and mess stuff up in other countries, anyway."

General lack of awareness. Three participants (15%) said they felt they did not know much about the Vietnam War in general, thus leading to their specific lack of awareness of AO/D. "I feel bad, like I should know what happened during this time. It's how we got here anyway," said one participant who never heard of Agent Orange.

Assessing Support for Restitution and Remediation Policies

After reading the AO/D summary, all participants supported the idea of the U.S. government providing compensation or help to those affected by Agent Orange/Dioxin and answered "yes" to the question "Do you think the U.S. should be financially responsible to address ecological and human impacts of AO/D?" One popular reason was that the U.S. was directly involved in spraying and handling AO/D; "They made a mess, so they should clean it up" said one interviewee. Another reason to support this statement was that some felt current victims exposed to AO/D are innocent. Voicing their support for U.S. financial responsibility, another said, "I don't like this idea that people in Vietnam never meant to be born into any of this. Why should one war, determined by a few people in power, have to ruin the lives of hundreds of thousands of people even after its over?" Despite the general support for such policies, three interviewees supported this statement but voiced concerns. Two worried that the Vietnamese government may mishandle the money, while one believed that U.S. providing funding may create a "domino effect for other countries to want to start claiming that the U.S. should compensate them too. I mean, what about Hiroshima or Iraq or even the Second World War? Should we go back and help them?"

All interviewees answered "yes" to "Would you support the *Victims of Agent Orange Relief Act of 2011*" although six people raised issues about availability of funding.

All respondents responded "no" to the question "Some Vietnamese-Americans may feel betrayed if we help the people who drove them out of their country. Is this a reason not to help?" One popular explanation was that the people affected by AO/D should not be viewed as enemies. For instance a respondent said, "political differences should not matter," while another said, "funding help for AO/D should be a philanthropic cause. It's not about people, not politics." The idea that those affected by the war are innocent civilians was again a popular reason; one interviewee said, "the people affected in Vietnam are innocent and were born into a communist country. It's not like they want their government to be like that."

Table 5. Respondents' Support For Initiatives

Question	Yes	Yes w/ Concerns	No
Do you think the U.S. should be financially responsible to address AO/D issues?	18	2	0
Would you support the bill HR2634, the <i>Victims of Agent Orange Relief Act of 2011</i> ?	14	6	0
Some Vietnamese-Americans may feel betrayed if we help the people who drove them out of their country. Is this a reason not to help?	0	--	20

DISCUSSION

I found that respondents knew very little about AO/D, yet after learning about the issue, they felt that it is inherently connected to their Vietnamese-American identity. Generally, they supported holding the U.S. financially responsible for addressing ecological and human impacts of AO/D and did not feel as if the current political state of Vietnam should be a reason not to provide assistance. Those who previously knew of Agent Orange learned about the issue through family, formal education, and popular

media. However, they remained either poorly informed or misinformed about key aspects of Agent Orange, including its continuing impact.

My main finding is that for young Vietnamese-Americans, learning about AO/D can prompt support for a movement to address AO/D-related issues. I provide the following recommendations on ways to empower this community for future advocacy: politicize the Vietnamese-American identity, direct educational efforts to frame AO/D as an urgent issue relevant to all Vietnamese peoples, move past a Cold-War ideology, address the generation gap, and situate AO/D as a contemporary environmental justice issue.

Politicizing Vietnamese-American Identity

My interviewees felt similarly to other Vietnamese Americans who relate their identity with cultural practices (Zhou and Bankston 1998) and the sense of being on the margins of two margins, which Thai (1999) terms "bipolar marginality." Despite taking pride in being able to participate in certain Vietnamese activities such as going to pagoda or speaking Vietnamese, participants still experienced never truly belonging to either Vietnamese or American identities.

Given that members of this group felt strongly connected to the Vietnamese-American identity, learning about AO/D may be the spark to politicizing their cultural identity. Despite experiencing "bipolar marginality," as young adults, Vietnamese-Americans can still continue to reconstruct their ethnic identities (Stonequist 1937; Thai 1999; Zhou and Bankston 1994; Zhou and Bankston 1998). By participating in advocacy around the transnational issue of AO/D, Vietnamese-American solidarity may be strengthened by ethnic group consciousness and therefore spur engagement in this public policy cause (Junn and Masouka 2008; Vo 2004). One participant spoke about the yearning to learn more about their own history: "See, learning about this stuff [AO/D] makes me realize I need to learn more about being Vietnamese. There's so much to my history I have yet to explore. This just isn't right." Learning this history, which is highly impacted by war and public policy, can be a means of forming a politicized Vietnamese-American identity that can engage members in social justice causes.

