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# Labor market channels: perceptions of Vietnamese immigrants on accessing jobs in Chicago

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Labor Market Channels:  
Perceptions of Vietnamese Immigrants on Accessing Jobs in Chicago

A Thesis  
Presented in  
Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

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BY

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## **Abstract**

My thesis establishes the factors that lead first generation female Vietnamese immigrants towards or away from employment in the nail niche from the role of employers, industries, government policies, and the agency of community development. Immigrants entering the United States labor markets have historically been subjected to culturally interpreted skills valuation and socialized to work in specific service industries. As a result, many first generation Vietnamese immigrants feel that they have little choice beyond underemployment in low wage jobs while struggling to earn a living. Employment history, education credentials, language skills and social networks are among the most well-known factors that lead immigrants towards niche employment. However, niche employment is also a result of socialization in the U.S., discrimination, stigmatized work, devalued skills, and social stigma. The development of the nail niche has created a space in U.S. labor markets and beyond for Vietnamese immigrants to reject secondary labor markets by using cultural advantages such as Vietnamese language instruction and ethnocentric social networks. Industry regulations and employer strategies have made room for the degradation of work, which when combined with racial and ethnic differentiation creates specific job categories for immigrants and minorities. Ethnic niches provide the similar employer strategies for a newly protected class of low wage workers, with different political negotiations of racial hierarchy than secondary labor markets. It is important to understand ethnic niche employment not only for its economic role in the lives of immigrants, but as a complex intersection of skill valuation, social capital versus human capital, politics of exclusion, the creation of advantage where it had not previously existed, and a protected cultural identity through industry authority. As a result of historic, social and economic influences on this population, nail care has become easy employment, often meant to provide income during the process of incorporation into American life. As ethnic niches have become normalized in the U.S., the permanence of employment in ethnic niches reflects a much larger issue within local labor markets.

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The phrase ‘it takes a village’ is generally used to describe raising a child, and while I consider this master’s thesis to be in many ways my baby, I believe it took a village to nurture me in this process. Talented, caring professors like my advisor, the head of the International Studies Department, and my amazing my thesis committee members helped me to formulate what I was saying but also why I was saying it. I’ve been extremely fortunate to also have been encouraged along the way by family, starting with my roommate and aunt who constantly told me I could do it and convinced me to take breaks to clear my head and fuel my brain. My aunt and uncle supported me from a distance by checking in and keeping me afloat. My aunt invited me to eat with her beautiful growing family and taught me countless lessons about language, culture, and grace. My friend and colleague signed me up to volunteer at her organization, began learning Vietnamese with me, and helped me find the words when I had none. My cohort read and listened to drafts of my work, provided feedback, and drank wine alongside me for many of the best Tuesday evenings of my life. My cousin opened up the doors to her house to me for writing days, allowing me to sit in the best seat in the house for hours on end and entertaining me with puzzles and birdies. My many siblings who are all extremely smart and talented offered support in every way I could imagine. My colleagues gently nudged me to talk about my thesis and then transformed the topic in to career building. Last but certainly not least, I’m incredibly thankful to have met such wonderful women throughout my field research who took me into their communities, opened up about their personal experiences, and helped to teach me Vietnamese in their precious free time. I can’t help but feel lucky.

## **Introduction**

Over time, ethnic niches have become the rule instead of the exception, and permanent rather than temporary ethnic niche employment becomes the expectation as first generation immigrants are socialized into specific occupational roles. Vietnamese immigrants entering the United States have long been subjected to differential skills valuation upon entry into local labor markets, and socialization to work in specific service industries such as nail salons. As a result, many first generation Vietnamese immigrants have little choice beyond undervalued or low-skilled jobs while struggling to earn a living and provide for their families. It is important to understand ethnic niche employment not only for its economic role in the lives of immigrants, but as a complex intersection of skill valuation, social capital versus human capital, and politics of exclusion.

My thesis studies the complex interplay between the social construction and economic evaluation of employment. The realities of labor market incorporation for first generation immigrants, and social segmentation, are geographically specific and are learned through a variety of social institutions. The goal of my research is to understand the factors affecting first generation Vietnamese Americans in their employment trajectories and concentration in the nail-salon sector. Three main factors play a role in the occupational attainment of first generation immigrants: 1) specific context of reception, 2) labor market negotiation, and 3) the role of ethnic niches. Immigration studies typically focus on the relationship between human capital and earnings in the U.S. or how unemployment rates and ratios of displaced native workers affect immigrant workers (Massey et al, 1994). My study adds to the literature on immigrant entry into local labor markets by expanding the focus

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from economic aspects of immigration to the context of reception and the sociological effects of ‘othering’ on immigrant groups’.

Employment as a social construct is characterized by the adage ‘it’s not what you know but who you know’, which is notable on every level and in every sector of the labor market from the ‘good old boys’ Caucasian niche in business to the elderly care sector dominated by Filipinas. Ethnic niches represent a particular form of socioeconomic negotiation as first generation immigrants develop their identities in the U.S. For Asian Americans, there is a thick organization of the status of foreigners, which is understood not by phenotype alone but also by expertise in the English language. For Vietnamese Americans whose immigration trajectory expanded after the U.S. loss in the Vietnam War, there is a social stigma attached to their country of birth despite the fact that U.S. forces and refugees from Vietnam worked together. My field research addresses the role of agency of first generation Vietnamese immigrants in finding employment. My secondary research assess the impact of context of reception for Vietnamese immigrants after the Vietnam War, the labor market negotiation of Vietnamese immigrants, and the development of the Vietnamese nail salon niche. As a result of looking at employment from the role of society, of government, of industries, of employers, and of communities, my thesis will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the negotiations that first generation Vietnamese immigrants make in the local labor markets of Chicago.

Nail salons, in comparison with the similarly licensed practice of hair salons, are both private spaces where women have traditionally gone for pampering that operate on opposite ends of the spectrum. In a hair salon, a woman’s hair is worked on individually, there is conversation with her hairdresser, and quite literally the customer is seated while the service



provider stands over her demonstrating where power is placed in the exchange. Alternatively in a nail salon, conversation is often stilted and almost discouraged, and women sit side by side on thrones while service providers hunch over their feet, working quickly and quietly, demonstrating the place of power in the relationship. This divergence between two different service industries is due to a variety of factors: the cost of training and startup for salons, the relationship with customers, and the social stigma of working at the hands and feet of clients. How have so many low-wage service industries, such as nail technicians and elderly care nurses, become filled by first generation immigrants?

My literature review is broken down into two chapters that identify the complex social factors that have kept so many female Vietnamese immigrants from pursuing other occupations and the role of the historic context of the relationship between the United States and Vietnam as it relates to the placement of power in the work of manicurists. My case study is also split into two chapters, the first establishing the creation of the ethnic niche of nail care, and the second detailing my field work in identifying factors that have compelled first generation Vietnamese American women to become manicurists. My field research shows a clear delineation of work in terms of easy or good jobs, easy jobs being in nail salons, restaurants, or coffee shops, and good jobs being in hospitals and/or as nurses. Many participants also expressed difficulty with U.S. labor market requirements such as education and certification, which most women could not do while supporting family. There was also a clear impact of residential location on social networks which was particularly noteworthy as Chicago is known for its tight knit, often ethnically segregated neighborhoods. My conclusion demonstrates the channels that have led them to this occupation and the internalization of the social and political factors that led them to the United States.

## Chapter 1

### Literature Review: Context of Reception

The United States is often referred to as “the land of opportunity” where anyone and everyone can achieve the “American Dream”, notions that are fueled by the collectively held vision of the U.S. as a country founded by immigrants. These promises are understood as reward for hard work that is based on merit, and only those who are able to pick themselves up by their bootstraps are able to achieve the American Dream (Doussard, 2008). This image is problematic as it erases the colonial history of the *discovery* of America, but also because immigrants are seen as a homogeneous group that is equally absorbed and accepted as individuals abandon their native customs, languages, and traditions for those of the U.S. (Dick, 2011). Framing both the U.S. and immigration into the U.S. in this way allows native born U.S. citizens to translate struggling immigrants into social and economic problems as a result of their inability to work hard instead of understanding the cultural hierarchy into which immigrants are received and categorized as well as the restrictions that reception places on the agency of individual immigrants. The context of reception of immigrants is shaped by a combination of various actors, most important of which are government programs and restrictions, local socio-economic conditions, labor market patterns, and the support of the ethnic community (Parrenas, 2001).

All immigrants and descendants of immigrants are not equally received in the United States, which is evident in exclusionary immigration policies, barriers to inclusion of labor markets, and residential and educational segregation in cities across the U.S. The goal of my thesis is to understand how first generation Vietnamese Americans negotiate employment in Chicago as a result of many factors affecting them when they settle into the U.S. In order to

understand the negotiation of Vietnamese immigrants, my thesis will detail the context of reception of Vietnamese immigrants, their labor market negotiation, and the development of the nail niche. This chapter details the immigration policies that shaped Vietnamese immigrant entry into the U.S. beginning in 1975 with the fall of Saigon, the economic conditions, social temperature and attitudes toward immigrants after demonstrations and protests of the war, the constitution of the ethnic community, the regimes of social differentiation, the regulation and assertion of identity of Vietnamese Americans, and the ethnic typification of first generation Vietnamese immigrants.

### 1.1 Immigration Policy

Immigration policies have created four overarching groups of immigrants by legal status: naturalized citizens, legal immigrants, legal non-immigrants, and undocumented immigrants (Massey and Bartley, 2005). United States immigration policies revolve around rewards and punishments to these four groups, essentially creating preferential treatment through visa status (Massey and Bartley, 2005). The first group includes naturalized US citizens: individuals who were born outside the US, were admitted as legal resident aliens and applied and were admitted American citizenship. They are, in theory, entitled to the same privileges as native born citizens except they cannot become President (Massey and Bartley, 2005). The second group is comprised of legal immigrants: individuals who have been admitted as permanent legal residents, such as refugees, and enjoy legal protection from discrimination and access to most US jobs (except public sector employment in the federal government). They cannot live indefinitely outside of the US, they cannot vote, social services and benefits are constrained, and access to due process has been significantly

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curtailed after the passage of the US Patriot Act in 2001 (Massey and Bartley, 2005). The third group is made up of legal nonimmigrants: individuals who are legally admitted into the US but cannot remain permanently, such as employees of foreign corporations, members of diplomatic missions, asylum seekers, traders and investors, and the partners and families of those listed above, but do not include tourists. They have restricted travel outside of the US, are often not allowed to work, and have no access to US social services except emergency medical care and public education (Massey and Bartley, 2005). The fourth group is composed of illegal immigrants: individuals who came to the US 'without inspection' or arrived using nonimmigrant visas and continued their stay illegally. They have no political rights, few legal rights, little access to US social services (public schooling and emergency medical care), and they legally cannot work in the US. They face immediate incarceration or deportation and have restricted social, economic and geographic mobility (Massey and Bartley, 2005).