Incorporate AO/D as an Urgent and Relevant Issue In Education

All participants had very little or no knowledge of, or were misinformed about, AO/D. This stems in part from the general omission of AO/D from participants' educational experience. The finding that the majority of participants did not learn about Agent Orange in school suggests the need to integrate more relevant and contemporary Vietnamese-American experiences into formal education. When asked about the material presented in high school regarding the Vietnam War, none of the interviewees said they learned anything about experiences of Vietnamese people, much less the continuing impact of AO/D. One participant said, "perhaps America does not want to reflect on what it did wrong, why would they want to admit their fault? [...] I only learned about politics, facts and figures, not the experiences of people themselves." One explanation for this biased view of the Vietnam War is that the "official" view serves to promote the interests of the U.S. government by only showing factual details, thus de-humanizing war (Fleming and Nurse 1982, Griffen and Marciano 1980, Logan and Needham 1985). As students, interviewees also did not learn about the trials of the Vietnamese refugee diaspora such as refugee history, resettlement, or contemporary issues such as AO/D (Beevi et al. 2003).

When integrating AO/D into K-12 or college curricula, AO/D must be presented as an ongoing, pressing issue. Most of my participants felt the most important aspect of the AO/D issue was that its impact continues for generations. Given this concern, AO/D should not be framed as a historical remnant, but rather as a contemporary issue. However, Vietnam is often represented as a static country in textbooks and is consistently only associated with the war (Beevi et al. 2003). One initiative to overcome this and make education more relevant is "Vietnamese Americans: Lessons in American History," the first comprehensive curriculum on Vietnamese-American experiences. In 2000, the Orange County Asian and Pacific Islander Community Alliance spearheaded this initiative in order to expand the history of the war past "one-dimensional images [and] ... bits of parents' experiences" and provide a way to learn about the evolution of these new Vietnamese communities and their ongoing issues, including AO/D (Beevi et al. 2003).

In addition to emphasizing continuing impacts, AO/D should be framed as an issue that directly relates to and impacts all Vietnamese-Americans. Most participants felt they were affected due to their Vietnamese-American identity and a sense of obligation to other Vietnamese peoples, yet a few felt AO/D did not relate to them because they did not know anybody “affected” by Agent Orange or dioxin. This false sense of security not only inhibits a deeper connection to the issue, but also highlights that interviewees feel that only those with very severe disorders (i.e. physical disability) are affected by dioxin (Shweik 2011). Yet dioxin can cause many “invisible” chronic health issues, such as cancer (Schechter et al. 2006). Some interviewees had family in dioxin "hot spot" cities such as Bien Hoa or Da Nang, but said with assurance that their family was not exposed to dioxin (Dwernychuk 2005). When I probed some interviewees with the question, “but how are you sure?” they could not provide justification for this perspective. Their perception that they are not affected by AO/D is perpetuated by the lack of scientific research around Vietnamese-Americans and exposure (Nguyen 2011). Despite this lack of scientific evidence, educational efforts should still aim to build an empowering framework that can deconstruct the belief that AO/D is a philanthropic cause for a disabled, otherized victim of AO/D.

Situating AO/D as pressing and relevant into the educational system may have potential, but given the difficulty of such task educators should seek other venues of informing this group about AO/D. If AO/D continues to be underrepresented as a topic in popular education, outreach efforts may be able to focus on developing workshops in community organizations as a primary means of reaching the greater public. The Make Agent Orange History campaign provided two additional methods to increase awareness - - have students ask professors to include a unit on AO/D in their class and support academic researchers to focus a thesis or dissertation to this topic (Make Agent Orange History, 2012).

Moving Past Cold-War Ideology

Most interviewees did not feel the political state of the Vietnamese government was a reason to withhold funding, showing that young Vietnamese-Americans may be

less likely to embrace the anti-communist ideology supported by many first-generation members. In 2000, 40% of Vietnamese-Americans polled living in Orange County, CA said that “fighting communism” was a “top priority” or “very important,” even over improving their own health care or financial security (Collet 2000). Researchers argue that the anti-communist ideology creates “structural holes,” social divides that make it difficult for the community to organize around common goals, such as AO/D (Le 2009). Despite this strong popular sentiment and possible difficulty, my findings align with research in which the younger generation of Vietnamese-American leaders expressed less anti-communist sentiment than the older ones, yet still believed in directing political actions towards Vietnam (Ong and Meyer 2008). Most saw the issue in humanitarian terms; one interviewee said, “It doesn’t matter what political state these people were born into. Helping them is the right thing to do.”

Transforming this general opinion into actual action around AO/D may be complicated by the fact that there are second-generation Vietnamese-Americans engaged campaigns against the current Vietnam government. For example, in 2004, second-generation Vietnamese American legislators backed a resolution to create a “Communist-Free Zone” in Garden Grove and Westminster, CA, two main cities for Vietnamese-Americans (Thu-Huong 2005). A second example is the 2012 campaign to “stop expanding trade with Vietnam in the name of human rights,” sponsored by prominent organizations including the Mid-Atlantic Union of Vietnamese Student Associations (MAUVSA 2012). Many young Vietnamese-Americans support a 2012 petition that garnered over 130,000 online signatures and rallied 500 Vietnamese-Americans in front of the White House to demand that the U.S. government not grant preferential tariffs on goods from Vietnam until imprisoned human rights activists are released (Kopetman 2012).

Although this support for human rights is a commendable effort to mobilize for equity in the homeland, campaigns like this may actually be counterproductive for the current AO/D movement, which often supports U.S. funding to the Vietnamese government. Although most participants believed AO/D is an issue that should be addressed, actual mobilization may be more difficult as young Vietnamese-Americans “often feel reluctant to voice contrary opinions” to the older generation due to “political

pressure and filial piety" (Nguyen 2003). This change can occur only if young Vietnamese-Americans are able to voice their opinion that AO/D is a humanitarian issue that should not be hindered by political differences. Social justice movements like these be aligned only if we adopt a new framework that can hold the current government of Vietnam responsible for human rights violations and to help those affected by AO/D, rather than just communist policies (Thu-Huong 2005). Financial compensation for AO/D to Vietnamese nationals can materialize once the Vietnamese-American community is able to let go of the remnants of the Cold War (Le 2011).

Addressing the Generation Gap

Most interviewees never discussed AO/D with family, perhaps due to a general lack of communication about the Vietnam War between generations. When asked why he never heard of Agent Orange through his parents, one interviewee said, "my father was in the war but he never wants to talk about it...People want to cover it up. [He] doesn't want [me] to live with the burden of knowing about it." This unwillingness to speak about the war signifies that pre-migration traumatic experiences do cause psychological distress for Vietnamese refugees (Birman and Tran 2008). There is evidence that Vietnamese-Americans live with post-traumatic stress disorder, a condition of anxiety that develops after psychological trauma which may prevent members of the first-generation from bringing up stories and memories of the war (August and Gianola 1987; Fawzi et al. 1997; Silove et al. 2007). In addition to the silence induced by trauma, participants noted that language barriers are another impediment to learning about AO/D; one participant said, "I wouldn't even know the vocabulary to talk to [my parents] about this." This reflects a prominent language gap found between the generations in San Jose, CA, where young members primarily rely on English and older members primarily rely on Vietnamese (Collet and Selden 2003).

A successful AO/D movement must address this generational divide between young and older Vietnamese-Americans. One strategy is to facilitate a dialogue between generations not only about AO/D, but also about the war in general. In April 2012, VIET Fellows hosted a "Gia Đình Họp Mặt," or family gathering in San Jose, CA as an

outreach technique (VIET Fellows 2012). The event brought together younger and older Vietnamese-Americans along with leaders in the AO/D movement to provide VIET Fellows participants a space to speak their experiences working around the issue of AO/D and with people living with disabilities in Vietnam. According to a VIET Fellows participant, first-generation Vietnamese-Americans at the event saw the importance of AO/D not because of its political and historical context, but because young Vietnamese-Americans cared so deeply about the issue (Personal communication). This type of community space may ease possible tensions around anti-communist ideologies. This summer of 2012, VIET Fellows will host another "Gia Đình Hẹp Mắt" in Southern California.

Relating AO/D To Contemporary Domestic Issues

AO/D should be framed as a living legacy of the war that is both a homeland issue, one directly affecting the population of Vietnam, and a domestic issue, one directly affecting Vietnamese-American communities. It is important to establish this link, given that the issue of AO/D is unique in its ability to connect Vietnamese nationals to Vietnamese-Americans; both are powerful stakeholders given their potential exposure to AO/D. I found that when respondents expressed concern about AO/D, it was mostly directed at relatives still back in Vietnam, rather than themselves and their relatives here in America. As previously discussed, the belief that AO/D only impacts people in Vietnam is problematic. However, this concern for the homeland can still be influential as young Vietnamese-Americans identify improving the conditions of people in Vietnam as an important issue to the community (Le 2011; Ong and Meyer 2008). Building this political concern for the homeland can be powerful, as in a recent poll fifty percent of young Vietnamese-American respondents agreed with the statement "mobilization on homeland issues provides a foundation for subsequent political mobilization on domestic issues" (Le 2009).