The first dramatic shift in U.S. immigration policy came at a time of economic expansion when selective immigrant labor was highly desirable. The Amendments to the Immigration and Nationality Act in 1965 fundamentally changed immigration policy by abolishing country of origin quotas and favoring relatives of U.S. citizens or residents, refugees, and highly skilled individuals, in that order (Clark et al, 2007). The doors to the U.S. seemed to be open to diverse groups of immigrants and the exclusionary policies of the 1800s were forgotten until the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986 began to identify undocumented immigrants as criminals (Massey and Bartley, 2005; Clark et al, 2007). This clear shift in policy to keep specific immigrants out of the country was strengthened in 1990 when further acts were passed to increase penalties for immigrant

related violations, streamline deportation processes, and restrict the number of incoming immediate relatives of U.S. citizens (Massey and Bartley, 2005; Clark et al, 2007). However, instead of putting an end to immigrants unlawfully entering the U.S., the hiring processes of industries that employed undocumented immigrants shifted to subcontracted labor which decreased wages and working conditions for undocumented as well as legal immigrants (Massey and Bartley, 2005). This change affected both legal and illegal immigrants as employer strategies shifted, wages decreased and working conditions worsened (Massey and Bartley, 2005). The socio-political context of reception of immigrants had also shifted to anti-immigrant policies as social programs for legal and illegal immigrants were eliminated.

The specific historical phase that began the major flow of Vietnamese immigrants to the U.S. was the loss of the Vietnam War in 1975, and Vietnamese refugees were soon incorporated throughout Southeast Asia and the United States. The cost to support refugees was minimal in comparison with the amount of money spent on the Vietnam War as well as on Cuban refugee resettlement (Nguyen, 2010). Entering the U.S. as refugees gave first generation Vietnamese Americans access to resources such as Supplemental Security Income (SSI), food stamps, and Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFCD). They also received job and language training until they were able to find employment in the U.S. (Lowell, 2001; Drachman, 1995). The changing immigration policies, however, soon reduced refugee access to social programs. Generous treatment of refugees in the U.S. ended in the 1960s with Cuban refugees; state and local organizations had to absorb the costs of helping Vietnamese refugees settle in the U.S. President Ford instituted the Refugee Dispersion Policy to thin the cost of supporting refugees among all 50 states, to ease job competition, to decrease the impact of refugees on communities, and to prevent refugee camps from turning

Labor Market Channels: Perceptions of Vietnamese Immigrants on Accessing Jobs in Chicago into ethnic ghettos. This policy was also designed to help refugees find sponsors in the U.S. who would help them become naturalized U.S. citizens, and to achieve financial independence (Nguyen, 2010).

Between the fall of Saigon in 1975 and 1990, the number of Vietnamese refugees gradually waned while family sponsored Vietnamese immigrants steadily rose; between 1990 and 2000, 444,912 first generation Vietnamese immigrants were admitted as family sponsored legal immigrants, an 82 percent increase according to the 2000 Census (Greco, 2004; Nguyen, 2010). As such, the majority of first generation Vietnamese immigrants in this period were received as legal immigrants with the possibility of becoming naturalized citizens, with very few receiving special assistance as refugees. Under the family sponsored visa, first generation Vietnamese Americans were given access to the labor market and to apply for permanent residency and government assistance (Lowell, 2001; Drachman, 1995). However, after the enactment of the immigration policies of 1996 more firm restrictions were placed on social programs and the processes to access these resources became more rigorous. Many documented and undocumented immigrants face the same difficulties as they enter the labor market, including lack of options outside of subcontracting, are increasingly subject to harassment, difficulty accessing social support, and lowered income and returns from experience which I'll go into further detail in the next chapter (Massey and Bartley, 2005).

The paradox of economic globalization lies in its promotion of the free movement of capital and the restriction of laborers (Fassin, 2011). Immigration policies must balance the construction of borders and a sense of nationalism, but also must take into account economic conditions, humanitarianism and the law (Fassin, 2011). "In effect, immigrants embody the articulation of borders and boundaries, even beyond what is generally assumed by the studies

of transnationalism. They cross borders to settle in a new society and discover boundaries through the differential treatment to which they are submitted” (Fassin, 2011: 215). Ethnic boundaries are related as much to the culture, language and geographic origin as they are to the politics of otherness that establish a dominant group culture versus the ‘other’ culture (Fassin, 2011). Vietnamese immigrants coming to the U.S. directly after the Vietnam War experienced loss of their home country due to war, but also only a partial membership in the U.S. based on the same war. Later waves of immigrants came to the U.S. for economic reasons, often based on the sponsorship of family members already in the U.S., and faced ever more restrictions as U.S. policy favoring specific populations with specific skills. The effect of immigration policies on social relationships between immigrants and native born citizens can become intensified by the economic conditions, further shaping the context of reception of immigrant groups.

## 1.2 Socioeconomic Conditions

The fall of Saigon in 1975 had very serious consequences for the Vietnamese who stayed in Vietnam, but also for those who fled the country. Many Vietnamese who fought side by side with American troops who were unable leave Vietnam were sent to re-education camps by the North Vietnamese government. Those who were able to leave Vietnam were placed into refugee camps for a short time in the U.S. and throughout Southeast Asia. The first flows of refugees from Vietnam included upper class Vietnamese who had previously been doctors, lawyers, teachers, and business owners who had enough convertible capital to flee to U.S. refugee camps. The economic situation in the U.S. at the time of Vietnam War was less than ideal; the U.S. was in a deep recession coupled with high inflation in the mid-

1970s (Mark and Hall, 1979). For this reason, the U.S. government focused on economic aspects of refugee adjustment, working to keep costs low by placing Vietnamese immigrants into any available jobs, which were mostly low-skilled and low paying (Nguyen, 2010). As a result of the recession and of Vietnamese refugees' lack of English proficiency, many refugees were underemployed and needed to develop new sets of skills as their previous education and training had also become devalued (Nguyen, 2010).

Despite access to social programs and job and language training, the socioeconomic context in which Vietnamese refugees came to the U.S. was tense and assistance was limited (Nguyen, 2010). The lack of public support and eventual loss of the Vietnam War made the American public resentful; "A Gallup Poll taken in May of 1975 showed that '54% of all Americans opposed admitting Vietnamese refugees to live in the U.S. and only 36% were in favor, with 12% undecided'" (Do 1999: 29 in Nyugen, 2010: 99). As state and local organizations took on the costs of helping Vietnamese refugees settle in the U.S., Vietnamese refugees faced the stigma of "welfare mentality". Media reports worsened the situation for the refugees by disseminating "dependency rates" and reframing discretionary programs as "entitlement" to demonstrate that money directed to social programs for refugees and immigrants was not needed (Nguyen, 2010). U.S. immigration policies create legal and social categories, which inevitably are linked to racial generalizations that allow for negative views of specific groups of immigrants. These stereotypes then appear 'reasonable and justified' because they are based on government policy, protecting U.S. citizens from the suspicion of prejudice (Dick, 2011).

During the period of 1970-1986, the U.S. produced more jobs than any other country, which was especially impressive as there was a deep recession and high inflation in the U.S.



during the mid-1970s. The economic conditions were evident in the quality of employment during that time which grew increasingly polarized, and the jobs that first generation Vietnamese Americans filled became increasingly degraded (Bluestone and Harrison, 1989). Bluestone and Harrison (1989) suggest that there are many causes of the two tier wage structure, such as union decline, the growing difference between a living and a minimum wage, the management strategy of outsourcing, and the increasing political powerlessness of labor versus management under President Reagan. The next chapter of this thesis will further examine labor market segmentation and degraded work, but it is important to note that along with the negative consensus of the war, the recession in the U.S., trends of degraded work, and the stigma of welfare mentality, Vietnamese refugees came to the U.S. during a particularly difficult time which influenced the context in which they were received.

### 1.3 Constitution of the Ethnic Community

Research shows that immigrants who are able to maintain ties to their home country and customs are in a better position to adapt to a new society. It is therefore increasingly important to understand the constitution of Vietnamese communities in the U.S., including the restrictions on place of residence, community support, social networks, and opportunities offered in the Vietnamese language. At the time of the first waves of Vietnamese refugees after the fall of Saigon, the U.S. government planned to move all refugees from the camps in which they were temporarily living to communities spread throughout the U.S. Many traumatized Vietnamese refugees were opposed to President Ford's resettlement policy and scolded by refugee camp newspapers (written by the U.S. Army Psychological Operations Unit) for their unwillingness to 'become American' (Nguyen, 2010). Despite the

government's attempt to disperse Vietnamese refugees across the country, many first generation Vietnamese Americans kept in touch and soon moved closer to their newly established social networks. As the majority of refugee camps were set up in California, this state has historically housed the largest quantity of Vietnamese refugees. According to Census data by 2000, foreign born Vietnamese Americans have clustered mainly into ten states: California, Texas, Washington, Virginia, Massachusetts, Florida, Pennsylvania, Georgia, New York, and Illinois (Greco, 2004). Those Vietnamese Americans who moved on their own tended to choose large cities, and research shows that immigrant groups living and working within larger cities tend to develop more tight knit communities that are increasingly segregated (Wilson, 2003).

Residential segregation is a result of the labor market stratification of ethnic, professional, and class identity that creates a very specific regime of differentiation that runs along ethnic, occupational, and class lines (Bauder, 2001). Neighborhoods take on a cultural identity based largely on the community's occupational outcomes, demonstrating the embeddedness of labor markets in social relationships affected by residential segregation and 'cultural representation of place' (Bauder, 2001). For first generation immigrants specifically, there is also generally a reliance on public transportation or cooperative car sharing within a social network that also raises employment boundaries. As social networks for immigrants often provide connections to both employers and neighborhoods, it is not surprising to find both residential segregation and occupational segmentation; however, as ethnic niches exist across industries there is more to the concept than simply network connections (Ellis et al, 2007). Studies also show that refugees and first generation immigrants tend to develop a sense of community mostly with friends and family.

Vietnamese Americans have been reluctant to join organized religions or take active roles in ethnic associations in the U.S., further relying on existing social networks (Finnan, 1981).

Ethnic niches are, simply put, the clustering of immigrants from a specific ethnic background in one sector of the local labor market, which could be within the same industry or the same occupation (Shrover et al, 2007; Wilson, 2003; Scott, ed, 2001). “Convention now defines an ethnic niche as an occupation or industry in which the percentage of workers that are group members is at least one-and-a-half times greater than the group’s percentage of all employment” (Scott, ed, 2001: 307). There is some disagreement whether ethnic niche employment should be studied by occupation or industry. My thesis will use the current classification in place: ethnic group members totaling at least one-and-a-half times greater than the percentage of all employment within an industry are considered an ethnic niche (Scott, ed, 2001). Much of the research that exists on immigrants entering the labor market frames ethnic niches as a safety blanket, or a ‘protected environment’, that serves to provide employment for immigrants devoid of skills, education or English language ability. Some advantage to niches is that they are able to counteract labor market discrimination by leveraging ethnicity as a means to obtain employment, require little English language domination, and allow for culturally defined expectations of newcomers (Maples, 2012). Most ethnic niches exist within degraded occupations that have few requirements and provide little returns, but there are primary labor market niches such as engineers. The very establishment of ethnic niches across skill borders signals much larger barriers to entry for immigrants (Scott, ed, 2001; Maples, 2012). Ethnic niches provide group members with access to information, resources, and social support that allow for group members to create labor market advantages such as entry level employment opportunities and strategies in

Labor Market Channels: Perceptions of Vietnamese Immigrants on Accessing Jobs in Chicago specialization and concentration for long-term professional and economic benefits (Wilson, 2003).

Regardless of the motive of migration, most immigrants have worked hard and expect to work hard upon arrival (Nguyen, 2010). In fact, studies show that Vietnamese refugees considered themselves to be “hard working, intelligent, proud people, who are held back from regaining their former positions because of language, size and age limitations” (Finnan, 1981: 295). Vietnamese refugees in Santa Clara, California, began their own training courses in electronics within the refugee community in which Vietnamese engineers volunteered to speak at weekly sessions while others teach classes to those willing to pay for instruction by a Vietnamese instructor (Finnan, 1981). This is very similar to the concept that nail technicians formed in Van Nail School and the nail schools that have since been established up in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

Research suggests that opportunities for labor market incorporation for first generation immigrants are largely within co-ethnic owned organizations which, while preferable to unemployment, promise little beyond minimal wages for menial and lower-paying work than the secondary labor market (Bobo et al., eds, 2000). “The primary sector produces jobs with secure tenure, high pay, generous benefits, and good working conditions, and the secondary sector is typified by instability, low pay, limited benefits, and unpleasant or hazardous working conditions” (Massey et al, 1994: 715). Therefore, while ethnic niches provide gainful employment to first generation immigrants, it is problematic that immigrants are propelled into the same stagnant labor pools as the secondary labor market (Smith, 2006). Another disadvantage to ethnic niches is that employment is also linked to linguistic isolation that further prevents first generation immigrants from entering the primary local labor market

(Bobo et al., eds, 2000). Waldinger's longevity study of ethnic niches indicates that many immigrants who came to the U.S. in the 1960s remained employed within the niche even twenty years after arrival to the U.S. (Nguyen, 2010). Employment in an ethnic niche can provide immigrants with training, local experience, and possibly even the savings needed for certification; however, in many cases the lack of job ascendency within niches demonstrates that immigrant workers wind up in ethnic niches due to the lack of alternative options (Bobo et al., eds, 2000; Wilson, 2003).

It is not surprising that a disproportionate percentage of immigrants from non-Western countries tend to be underemployed. While this can be attributed to differences in education, training, certification and language, there is also a degree of labor market discrimination at play which can be offset by finding sectors of local labor markets that have short training, small startup costs, and lack ethnic control (Wilson, 2003). Hiring processes evaluate education, certification, training, and English language ability, which can be the hardest obstacle for first generation immigrants, especially refugees, to overcome. Research shows that domination of the English language often channels different immigrant groups into different ethnically dominated occupations while also pushing other ethnic groups away (Maples, 2012). At the same time, self-employment is the method most often used to escape marginalization (Blume et al, 2009).

As first generation Vietnamese Americans found themselves in mostly low to unskilled jobs even after refugee camp training, work in nail salons offered the skills and savings needed to become their own bosses and open their own nail shops (Wilson, 2003). In 1975, actress Tippy Hedron is reported to have visited Vietnamese refugee camps in California where she noted the dexterity of Vietnamese refugees and as nails were becoming

a fashion statement in Hollywood, she brought her manicurist to train refugees. Soon after that she negotiated with beauty schools to allow for the free education of Vietnamese refugees to be trained as nail technicians (Tran, 2008). This story relates not only to the timing of the nail craze, but also the key detail that niches appear to be organic when an ethnic group is seen to possess a natural predisposition to a certain skill (Maples, 2012). At this point in time, nail salons were not in existence because the trend was just beginning and only affluent customers to beauty shops could afford nail treatments. While many of the first Vietnamese refugees came to the U.S. with education and experience as entrepreneurs in Vietnam, nail services offered them the opportunity to pool together community resources and open up their own shops after a minimum training period and little English fluency requirements (Miller, 2007). The truth remains that many Vietnamese Americans to this day seek employment in nail salons out of necessity, which is evidenced by the fact that Vietnamese immigrants born in Vietnam do better than Vietnamese Americans born in the U.S. In fact, Vietnamese Americans and Filipino Americans are moving downward economically while most other Asian immigrant groups in the U.S. are able to advance out of the secondary labor segment (Nguyen, 2010).

#### 1.4 Regimes of Social Differentiation

As first generation immigrants settle into the U.S., they are confronted by social and cultural norms that are often quite different from what they are accustomed. Social distinctions in the U.S. dictate language hierarchies that also favor regional accents, racial and ethnic preferences, cultural imperialism, and varying degrees of xenophobia throughout history. Sharp increases of immigrant groups can be traced to events in both sending and

receiving countries, as immigration is a product of international relations (Parrenas, 2001).

Individuals are dynamically categorized and placed into national and international hierarchies as a result of gender, race, and class designations (Dick, 2011). As immigration from many Asian countries has only begun since U.S. involvement in Asia since 1965, many researchers argue that for countries like the Philippines, Vietnam and Korea immigration is a product of a new form of colonialism (Parrenas, 2001; Mohanty, 1986). For Vietnam specifically, immigration to the U.S. was practically non-existent before U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War (Parrenas, 2001). Colonization implies a political connection by which some form of structural or cultural domination occur in the country of origin as well as the host country to immigrants. For Vietnam, this concept is supported by the fact that U.S. military in Vietnam served as a dominating political force that in turn began immigration flows. Vietnamese refugees thus entered into strict cultural domination that had begun with the presence of U.S. soldiers (Mohanty, 1986). Modern imperialism is created and spread through calculated violence such as war, but also specific cultural education and valuation (Mohanty, 1986).

The structure of contemporary cultural imperialism is established by hegemonic military interventions and international development by which countries are forced to open to foreign trade and accept foreign ideals, and is supported by seemingly universal but in fact hierarchical education, technology, and industry (Mohanty, 1986). Social differentiation has local, national and international foundations that each value discrete aspects of group membership along the lines of class, occupation, and race (Dick, 2011). These group memberships are categorized by location and instead of being universal, they are contextually categorized positively as good or smart, or negatively as suspicious or dangerous (Dick, 2011). Research shows that categorization in each of the different

geographic contexts is a key force in organizing human movement (Dick, 2011). In the context of the U.S., assignment of race has historically defined ethnic groups as others, allowing for the dehumanization and negative categorization based on phenotype (Blauner, 2001; Dick, 2011). Racial categories allow for degrees of whiteness versus degrees of blackness as people of color are given indexical hierarchy status (Dick, 2011). In this way, African Americans are considered to be dangerous, Latinos are understood to be less dangerous but still suspicious, and Asians are partially accepted as both the model minority and perpetual foreigners (Dick, 2011).

Cultural identities are ascribed through a variety of institutions in the U.S. and validated by residential location and occupational outcome without breaking down the many factors that produce these outcomes (Harro, 2000). The assertion of an individual's own identity becomes increasingly important as social norms in the U.S. dictate unspoken rules, roles, stereotypes, and assumptions that shape perceptions through television, advertising, newspapers, language patterns, song lyrics, and traditions (Harro, 2000). To divert from these norms, such as speaking a different language or wearing traditional clothing, is considered suspicious as it crosses a social boundary that challenges U.S. culture and indexical hierarchies (Dick, 2011). To challenge the existing norms of the majority often provokes the response of protecting national interests from invaders (Cornell and Hartmann, 2007). In this way, xenophobia places immigrants at a disadvantage as they must learn the rules as they go or else suffer ostracism for never having learned *common sense* (Parrenas, 2001). Social and labor market incorporation of immigrants is dependent on U.S. racial contexts but also country of origin differences (Dick, 2011). Depending on the specific time in U.S. history, some identities might be more salient in the hierarchical order based on generation, gender,



Labor Market Channels: Perceptions of Vietnamese Immigrants on Accessing Jobs in Chicago or class (Dick, 2011). Regardless of the categorization in the U.S., immigrants also face distinct otherness and the identity of perpetual foreigner (Dick, 2011). Language is especially critical as it signifies where an individual is from in the current world order, evidenced by the acceptance of some languages over others and even some accents over others (Dick, 2011).

Considering the timing of the arrival of Vietnamese refugees, the climate in the U.S. was experiencing “intensifying nativism, racism, xenophobia, and ‘compassion fatigue’ ” (Nguyen, 2010: 100). Anti-immigrant times are not simply due to an influx or accumulation of immigrants, rather, they are produced when demographics change and national media polarizes economic stress (Massey and Sanchez, 2010). In this way, Vietnamese refugees became marginalized, separated from the model minority status, received as unskilled and unable to pick themselves up by their bootstraps (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999). Part of this misunderstanding of individual success can also be attributed to cultural differences as the U.S. values individualism whereas other cultures value community support. Ethnic groups that become undesirable in local labor markets are seen to fall to the end of the ‘labor queue’, and so ethnic niches become less of a statement and more of an alternative to the least desirable jobs (Wilson, 2003). As hiring and promotion procedures within an industry are contingent on a firm’s current needs, it is important to recognize that situational factors such as working conditions, occupational structure, and perceived job security also play a role in employment choices for immigrants (Waldinger, 2005). Employers benefit from surplus pools of laborers that can be rendered useful but cheap through informal and inter-niche trained workers, which in turn reinforces the provisional nature of immigrant work (Schrover et al., 2007).

Research shows that significant first generation immigrants from Turkey, Pakistan, and Vietnam are self-employed (Blume et al, 2009). The fact that such large percentages of specific immigrant groups are self-employed cannot be explained by mere differences in skills, training and/or education (Blume et al, 2009). First generation Vietnamese Americans racially fit the profile for low-skill, low pay, manual work in the U.S. as they were seen as perpetual foreigners, spoke with accents, and possessed educational and professional certifications that were not accepted. It's therefore not surprising, then, that it soon followed that they were understood to possess inherent skills that gave them an advantage in nail care (Nguyen, 2010). Due to the transitional nature of immigration, immigrants seek entrepreneurship as a means to avoid unemployment (Blume et al, 2009). In a study that focused on racial differentiation of first generation immigrants employed as domestic workers, the tendency for visible minority immigrants to be considered lower quality workers emerged, and with this categorization came an acceptance by those of the 'better-than-low-quality' workers as they felt it was due to educational attainment and provided comfort in their experience of marginalization (Parrenas, 2001). Identity is an ongoing negotiation for immigrants and minorities as the majority of assumptions are made based not on actions but on physical features. The next section explores this negotiation and its impact on the regulation of immigrants based on this internal and external identity negotiation.

### 1.5 Thick Versus Thin Identity of Vietnamese Americans

My thesis studies the regulation of the immigrant identity specifically for Vietnamese immigrants seeking employment. In order to better understand the role of immigrant identity, I will use Cornell and Hartmann's (2007) framing of thick versus thin identity. The

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prominence of race and ethnicity in organizing social life can be understood in terms of thick, strict, and thin, loosely regulated identities that are both assigned and asserted. Identities, especially ethnic and racial, change over time in relation to context and circumstance (Cornell and Hartmann, 2007). Ethnic identities and individual identities form through complex interaction between asserting one's own identity and the assignment of identity by dominant groups (Cornell and Hartmann, 2007). Thick ethnic or racial identities regulate many aspects of life from employment to residential location, and thick identities are the most salient identity of an individual that is understood by others before any interaction even takes place. Thin ethnic or racial identities organize much less of an individual's life, allowing them greater freedom to express themselves before they are categorized (Cornell and Hartmann, 2007). "Part of the meaning of 'construction' is that ethnic and racial identities are not rooted in nature, but are situational precipitates, products of particular events, relationships, and processes that are themselves subject to change" (Cornell and Hartmann, 2007: 81). The boundaries that separate ethnic groups are significant as there are meanings attached to group membership and outsiders regardless of the amount of assertion versus assignment of identity (Cornell and Hartmann, 2007).