Members of this group may be inspired to mobilize around AO/D if they are given examples of how young Vietnamese-Americans are at the forefront of other environmental justice issues. For example, Vietnamese nail salon workers currently face

occupational hazards associated with chemical exposure at their workplace (Federman et al. 2006, Quach 2010, Roelofs 2008). To make AO/D more relevant, AO/D exposure should be compared to exposure to chemicals in nail polish. In order to address this issue, the California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative was formed and includes Vietnamese-Americans in order to "proactively address health and safety concerns facing the nail salon worker community (California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative 2012). A second example of young Vietnamese-American leadership is the movement to support Vietnamese-American fishing communities affected by the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill in Louisiana. Currently Vietnamese-American youth are calling for accountability from the federal government and providing legal educational services for impacted community members (Damian 2010). In order to dispel the myth that AO/D is a legacy of the past that young Vietnamese-Americans cannot do anything about, it is important to link AO/D to present-day issues these communities face.

Limitations

My respondents differ from the greater second-generation Vietnamese-American population in age, political view, education level, and emigration experiences; thus, my results cannot be extrapolated to the entire Vietnamese-American community. My study population comprised primarily college-educated participants with liberal values, potentially increasing their willingness to support humanitarian aid and U.S. compensation. Additionally, I did not conduct interviewees anonymously, and interviewees could have been biased to support the initiatives I proposed if they knew of my personal background working for politically progressive Vietnamese-American groups. Although conducting interviews over the phone and internet was convenient, interviewees had the potential to research additional information about AO/D during the interview. For example, one interviewee searched for images online of people living with physical deformities during the interview. These images increased his negative attitude about AO/D and also supported his misconception that AO/D primarily causes physical disability. Furthermore, my research's qualitative nature and snowball sampling technique prevent my results from being projectable to the general population. Despite these

limitations, there is potential for inference to the experiences of AO/D knowledge and mobilization of other communities in the Vietnamese-American diaspora. Lastly, my research is an investigation into the effect of knowledge on attitudes. It is impossible to infer participants' likelihood to actually mobilize or invest in the AO/D movement.

Future Research

My proposed action items can be implemented and evaluated to assess their usefulness and relevance for this demographic group. Second, in order to better understand the nuances of the community, future research should examine how first-generation Vietnamese-Americans feel about AO/D, what their pre-existing knowledge is, and how they too may become engaged. Third, research should further explore possible incentives for members of this group to participate in community movements and what issues (homeland or domestic) they find most important. Lastly, documentation of how AO/D has affected Vietnamese-American communities is needed to provide sufficient scientific data to promote greater education regarding the toxin. For example, there are no scientific studies to measure dioxin-exposure levels in the community yet, and studies tracking the incidence of dioxin-related diseases fail to include Vietnamese-Americans (Ngo 2006).

Conclusion

My research shows that introducing AO/D to young Vietnamese-Americans may catalyze community engagement, particularly in mobilizing support for U.S. political accountability and financial restitution to those affected by AO/D. Young Vietnamese-Americans leaders have collectively organized around issues in the past and there is evidence that they believe in their agency to influence the decisions of not only the Vietnamese-American community but also those of the U.S. government (Le 2011). By adopting an AO/D framework that politicizes the Vietnamese-American identity to bridge generational and ideological gaps, young Vietnamese people in America can add

momentum to the growing movement to back policies that support U.S. redress for affected communities in America and Vietnam.

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APPENDIX A

AO/D Summary

Agent Orange was an herbicide that U.S. forces sprayed in rural parts of Vietnam to kill trees, shrubs, and food crops. The production of Agent Orange stopped in the 1970s and is no longer used. The damage done during the conflict, however, continues to affect the environment and ecosystem in parts of Vietnam. In some of the areas that were sprayed soil erosion and landslides have lowered soil nutrients levels and there are now different species where the pre-war forests were an ecologically balanced mixture of plants and animals.

Dioxin is a chemical that resulted from the production of Agent Orange. It is a "persistent organic pollutant" which can affect the health or shorten the lives of people exposed to it. Dioxin continues to be toxic for decades. It can attach to fine soil particles, which are then carried by water downstream and settle in the bottoms of ponds and lakes. In Vietnam, it continues to affect people who eat dioxin-contaminated fish, mollusks, and birds, especially around a handful of dioxin "hot spots." The Vietnam Red Cross estimates that dioxin has affected up to 3 million Vietnamese, of whom 150,000 are children with birth defects.

In American veterans, exposure to dioxin has been linked to leukemia, prostate cancer, type II diabetes and birth defects in the children of the veterans exposed. The Veterans Administration pays for Vietnam veterans' health care for many of these conditions, and veterans' groups are working to expand the list of covered conditions. To date, no compensation exists for Vietnamese-Americans exposed to Agent Orange/Dioxin.