Race and ethnicity are social constructs that frame perspectives, created for organizing and categorizing groups not for understanding cultural linkages (Brubaker et al, 2004). Race has historically been used to place individuals on a spectrum based on phenotype to establish hierarchy (Brubaker et al, 2004). The American Anthropological Association defines race as a means to socially classify others in order to make differences seem natural (Brubaker et al, 2004). Ethnicity, on the other hand, incorporates history, culture and social bonds that are grounded in historic context and current experience (Conzen

et al, 1990). As the ascribed identity of immigrant groups become attached to labels and stereotypes, which is often the result of international policy changes, war, or economic crisis, the assertion of ethnic identity becomes intensified (Conzen et al, 1990). The way that race informs interactions in daily life is based on assumptions and stereotypes that are often subconscious, which means that questioning and analyzing these mental processes is difficult to say the least (Brubaker et al, 2004). As a result, the concept of race seems natural, as do the social meanings that become linked with racial categories (Brubaker et al, 2004).

The assertion of ethnic identities can be a means to resist dominant culture and the exclusion of specific groups by reframing identity in more positive terms (Conzen et al, 1990). “Ethnicity and race are not simply labels forced upon people; they are also identities that people accept, resist, choose, specify, invent, redefine, reject, actively defend, and so forth” (Cornell and Hartmann, 2007: 81). There are many ways that ethnic groups have worked to assert their identities, such as creating ethnic affiliated organizations, conducting research into ethnic history and culture, retelling history in order to recognize and celebrate heritage as well as to redefine their relationship with others, and reviving forgotten traditions or inventing new ones (Cornell and Hartmann, 2007). Research that addresses how racial and ethnic identities shape the role of agency for minority groups demonstrates the thickness of some identities over others as well as the need for thinning of racial identities that are ascribed on minorities (Cornell and Hartmann, 2007). There are four main forces that serve as the conscious and unconscious processes of ethnic and racial identities: interests, meaning, happenstance, and inertia (Cornell and Hartmann, 2007). For intergroup relations, the primary unit of analysis is not the ethnic group or individuals, but the social system in which

the group is part, including transnational and even global systems of relationships (Cornell and Hartmann, 2007).

For visible minority immigrants, it is important to understand that ethnicity is another form of social and racial ‘otherness’ that separates them from *true* Americans (Conzen et al, 1990) which is best explained by the fact that not all immigrants are considered ethnic groups such as West European immigrants (Conzen et al, 1990). The racial identity that Vietnamese immigrants receive in the United States is Asian American, which is an assigned versus an asserted identity, and is often a thin identity for Asian Americans; however, for Vietnamese and Cambodian immigrants specifically, research shows that the first wave of these groups were also assigned their ethnic identity which plays an even thicker role in the organization of their lives (Cornell and Hartmann, 2007).

As identity negotiation often takes place when individuals are in contact with majority groups, entrance into local labor markets and the search for housing become the prime locations for ascription and assertion of identity (Conzen et al, 1990). Upon arrival to the U.S. after the war, Vietnamese refugees increasingly found that their skill sets were not applicable to employment in the U.S. and they needed U.S. certification (Cornell and Hartmann, 2007). Whether or not Vietnamese immigrants felt overt discrimination, the presence of their ethnic boundary was established (Cornell and Hartmann, 2007). The bonds of ethnicity are evidenced more by the “shared experiences of daily living” than by political interests or cultural meaning (Cornell and Hartmann, 2007). With this foundation of ethnic and racial identity, the next section discusses this relationship between identity and the labor market as asserted identities become attached to qualities and traits of others.

## 1.6 Labor Market Patterns of 'Ethnic Typification'

First generation immigrants experience dislocations in local labor markets in which their skills and education become devalued. Underemployment is an excruciating experience which can be attributed to a variety of causes stemming from the world order, unequal development, differential qualities of educational systems, accreditation differentials, and restrictions on citizens (Parrenas, 2001). The contradictory class mobility that immigrants experience involves a decline in social and occupational status is often due to degraded work in the U.S. despite increased income in the U.S. (Parrenas, 2001). Research on racial differentiation of immigrants in domestic work shows that there is a preconceived difference in quality of workers by race (Parrenas, 2001). Domestic work is considered to be a de-skilling process that carries with it a sense of loss for failing to utilize their educational achievements (Parrenas, 2001). For Vietnamese immigrants, new skill sets in nail care were learned and certified in the U.S. but became considered inherent skills to all Vietnamese and linked culturally to Vietnam.

Due to lack of certified job skills and accredited education, limited proficiency of the English language, and the dramatic loss of home country after the War, first generation Vietnamese Americans are more likely than not to be found in semiskilled, or blue-collar, employment (Nguyen, 2010). Despite the addition of 1.5 and second generation Vietnamese Americans who were educated in the U.S., many Vietnamese are still clustered in semiskilled occupations while few have moved up into the primary labor market. The career trajectories of Vietnamese women are much more restricted by gender to service and sales positions; however, beauty work arises as the most popular form of employment for Vietnamese American males and females (Nguyen, 2010). Over the last 40 years, the investment of first

generation Vietnamese immigrants into the nail industry has created a link between nail salons and Vietnamese culture (Nguyen, 2010). A second part of this investment is that nail schools and nail salons have begun to appear in Vietnam as well, further solidifying the connection; however, the fact that even in Vietnam the word ‘nail’ is used in English demonstrates that the nail trend began as an economic adaptation of Vietnamese immigrants in the U.S. as opposed to a supposed intrinsic link to Vietnamese culture (Nguyen, 2010).

As nails have become synonymous with Vietnamese culture, one of the traits that has become assigned to Vietnamese Americans is the dexterity needed to provide quality nail care. Research shows that many nail salon owners attribute their work not to training, certification or experience but rather to inherent talent (Nguyen, 2010). Some even go so far to say that the ‘potential’ for nail work is either there from birth or not, that artistry is not something that can be taught (Nguyen, 2010). There is a Vietnamese expression that echoes this sentiment of pride: “We Vietnamese are good with our hands” (Nguyen, 2010: 156). Customers agree that these skills are inherent, which diminishes the prominence of training and motivation for success in nail salons, further demonstrating that ethnicity overrides employment and individual characteristics (Nguyen, 2010). The internalization of dexterity is one way that the nail niche is perpetuated: nail technicians and customers readily accept the dexterity of Vietnamese manicurists as an ethnic advantage (Nguyen, 2010). Within nail schools, instructors agreed that the Vietnamese have something ‘special’, that their dexterity, discipline, development of techniques, and overall dominance of the industry is ‘a natural gift’ (Nguyen, 2010).

Finnan (1981) describes occupational identity development as the dual process of creating oneself in the image of an occupational role, but also the construction of an image of

an occupational role to fit oneself. This type of development can be considered a response to the socialization of immigrants into specific labor market roles, but also the way that immigrants influence the image of an occupation (Finnan, 1981). Vietnamese immigrants who are employed as manicurists not only actively fashion themselves in the image of manicurists, as a community, they are able to overcome the stigma of underemployment by focusing on the outcomes of nail work in order to appreciate their niche (Finnan, 1981). Community support provides not only entry level jobs within the niche, but also helps males and females to identify and adjust to their chosen occupation. In this way, the Vietnamese American community provides agency for economic stability while also maintaining cultural identity to merge previous lives with current lives in the U.S. (Finnan, 1981).

## 1.7 Conclusion

There are many factors that affect first generation Vietnamese immigrants as they settle into the U.S., beginning with the context of reception of the first immigrants from Vietnam, the role of government in setting and updating immigration policy, the socioeconomic conditions during the influx of Vietnamese immigrants, the constitution of the ethnic community, the socialization that immigrants confront as they interact with majority groups, the role of ethnic identity in the regulation of social life, and the translation of Vietnamese skills in local labor markets. Context of reception is especially critical for first generation Vietnamese Americans because and affects the incorporation of future generations. Immigrants who arrived in the 1990s or later are still subject to the ethnic typification, which can be traced back to the refugee camps in 1975 (Nguyen, 2010). The emergence of the Vietnamese nail salon niche can be associated with exclusion from other



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local labor markets, but may also create new social acceptances and jobs for newcomer Vietnamese workers. The next section will discuss the many factors affecting labor market incorporation of immigrants from the perspective of labor market segmentation in order to better understand the role of industry, employers, and occupation for the development of the nail niche.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review: Labor Market Negotiation**

A range of dynamic forces affect first-generation immigrants as they enter local labor markets (Waldinger, 1994). Many current international migration theories focus on the labor market outcomes of immigrants and erase the permeation of discrimination in every aspect of hiring for international migrants, deemphasize the reality of differential job opportunities in immigrant receiving countries, and recreate class differentials in sending and receiving countries (Massey et al, 1994). This chapter will begin with a comparison of international migration theories before taking an in depth look at labor market segmentation theory which will be used to examine the labor market negotiation of Vietnamese immigrants.

Economic studies of international migration often focus on the impact of immigration on host countries, specifically on how immigrants perform in the U.S. economy and what impact immigrants have on the employment opportunities of natives (Borjas, 1994). This focus fails to address the ways by which immigrant skills and education are devalued in the U.S. economy by assessing skills and training through wage rates. Skills cannot only be assessed through wages because even among equivalent job descriptions there exist large income discrepancies based neither on education nor on previous experience, but rather on social aspects of the hiring processes that allow for conscious or subconscious discrimination. Sociological studies of international migration assert that social networks increase the likelihood of immigration by sharing the costs as well as the risks to individuals through network ties, which then influence the location and opportunities available to immigrants (Massey, 1994). While network connections increase wages and hours of work in the U.S., demonstrating social networks to be a significant factor for migration and

employment, studies also show that niches are often a last resort for immigrants (Massey, 1994).

Neoclassical theory of international migration finds that laborers migrate from local labor markets with low-wages to those with high-wages, while investment flows in the opposite direction (Massey et al, 1994). Neoclassical theory is supported by evidence that migration stems from economic reasons; however, it does not offer enough explanation for the complexity of factors that go into the decision to migrate (Massey et al, 1994). The new economics of migration theory establishes that immigration stems from hierarchical national labor markets, pointing to the infrastructure differentials as the main indicator to barriers for economic achievement (Massey et al, 1994). While the new economics theory recognizes that barriers to primary sector employment exist and that markets differ greatly across the world, wage differentials only provide for one economic motivation for migration. However, studies show that there are more factors to the decision to immigrate than solely economic reasons (Massey et al, 1994). World systems theory demonstrates that the increasingly global economy causes international migration, specifically recognizing that capitalist modes of production create demand for unskilled and low skilled workers to provide services for wealthy owners and high skilled workers in core countries (Massey et al, 1994). While the world systems theory identifies push and pull factors, political and economic, in the decision to migrate and is able to identify the intrinsic draw of capitalism in the world market, the use of the frame of developed versus undeveloped countries is problematic as it implies culturally significant indicators that are not universal.

As compared to the economic centric theories of migration, labor market segmentation explains that the pull of immigration is built into the capitalist economy of the

U.S. as well as the intrinsic tendency of capitalism to exploit specific groups (Massey et al, 1994). Previous work by Massey et al. (1994) explains that secondary labor markets are sought due to barriers of entry of primary labor market, which is further exacerbated by limited upward mobility as secondary labor market employment brings lower returns to education, skills and experience. At the same time, immigrant enclaves and ethnic niches provide the opportunities that local labor markets lack related to returns to education and occupational mobility, especially for male entrepreneurs (Massey et al, 1994).

My thesis uses labor market segmentation theory to better understand immigrant entry into local labor markets. I do, however, understand the shortcomings of the theory, such as the fact that the demand for unskilled workers is not clearly linked to the secondary labor market (Massey et al, 1994). While economic migration is linked to differentials in salaries and economic development as a means to find more labor market opportunities, investments abroad possess greater freedom than do laborers in today's global world (Massey et al, 1994). "Labor is differentiated by age, skills, skin color and gender and is selected and directed into particular slots in the labor markets of receiving countries" (McDowell, 2008: 495). Visa policies tie immigrants to employers as sponsors, and many groups of immigrants find themselves restricted by company, industry, or occupation regardless of employment history, education, and training abroad (McDowell, 2008). As ethnic niches and stereotypes become the norm, another trend that has surfaced is the growing disparity of the service economy within the larger economy (McDowell, 2008). The next section will further explore the ways that labor market segmentation theory addresses the development of ethnic niches.

## 2.1 Labor Market Segmentation

This thesis uses labor market segmentation as a foundation because it establishes a complex understanding of labor market inequality that will help to identify the dislocations that first generation Vietnamese Americans immigrants face when searching for jobs in the U.S. From this foundation, I will study the nail industry niche as a form of resistance to the secondary labor market. Labor market segmentation theory explains that labor markets vary along the lines of working conditions, salary levels, opportunities for advancement, and labor laws, which affects first generation immigrants in magnified ways based on ethnic and cultural hierarchies (Bobo et al., eds, 2000). Increasing specialization leads to further class and wealth differentials as the gap between skilled and unskilled labor becomes larger, evidence of which can be found within the same location. The educated workforce that is paid above minimum wage works in an office during the day while the ‘unskilled’ or degraded workforce comes into the building, unseen, at night to clean for minimum wage. Research that glosses over the diversity of occupations that arise from the growth of specialized service industries in effect negates the existence of lower level technical and administrative jobs as low-wage low-skilled jobs that arise from the same process (Sassen, 2012). Labor market segmentation theory asserts that individuals and households choose to immigrate primarily based on labor demands and that modern capitalism inherently produces two distinct labor markets (Massey et al, 1994). Employment opportunities in the primary sector come with stability, high salaries, a safe working environment, and benefits while employment opportunities in the secondary labor market can end at any moment without reason, pay hourly wages, do not include benefits, and are often in dangerous workplace environments (Massey et al, 1994).

The United States has become one of the largest immigrant drawing countries, due in part to immigration policies as well as the self-acclaimed promotion of the ‘American Dream’ (Joshi, 2009). However, immigrant flows are becoming increasingly specific and studies show that countries with less income inequality than the U.S. are sending the most immigrants to the U.S. (Duleep and Regets, 1997). Additionally, there are political but also military ties that the U.S. engages abroad that protect trade routes and investments, garner political support, and “maintain sympathetic and pro-capitalist regimes” (Massey et al, 1994: 723). Studies have shown that the introduction of a military base is linked with high immigration flows and visa backlogs; in fact, U.S. foreign policy, trade policy, and military engagement abroad connect top immigrant sending countries to the U.S. from the 1990s and 2000s (Massey et al, 1994). As of 2000, the top five sending countries all have strong political and economic ties with the United States: Mexico (9.2 million), the Philippines (1.3 million), India (1 million), China (988,857) and Vietnam (988,174) (Greco, 2004). As a continuing result of U.S. ties with Vietnam, 3.2 % of all first generation immigrants in the U.S. as of 2000 are Vietnamese (Greco, 2004).

The focus of my thesis is international migration from the point of view of first generation Vietnamese immigrants entering U.S. labor markets. In this way, I am able to focus on perceived opportunities available and barriers to immigrants in order to better understand the complexities of labor market decisions. The combination of immigration policies, employment policies, work conditions, wage-setting mechanisms, and mobility opportunities creates employment practices that compel many first generation immigrants to join the secondary labor market or ethnic niches (Massey, 1994). Immigrant skills and educational achievement are assessed in culturally specific ways in which there are spaces

for devaluation of immigrant human capital. Immigrants are propelled into to the secondary labor market due to legal and social misrepresentations of skills, lack of primary labor market networks, lack of political agency due to symbolic citizenship, and institutionalized discrimination (Schrover et al., 2007). Within the context of local market inequality and the increasing embeddedness of labor and culture in ‘the market’, my thesis seeks to better understand ethnic niches as a means to escape the secondary labor market and skill devaluation.

## 2.2 Cultural Labor Market Boundaries

In local labor markets, symbolic boundaries, such as residential segregation, differential returns on experience and skills, rewards that favor education and training from specific countries, have become naturalized. Other boundaries are much more subtle, such as the conceptualization of immigrants as perpetual foreigners and the expectations of immigrants according to gender and ethnicity. The measurement of skills is generally done through wage comparisons, which is problematic as both skills and wages are not impartial, but rather they are gendered and ethnicized by geographic location (Schrover et al., 2007). The cataloging of skill sets for jobs is essentially determined on a case by case basis according to social negotiations (Schrover et al., 2007). As Harry Braverman explains: “classifications of workers . . . are neither ‘natural’ nor self-evident, nor is the degree of skill a self-evident quality which can simply be read from the labels given to various such classifications . . . If you take Jane Woodward at her word, the gap between the skilled and the semi-skilled worker is a matter of ‘years’ of training, while the creation of ‘semi-skill’ as against ‘no skill’ is accomplished in ‘two to twelve weeks’ ” (1998: 296-299). Skills and

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training in the U.S. are understood in a hierarchical fashion that allows for devaluation of specific groups of people. In the secondary labor market, employment is often provided without education and skill assessment; at the same time, educational, licensing, and certification requirements are becoming more common across industry and occupation lines (Waldinger, 1982).

Saskia Sassen (2012) establishes that labor market segmentation occurs on the global stage, but also on the local scale. This is most obvious in economic centers of large cities where labor market segmentation and income inequality are separated by neighborhoods. Harald Bauder (2001) explains that residential segregation is at the center of the development of segmented labor markets as a result of unequal power distribution in a society. Framed through a cultural lens, the role of agency can be seen at the group level in the production of labor market identities through experiences, economic processes, social contexts, and practicality (Bauder, 2001). Especially in the case of underclass and impoverished neighborhoods, labor market identities are imposed based on residential location (Bauder, 2001). Identities have been created and assigned for minorities that clearly have racial linkages but also residential connections; in fact, the images of lazy, unemployed, uneducated, criminals are depicted in the media but also academic and political literature as ‘naturally occurring traits’ of inner city minorities (Bauder, 2001). The linkage of so called cultural traits to labor market success and failures solidify the social understanding of dominant and subordinate groups, legitimizing labor market discrimination and residential segregation (Bauder, 2001).

Differences in employment history based on race and ethnicity may in part signify education and skill training for the group, but also may be a result of returns on work



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experience (Tienda and Stier, 1996). Experience plays a large role in labor market outcomes, but for first generation immigrants especially, the significance of work experience is tied to geographic location (Tienda and Stier, 1996). “Country-of-origin differences alone imply large differences in skills and wages between immigrant groups” (Smith, 2006: 213). Immigrant labor does not merely fill a vacuum in what would normally be considered the secondary labor market; immigrants have differential access to labor markets based on skill transference, language or accent, certification of training, and type of work (Schwartzman, 2008). Duleep and Regets (1997) studied the dramatic drop over time in the entry earnings of immigrants holding constant years of schooling and found evidence that rather than ability decrease there has been a decline in immigrant skill transferability. Evidence points to immigrant difficulties in entering local labor markets in the U.S. and lower earnings despite comparable skills to their native born counterparts which is especially notable for specifically visible minority immigrants who are increasingly under-utilized (Joshi, 2009). This is due to employer strategies that place precedence on culturally honored skills and education.

Studies show that in comparison with white counterparts, non-white and non-European immigrants with exceptionally high levels of education are under-employed and under-utilized in local labor markets as employer bias favors white European immigrants (Waldinger, 1982). In Western countries especially, foreign education has become the basis for visa approval, but upon entry into labor markets the same foreign education is routinely devalued (Joshi, 2009). This can be attributed in part to the history of immigration at the turn of the century when Western European immigrants were hired to fill the demand for strong backs and capable hands, not on the basis of education or certification, as mechanical skills could be learned on the job (Waldinger, 1982). In comparison, current Asian and Latin

American immigrants must fit the demand of “white-collar, technical, and professional occupations’ that use higher education as ‘a screening device, barring entry to workers with lower levels of schooling” (Waldinger, 1982: 199).

These distinct differences in employment outcomes suggest that local labor market incorporation is an increasingly social and hierarchical process that leaves spaces for factors such as discrimination to play a larger role in labor market outcomes (Waldinger, 1982). This could theoretically happen in part due to the concern of education quality abroad, except that white immigrants with the same foreign credentials receive higher labor market returns in the U.S. (Joshi, 2009). Studies show that mathematical proficiency of immigrants from countries less developed than the U.S. may in fact be higher than mathematical skills of U.S. students (Duleep and Regets, 1997). Research challenges the universality of education as the basis of ethnic job sorting, demonstrating instead that special circumstances favor enterprises, education, certification, and geography, which translate into a hierarchy of laborers in every industry (Wolf, 1982; Nguyen, 2010). Joshi demonstrates that the uncertainty of credentials from other countries allows for the application of prejudice against visible minority immigrants in a study of Indian immigrants in Canada (Joshi, 2009). If there were legitimate concerns about Indian immigrant training versus Canadian training, then all participants in Joshi’s study would have evaluated the candidate trained in India as less qualified than the candidates from Canada, which did not occur (Joshi, 2009).

Likewise, skills acquired in economically developed countries are more likely to be comparable not due to rigorous testing, but rather because the industrial structure, cultural values, and economic rewards in the labor markets are more similar (Duleep and Regets, 1997). Further research suggests that this degree of discrimination against visible minority

immigrants with foreign credentials is specifically found in Western societies. With non-visible minority immigrants, foreign training can be an asset (Joshi, 2009). If immigrant wages are lower because their skills aren't translating across borders, then highly educated immigrants should earn high wages in their first jobs in the U.S., which is not the case (Duleep and Regets, 1997). Studies by Bennett-Abu Ayyash et al. (in Joshi, 2009) tested the variable of religious affiliation shown by a pendant worn by job applicants during interviews and found that credentials from abroad was considered to be an asset for Christian pendant wearing applicants but was not evaluated highly for Muslim pendant wearing applicants. Joshi (2009) built upon previous research that maintains that prejudice against the credentials of visible minority immigrants may change if the credentials are accredited locally or if local credentials are obtained. Joshi's (2009) dissertation "informs extant research on the labor market outcomes of visible minority immigrants and explains that an indirect, covert and modern form of prejudice affects the labor market outcomes of visible minority immigrants" (147).

Economic studies of migration explain that immigrants from less developed countries have lower labor market quality; however, this information is gleaned from wages earned in the U.S., not skill or education attainment (Scheve and Slaughter, 2001; Smith, 2006). In fact, many factors are at play in the occupational outcomes of first generation immigrants: bias in favor of native born candidates, discrimination against visible minority immigrants, favor for local labor market experience, lower returns on education abroad, concern over language abilities or accent, and social networks that are also predominantly found in the secondary labor market segment (Joshi, 2009). Recent immigrants cannot unambiguously be characterized as having lower ability than 'traditional' immigrants from European countries,

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especially when the intrinsic abilities of the immigrants in question are based on local assessments that measure only culturally significant values (Duleep and Regets, 1997).

Additionally, an individual who has already learned a skill set has distinct advantages for gaining new skill sets (Duleep and Regets, 1997).

Labor market segmentation theory discusses the spaces for devaluation and economic marginalization by ethnicity, class, and gender on the basis that there is no intrinsic labor market mechanism that matches occupations to employees (Bauder, 2001). Instead, individuals hiring employees act upon person bias, whether consciously or subconsciously, which is why stereotypes and culturally valued behaviors are so damaging to immigrants and visible minorities. The social constructs of domination and ‘otherness’ allow native born individuals to ascribe and generalize traits and motives to others (Bauder, 2001). Research finds that foreign credentials for visible minority immigrants are scrutinized far less than foreign credentials for White immigrants, clarifying that lower evaluations are related to immigrant qualifications (Joshi, 2009). Culturally valued meaning and behaviors are considered to be commonly accepted standards, but they are taught, negotiated, and countered within the mainstream and popular culture that subordinates all ‘others’. Culture, in fact, is merely an idea that, much like race, was constructed to organize otherness, and creates a specific view of reality and hierarchy within a society (Bauder, 2001). Socialization in the U.S. places a precedent on upholding social norms and political correctness to cover powerfully held stereotypes and prejudice (Joshi, 2009: 33).

Gender and ethnicity are intertwined in the production and perpetuation of inequality and social hierarchy in U.S. labor markets (Schrover et al, 2007). The presentation of self to a hiring manager is heavily influenced by asserted as well as assigned identities. Employers

look for specific social cues and often misunderstand women and immigrants, expecting them to be suited for a specific job regardless of what the candidate might say or do (Schrover et al, 2007). Likewise, skills are socially charged concepts based on socio-political negotiations of work (Schrover et al, 2007). Women are often misinterpreted as having specific traits that qualify them for employment as opposed to learned skills, which makes women seem a better fit for certain occupations over others (Schrover et al, 2007). For Asian immigrants, often the culturally accepted behaviors for women and men are not as strict, and such challenge to dominant U.S. gender roles results in the assumption that Asian men are submissive, weak, and docile (Schrover et al, 2007). Together all of these cultural boundaries reinforce the exclusion of immigrant groups from primary labor market roles. The next section will focus on the role of industry in the creation of secondary labor market roles and the channeling of individuals into such positions.

### 2.3 The Role of Industry

The primary and secondary segments of the labor market represent a power differential to workers with rights that separate those who are relegated to jobs that have been stripped of benefits by industrial standards and methods of employment. As Schwartzman (2008) explains, “as the hiring of immigrant labor spreads from one economic sector to another, one must ask ‘how jobs become ones that nobody wants’ ” (152). For every industry and every job there exists a history of workers no matter how underpaid, unsafe or unsanitary (Schwartzman, 2008). Furthermore, what often appears as displacement of natives is actually supplemental labor that reflects a new industry or employer strategy (Schwartzman, 2008). While supply and demand are recognized as labor market forces, the matching of any

individual's skills with employer needs is not a smooth or clean process. Labor market segmentation focuses on industry and employer strategies as the root of secondary labor market development (Doussard, 2008).

The changes in the state and federal laws by industry have altered the mechanisms of labor demand and the conditions of employment, which can be seen in the decline of unions, the undermining of labor protections, the growth of sweat shops, and increases in involuntary temporary and part-time employment (Sassen, 2012). Labor market segmentation has been transformed as functions and costs of industries falls on households and communities, and the role of companies in structuring employment terms continues to be weakened as space is created for 'the market' to take control (Sassen, 2012). In the secondary labor market, employment is provided without need of literacy, language, and technical ability; at the same time in the primary labor market, educational requirements are rising with little correlation to job responsibilities (Waldinger, 1982). Social networks further change the recruiting and hiring processes for employers while placing the responsibility of training and education on the job to the individuals who are recruited through family and ethnic networks (Sassen, 2012).

Licensing in the U.S. protects the public against incompetence or dishonesty and creates standard procedures and processes within industries, from hiring to education, regarding the handling of dangerous materials. Regulations and industry education are controlled by business leaders who possess intimate knowledge of production; however, the role of expertise creates a form of power in which industry leaders are able to manipulate production, workers, and the industry itself. The barriers of entry for laborers to an industry are created by expensive, in time or money or both, licensure (Gellhorn, 1976). On one hand,

licensing regulations improve market performance in skilled industries, but on the other hand examinations create barriers of entry for less educated and minority laborers disproportionately (Dorsey, 1983; Gellhorn, 1976). Applicants that train by apprenticeship are also less likely to pass licensing examinations as they do not receive comparable preparation for the written examination. Therefore, the adverse effect of licensing may not be complete exclusion, but rather certain lowered earnings for laborers without the proper credentials (Dorsey, 1983). There are many intersections of power in the process of state licensing through which state regulatory agencies, industry leaders, professional organizations, and special interest groups are able to create harmful forms of protectionism and exclusion (Dorsey, 1983).

The nail industry began as a rudimentary paint treatment for elites and has grown into a multi-national, multi-million dollar industry that has become accessible and affordable for all income levels and classes. The first documented salons with nail technicians in the U.S. date back to the mid-1800s. In 1924 the Association of Accredited Cosmetology Schools was created to maintain industry standards (NailSchools.com, 2012). Fifteen years later, in 1939, the Board of Cosmetology in the state of California developed manicurist licensing (CA Dept. of Consumer Affairs, 2011). The nail industry began licensing manicurists with the conviction that manicurists needed training in the proper use of chemicals and sanitation practices to prevent injuries and the spread of infectious diseases. Licensing manicurists produces definite health and safety benefits; however, the current administration of licenses creates barriers to entry and imposes costs on potential entrants that are eventually passed off onto consumers (Federman, Harrington, and Krynski, 2006).

Manicure license requirements vary by state, with different examination formats, different accessibility to resources such as interpreters and dictionaries, different language options, different English proficiency requirements, and different training and education requirements that range from 100 to 600 hours (Federman, Harrington, and Krynski, 2006). Studies demonstrate that some of the requirements, such as English language proficiency, actually impede immigrant assimilation by restricting entry into an occupation in which immigrants arguably face lower costs of learning English (Federman, Harrington, and Krynski, 2006). The Colorado Sunset Commission found that only 90 hours of the required 350 hours of training for manicurists in Colorado focused on health and safety issues (Federman, Harrington, and Krynski, 2006). Another disconnect in the nail industry is the fact that certification is one part, but the hazardous chemicals themselves are regulated separately, as are the salons which have different styles of ventilation that is necessary for the handling of such chemicals. It wasn't until January of 2007, that laws went into effect in California forcing cosmetic makers to list the harmful ingredients in their products (Miller, 2007). I will discuss hazardous working conditions as a method of degraded work in the next section, but the regulation of the various properties involved in handling chemicals is integral to understanding the role of industry regulations in the degradation of work.

According to industry statistics, as of 2008 there are 349,370 licensed nail technicians employed in the U.S. (Nguyen, 2010). 40% of these licensed manicurists are Vietnamese Americans who found ways to overcome the barriers to the nail industry in spite of the fact that many had already experienced barriers to the industries in which they had been trained and educated upon arrival (Nguyen, 2010). The nail industry provided decent money, the opportunity to hire within their social networks, little English pre-requisites, and shared



savings to open their own salons which resonated with Vietnamese community ideals as well as the American independence values (Nguyen, 2010). “Immigrants and natives can both benefit from a minimization of occupational downgrading. Immigrants would be able to attain better jobs and apply their, in some cases considerable, prior experience and training, and a more precise allocation of skills can lead to a more efficient labor market” (Akresh, 2006: 876). There have been considerable changes to the nail industry since the influx of Vietnamese Americans, which will be further explored through the role of employer strategy in the next section.

#### 2.4 The Role of Employer Strategy

Labor market segmentation explains that industry standards and methods of hiring are what distinguish the primary from the secondary labor markets, and degraded work delves into how these strategies have become accepted. Marc Doussard defines the concept of degraded work as work that involves a fast pace or high amount of hourly productivity, low wages, and poor working conditions (2008). There are many ways that work can become degraded, such as the benefit to employers to keep the cost of products and services low, the use of subcontracting to avoid legal repercussion, the cost of government time to regulate workplaces and the priority of regulation that often focuses more on immigration status than on workplace conditions (Doussard, 2008). The current era of employment and income inequality can be attributed to both deindustrialization and the degradation of work in many industries (Doussard, 2008). Degraded work is a phenomenon in many of the rapidly growing service industries that are generating high rates of employment (Doussard, 2008).

Industry and occupation are also social concepts that are understood differently in ethnic niche employment. Much like skills that are gendered and ethicized, occupations are understood partially by the skills required, but also by industry norms for occupations. Industry conditions that create a high turnover rate generate opportunities for social networking to provide replacements. The consistency by which low wages and fast pace of work are found in service industries implies that there is a new category of employment altogether: degraded work (Doussard, 2008). Employers are the agents that structure income inequality, therefore the industry standards, hiring strategies, and responses to competition must be understood from the perspective of the employer (Doussard, 2008). Hiring employees is based on characteristics of candidates rather than actual in depth knowledge of individuals, there is no way to be unbiased in the process (Maples, 2012). The following components represent degraded work from the point of view of the employer: low wages are a strategy to reduce labor costs, fast paced work environments are expected to increase productivity, and low skilled work is related to employer control over employees and the production process (Doussard, 2008).

As a result of social organization, ethnic niches allow immigrants to create their own boundaries inside of which they can share resources, information, and opportunity (Scott eds, 2001). Inside of an ethnic niche, immigrants can monopolize an employment sector, taking advantage of their stereotyped 'ethnic' skills and specialization in a process Marlou Schrover et al. (2007) have termed "ethnicisation" (535). In this way, immigrants are still excluded from labor markets while different industry sectors are practically reserved for the ethnic group in a positive sense, allowing outsiders to enter the specialization under the pretense that they are part of the group (Schrover et al., 2007). A visible minority immigrant's status

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as an outsider positions him or her at the bottom of the labor market, providing the means to degrade work practices in five basic ways: workers limited knowledge of U.S. labor laws, pending citizenship status impedes worker from standing up to employers, workers are vulnerable to employer reprisals, migration debts and family support burdens and limits workers' ability to opt out of the labor market, and the lack of formal skills and English proficiency all channel workers into degraded jobs (Doussard, 2008). In short, analyzing degraded work means prying apart the workings of firms and industries to determine whether employers are degrading labor because they can, or because they must (Doussard, 2008).

Research shows that low wages and temporary or subcontracted work are connected to intensified work pace and worsening conditions of labor (Doussard, 2008). As employers find new ways to cut costs, labor costs are evaluated in different ways and through different divisions such as gender, ethnicity, class, training, or education in order to gain a competitive advantage through marginalized employees (Doussard, 2008). In degraded occupations, the rules of hiring are dramatically different than that of human resources or even economic standards. Networks structure hiring which generally also includes the training of new employees that falls upon existing employees and disregard formal job applications and rules (Doussard, 2008). This informalization of work from hiring to training has placed workers in a particularly precarious position as they lose the protection of labor laws, which in turn further allows for the downgrading of work (Doussard, 2008).

The number of businesses within the nail industry increases competition, which also adds pressure to lower wages to keep costs low while increasing competitive advantage (Doussard, 2008). Nail technicians can be paid as temporary employees, but approximately 87% are paid either as independent contractors or booth renters, and are paid a certain

amount per service provided in salons (Crowley, 2008). “Currently, the nail industry is in the habit of hiring technicians as independent contractors when they should actually be employees. This happens in many industries because hiring workers as independent contractors lowers the owner’s operating costs. But it is difficult to know how to classify workers, and many find out only when it is too late — when the IRS comes knocking at your door” (Crowley, 2008: 1). Whether the salon or the individual were to be audited, both are considered responsible for taxes, penalties and interest (Crowley, 2008). The use of subcontracting to avoid paying benefits to individuals is risky for both parties, but such employer strategies are common in every industry, regardless of organization size (Crowley, 2008). For individuals working in such conditions, the only way to increase income is to work longer hours, often 6 or 7 days a week, which further degrades work.

The promise of America as the land of opportunity is best understood in terms of working hard today means you will have opportunities for more benefits tomorrow, or more stable employment as the case may be (Doussard, 2008). Immigrants come to the U.S. expecting to work hard, but also expecting their hard work to pay off for their employment opportunities. As the wages for manicurists are low, the best way to earn more is to work more hours and to establish working relationships with customers. Many manicurists choose to work ten-and-a-half-hour shifts, often without breaks even for lunch, in order to earn more money (Gonnerman, 2007). For manicurists, hard work pays off when customers come back and new customers come to the salon. Many aspects of service industries are not recorded, such as the emotional work of showing care for clients and remembering names and stories, and these aspects go unnoticed if not unrewarded. Oftentimes work performance is related to internalized aspects of degraded work, from trying to stay in the good graces of their

supervisor to not reporting unsafe conditions or complaints for fear of losing their job (Doussard, 2008).

In one such case, a first generation immigrant who had been working at a nail salon for 17 years was fired for directing an informal complaint to her supervisor. She visited the Chinese Staff and Workers' Association and learned for the first time about overtime pay and labor laws (Gonnerman, 2007). Many manicurists speak highly of their clientele, often working through the pain of long hours and constant contact with toxic chemicals because of these working relationships (Gonnerman, 2007). This internalized work degradation, however, is essential to understand the benefits to employers for keeping costs down and essentially beating the competition (Doussard, 2008). Unfortunately, industry and employer strategies to maintain low costs of nail salons are only one side of the degradation of work. In the next sections, I'll discuss the stigma that becomes attached to degraded work as well as to the stereotypical populations employed in degraded work, further channeling immigrants into specific labor market roles.

## 2.5 Stigmatized Work

Labor market roles inform social relations and identities to a large degree (Blauner, 2001). Social stigmas associated with bad jobs can push natives to search out other options, while immigrants may not know about the stigma or may disregard it because of the importance of other values obtained through the occupation (Scott eds, 2001; Waldinger, 1994). "According to the so-called Sullerot thesis, the image of a job devaluates as women move in. The degradation of jobs, when taken over by immigrants or women, relates less to the work itself and more to the image of the work" (Schrover et al., 2007: 535). Industries as

well as labor market roles can often become part of an ethnic stereotype without being an ethnic niche (Schrover et al, 2007). Some occupations and industries become known as immigrant roles, or female immigrant roles, such as domestic work or manicurist, because of their degraded entry level (Schrover et al, 2007).

The necessity of depending on social networks over experience and foreign education that lead to the development of ethnic niches demonstrates the embeddedness of the labor market within social relations (Waldinger, 1994). Manicurists and pedicurists thirty years ago were simply beauty salon employees that performed lower-level services alongside nail work. With the combination of the timing of the first two waves of Vietnamese refugees to the U.S., the coincidence of artificial nails as a status symbol in the mid-1970s, and continued trending with TV shows in the 1980s, nail services has grown to a \$6.4 billion dollar industry (Miller, 2007) It wasn't until the 1990s that the title 'nail technician' was created, and with it came an increase in the licensing requirements (Nguyen, 2010). Manicurists have always been a low status occupation, largely ignored and stigmatized to the point that many manicurists didn't admit to doing pedicures because it was practically taboo (Nguyen, 2010). The stigma is still present today, though in a much different light. Many first generation Vietnamese Americans have been able to find employment in nail salons because it is an occupation that has not traditionally been socially acceptable, and as an ethnic minority with a disadvantaged status, nail salons provide steady income (Nguyen, 2010). The combination of gender and class in the mostly female employed occupation that provides services for the wealthy translates into social humiliation.

Not only is the job low paying, but the working conditions of nail salon technicians are considered hazardous. The chemicals used in nail polish and removal liquids, which

manicurists come in contact with on a daily basis through their hands and through the air in the salon, is so hazardous that extra ventilation is required. Particular to the nail industry is the fact that safety data sheets are not given the same treatment as licensing laws with the offer of translation into Vietnamese or Korean language. In fact, most state boards of cosmetology that issue licenses do not provide enough safety education to licensees (Nguyen, 2010). Even organizations whose main goal is to protect workers have a hard time reaching immigrant employees because of the fear of disturbing the cultural rules of hierarchy, such as the Chinese Staff and Workers' Association, the National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum (NAPAWF), and the California Healthy Nail Salons Collaborative, a coalition of nonprofit organizations (Nguyen, 2010). The use of masks and gloves has been proven to help protect manicurists from toxic chemicals, but many salon owners worry that customers would be afraid of manicurists in protective gear and therefore do not require it of their employees (Nguyen, 2010). "My community is suffering silent. They have lots of concerns, but they don't like me to speak out... if your boss doesn't care about chemicals and safety, why should you?" (Sole-Smith, 2007 in Nguyen, 2010: 143). The performance of health is unsafe for nail care workers, which could be better protected through industry standards that ban toxic chemicals.

Chemicals found in nail polishes are regulated by the FDA, which is dependent on the Cosmetics Voluntary Registration program that was created so that cosmetics manufacturers could voluntarily report harmful effects (adverse reactions) to beauty products. In actuality, the FDA cannot mandate safety testing for cosmetic products before sale and distribution (Nguyen, 2010). The European Union has a much stronger Cosmetics Directive which has banned the use of approximately 1,200 chemicals including the toxic trio- toluene,

formaldehyde, and dibutyl phthalate. Furthermore, several companies that produce nail polish products have already created alternative products for European customers as a result of the more stringent regulations (Nguyen, 2010). In the U.S., the FDA relies on the Cosmetic Ingredient Review (CIR) to test chemicals for banning. By comparison, the CIR has only demonstrated that 9 chemicals in U.S. cosmetics are harmful which were then banned by the FDA. The CIR is made up of a scientific panel with funding provided by the Cosmetic, Fragrance and Toiletry Association (CFTA), which also funds lobbying for chemicals and plastics industries (Nguyen, 2010). In assessing the safety of cosmetics ingredients, the CIR reports that there is 'insufficient data' for 119 chemicals, and that they are therefore cautious to ban these chemicals (Nguyen, 2010).

As the FDA regulations stand, nail polish companies are responsible for the health and safety of their products, but potentially hazardous chemicals do not need to be listed on their ingredient labels (Nguyen, 2010). This detail has been fought at the state level, lobbied against by CAFTA, and defeated more than once in California alone (in Nguyen, 2010). Advocacy groups in California are working to increase education on the toxic ingredients and in 2005 were able to pass a state law requiring manufacturers to disclose their ingredients to the California Department of Health and Human Services (Nguyen, 2010). Victories like this are few and far between, but in 2005 the state of California was also given authority to investigate the impact of hazardous chemicals, and in 2007 one large nail polish producer, OPI, removed one hazardous chemical, toluene, from its products (Nguyen, 2010). The EPA has also developed grants to help nail salon owners build safety features into their salons, but the fact remains that few alternatives to toxic chemicals exist as realistic options for the nail industry (Nguyen, 2010).



First generation Vietnamese immigrants recognize that work as nail technicians means constant contact with toxic chemicals, but have reported that they feel they have little choice because of a lack of alternate employment options (Nguyen, 2010). Research shows that some Vietnamese manicurists believe that they must endure exposure to toxic ingredients in nail products in order to make a living because they cannot report the health conditions or change their environment (Nguyen, 2010). Many Vietnamese immigrants employed as manicurists see their first priority as providing an income to support the family, the health risks are secondary as earnings can provide savings within a few years and then change jobs (Nguyen, 2010). Other Vietnamese immigrants noted that all jobs have a price, in accepting employment as a nail technician one must also accept its risks of exposure to chemicals (Nguyen, 2010). Hazardous working conditions degrade work and create social stigmas that become linked to employees. Social stigmas further allow for industry and employer strategies to keep low costs but also dangerous conditions of work. In the next section, I'll explain the role of stigma as it affects to Vietnamese immigrants in the search for work in U.S. labor markets.

## 2.6 Stigmatized Population

Social relations and employment are intrinsically related but also reciprocally reinforced, and therefore circumstances of class are ultimately linked to labor market outcomes (Bauder, 2001). The concept of degraded work is most pronounced in the low-end service oriented economy of the U.S., where there are increasing amounts of devalued occupations that require minimal education (no high school diploma needed), offer low pay, demanding work, and few advancement opportunities (Schwartzman, 2008; Nguyen, 2010;

Doussard, 2008). Instead of evaluating applicants by relevant education and skills acquired through prior experience, employers consciously or unconsciously attribute qualities that have become socially regarded as innate to immigrants and women (Schrover et al., 2007). Women and immigrants are thus considered disadvantaged in labor market terms, often not due to any lack of skills, but rather that their skills are undervalued (Schrover et al., 2007). “Discrimination not only relates to employers or unions denying women and immigrants access to certain jobs, but also to denying them access to training, education, unions, and political power” (Schrover et al., 2007: 534). Cornell and Hartmann describe the stigmatization of identities of minorities and first generation immigrants as they pertain to the regulation of others (2007). Thick ethnic and racial identities provide employers with an understanding of an individual based on phenotype which regulates how far an individual will be able to rise within a company, whereas thin ethnic and racial identities are received more neutrally and the individual is given more agency to assert his or her unique identity (Cornell and Hartmann, 2007).

This is especially problematic for first generation Vietnamese Americans as the ‘immigrant model’ does not accurately represent all Asian groups. Blauner (2001) explains that there is a difference between colonized groups who were involuntary immigrants and voluntary immigrant groups who executed a much larger degree of choice, and after whom the ‘immigrant model’ for minorities was created. By stressing the racial division of labor as opposed to the ethnic stratification of labor, Blauner (2001) also notes that not only is there a racial hierarchy in labor market opportunities, but there is also ethnic grouping that allows for ethnicity to provide an advantage for its members in the labor pool. Research shows that within larger metropolitan cities, Asian groups dominate the more ‘favorable’ ethnic niches

Labor Market Channels: Perceptions of Vietnamese Immigrants on Accessing Jobs in Chicago and Hispanic groups are relegated to less desirable occupational niches (Nguyen, 2010). Taking it one step further, demonstrating the role of ethnicity over the agency of global location, Nguyen compared cities in the Minnesota and Florida that have different populations and economic structures and found that the nail industry is largely controlled by Vietnamese niches (Nguyen, 2010).

The context of reception of specific groups of immigrants is shaped by government policies, labor market conditions, and patterns of 'ethnic typification'; in turn, this reception creates boundaries around immigrant groups (Parrenas, 2001). The process, as opposed to the event, of immigration is perpetuated as many immigrants are considered foreigners even into fourth and fifth generation immigrants. This process of othering, which fundamentally limits one's economic utility, or lack thereof, further stigmatizes already established otherness based on linguistic or physical features (Scott ed, 2001). Underemployment is a painful experience for first generation immigrants, which is related to a larger world order hierarchy that affects the degree and type of development of specific countries and in turn limits mobility. Migration to another country forces individuals to adjust to new social norms, new labor market norms, and new customs and traditions. The addition of employment discrimination can cause significant mental health and self-confidence issues, putting immigrants at high risk for emotional and psychological problems (Joshi, 2009). Many Vietnamese refugees who came to the United States soon after the fall of Saigon experienced exclusion in local labor markets and downward employment mobility from doctors, lawyers and teachers to manicurists. Later Vietnamese immigrants were then able and in fact chose to become manicurists due to the help of social networks, short training periods, and quick income gains (Nguyen, 2010).

Patterns of differentiation among specific ethnic groups have emerged that separate what are considered to be low and high-quality workers (Parrenas, 2001). Within the context of degraded work there is a hierarchy of laborers based on ethnicity despite the low wage, low skill employment. For example, Filipina domestic workers are received as high-quality first generation immigrants, and the quality of this context of reception is emphasized in order to balance the experience of contradictory class mobility (Parrenas, 2001). The weakest candidate for any type of employment is the individual with a stigmatized identity, as this assigned stigma is based on physical and or linguistic attributes and allows for others to see them as less than competent (Anderson, 2011). This stigmatized identity also allows for phenotypes to be ascribed to specific labor market roles, often in degraded occupations. As one Filipina immigrant employed as a domestic worker explained: “Any kind of job would do, but at this point this is the only kind of job that I can find. I am not mad or angry about that. It’s just the way it is” (Parrenas, 2001: 196). Working in nail salons is hard work that includes the risk of carpal tunnel damage and exposure to toxic chemicals, and as a result, Vietnamese nail technicians and salon owners forbid their children from following in their footsteps. To incorporate their children into nail salon work would defeat the purpose of the struggles of first generation Vietnamese Americans (Nguyen, 2010). The benefits of ethnic niches, are therefore not only that ethnicity becomes an advantage in the labor market, but also provides protection from secondary labor market discrimination which second generation immigrants are expected to experience differently from their parents.

## 2.7 Agency of Vietnamese Immigrants in the Creation of the Nail Niche

Ethnic niches can be found at all levels of hierarchy, within every occupation, and as a characteristic of every ethnic group found in the U.S. regardless of immigration status (Nguyen, 2010). The good ole boys club and Indian engineers are two examples of higher ethnic niches while Filipina domestic care workers and Korean green grocers provide examples of less desirable ethnic niches, all of which are exclusively based on ethnic membership and provide labor market advantages. Wilson theorized that ethnic niches in and of themselves are hierarchical, rising not out of self-selection but rather based on occupational stigma and ethnic placement based on residual opportunities (Nguyen, 2010). Previously in this literature review, I have focused on ethnic stratification and labor market stigmas, this subsection then will explore beyond this focus, incorporating agency of Vietnamese immigrants and their role in creating the nail niche.

“Research recurrently reports that informal social contacts are the most frequent way by which people of all (emphasis added) ethno-racial backgrounds find work” (Nguyen, 2010: 15). Studies show that network ties increase the likelihood of emigration by providing community support that helps maintain low costs and access to employment (Massey et al, 1994). Immigrant networks, however, are generally linked to occupations available to first generation immigrants as opposed to primary labor market roles (Massey et al, 1994). Ethnic groups that have similar education backgrounds tend to find specific occupational opportunities across the U.S., demonstrating that ethnicity is interpreted as more important than education (Nguyen, 2010). Residential segregation also plays a role in access to employment as those living in immigrant neighborhoods have a higher tendency to find ethnic niche employment (Ellis et al, 2007). Vietnamese immigrants tend to live apart from

other Asian immigrant groups, but share some ethnic niches despite differential educational attainment from groups such as Chinese and Koreans (Ellis et al, 2007).

Immigrant networks are also helpful to employers as they function as informal hiring systems, lowering costs for finding and screening employees. The same can be said of all social networks, however, immigrant networks often play a larger role in discipline for new hires based on bonds of solidarity and ‘enforceable trust’ based on ethnic pride in the labor market (Ellis et al, 2007). International migration is perpetuated over time regardless of the original impetus for immigration by structural and more specifically network connections, such as the allocation of visas along family lines (Massey et al, 1994). Immigrant networks are clearly linked with the high percentages of Vietnamese immigrants employed in the nail industry; networks, however, are only one factor of many as there are high numbers of first generation Vietnamese immigrants employed outside of nail salons as well (Nguyen, 2010). Research suggests that Vietnamese immigrants were limited to labor market opportunities based on culture; in this way, immigrant networks deemed specific labor market roles to be acceptable and encouraged networks to seek such employment (Nguyen, 2010).

Vietnamese refugees that had served as teachers, business owners, and government officials were taught how to do manicures while they were in refugee settlement camps in 1975 as a means to make a living in the U.S. (Nguyen, 2010). “Phong Ho, the director of ANC Nail Training, graduated with a bachelor’s degree in Psychology. However, he chose nail as a profession because it was easier to make money” (Nguyen, 2010: 68). Vietnamese immigrants have been overlooked by many studies because the circumstances of their arrival are too unique, they are a newer immigrant group, and they were not seen as economically successful (Nguyen, 2010). The nail industry provides first generation Vietnamese

Americans with the opportunity to own their own salon and become their own bosses, short training time which is often offered in Vietnamese, future hiring of co-ethnics, little English pre-requisites and the opportunity to practice English with customers, and language hierarchy of Vietnamese (Nguyen, 2010). As the nail industry has become an ethnic niche, so has the development of Vietnamese nail schools in both the U.S. and Vietnam, further strengthening labor market flows and the perpetuation of first generation Vietnamese manicurists (Nguyen, 2010). As Vietnamese nail salons began to open across the country, complaints were often mixed with racism as customers reported feeling uncomfortable when Vietnamese manicurists spoke amongst themselves, and fellow manicurists insinuated that Vietnamese salons were unsanitary and dangerous (Nguyen, 2010). Similarly in the 1930s, white, upper class beauty shops as early cast suspicion on working-class and ethnic-owned salons as unsafe and unhygienic (Nguyen, 2010).

## 2.8 Conclusion

The formation of immigrant service industry workers is the result of many factors leading to and from society at large (Wolf, 1982). Degradation of work is both impacted by industry regulations and employer strategies to reduce cost and be competitive. The most important signifier for immigrant groups is their placement in the hierarchy of labor as it is the basis for evaluation of skills and education and will govern what new training and certification must be attained (Wolf, 1982). Racial differentiation has long been used as a means to stigmatize specific groups, excluding them from primary labor market roles as well as from access to education and job specific information (Wolf, 1982). The rise of low-wage service industries is positively affected by the influx of immigrants from diverse backgrounds

that can be easily manipulated into local racial hierarchies and essentially new working classes (Wolf, 1982). Ethnic niches provide resistance for specific immigrant flows from this racial hierarchy, but still must be negotiated within the current political structure. The next chapter will explore the case study of the ethnic niche of Vietnamese nail technicians based on this understanding of the historical context of reception of Vietnamese refugees, the labor market segmentation that Vietnamese immigrants face, and the employer and industry strategies of work degradation.



### **Chapter 3**

#### **Case Study: Ethnic Niche Construction**

The first two chapters of this thesis explain the flight of Vietnamese refugees and the forces that affected their incorporation into the United States from the point of view of the U.S. government, U.S. society, industry and employer. This chapter looks at the agency of Vietnamese immigrants based on this context of reception and employment negotiation, exploring ethnic niche creation and the roles of gender and ethnicity in the specific development of the nail industry. My thesis will use the current classification in place: ethnic group members representing at least one-and-a-half times more than any other ethnic group employed within an industry are considered an ethnic niche.

Research on immigrants entering the labor market frames ethnic niches as a ‘protected environment’ that serves to provide opportunities for immigrants without skills, education or English language ability. Opportunities for labor market incorporation for first generation immigrants are largely within co-ethnic owned organizations which, while preferable to unemployment, promise little beyond minimal wages for menial and lower-paying work than the secondary labor market (Bobo et al., eds, 2000). Therefore, while ethnic niches provide gainful employment to first generation immigrants, it is problematic that immigrants are propelled into the same stagnant labor pools as the secondary labor market (Smith, 2006).

Employment in an ethnic niche can provide immigrants with training, local work experience, and possibly even the savings needed for certification in local labor markets (Wilson, 2003). By that same reasoning all immigrants with skills, education and English language ability should be able to enter the primary labor market; however, the very

establishment of ethnic niches across skill borders signals much larger barriers to entry for immigrants (Scott, ed, 2001). Additionally, while ethnic niches can turn discriminative disadvantage into an advantage by using social networks to gain access to previously restricted information and opportunities, in many cases the lack of job ascendancy demonstrates that immigrant workers wind up in ethnic niches due to the lack of alternative options (Bobo et al., eds, 2000). “Connections between newcomers and veterans provided the crucial entry mechanism, transforming the ways in which information about job opportunities and workers’ characteristics were transmitted by perspective workers and to employers” (Waldinger, 1994: 21). The keys to creating niche employment include opening a new door to business, creating a new service or opening a service to customers, or the relaxation of normal entry barriers (Waldinger, 1994). The next section looks more closely at the advantages and disadvantages of ethnic niches in order to better see them as individual and group strategies.

### 3.1 Ethnic Niche Development

Social and structural forces that shape ethnic niches have negative consequences on immigrants in those niches. Niches are not an immigrant phenomenon alone; in fact, niches are generally formed in response to labor market disadvantage (Waldinger, 2005). When it comes to employment, immigrant networks send information about business success to later arrivals about the type of companies to start and the employment sectors to seek out or avoid (Waldinger, 2005). Existing research suggests that there are four main forces that mold niche development: individual experience, current labor market openings, industry regulations, and hiring bias (Maples, 2010). At the same time, niches tend to form along industry or

occupation lines in urban areas; therefore, residence and geographic location play a role in niche formation (Maples, 2010). More often than not, ethnic niches are found in low-wage sectors that are non-unionized (Maples, 2010). Maples takes this one step further by identifying niche jobs as the only option for most immigrants, leaving out the fact that some immigrants are hired based on their immigration experiences (Maples, 2010). “For niches to occur, the local economy must also inadvertently create spaces for entrepreneurial growth” (Maples, 2010: 54).

What is left out of the equation is the agency of immigrants and immigrant groups in identifying gaps in location specific services and the tendency for specific immigrant groups to develop niches as opposed to others. Identifiers of groups that are more likely to develop niches such as race and ethnicity demonstrate the gap in understanding of the factors that lead specific groups to form ethnic niches (Maples, 2010). There are many spaces for unequal treatment that can occur during the hiring, training, and promotion practices (Lee, 2007). Laborers and firms are subject to different guidelines and laws in the separate labor market segments, regardless of industry, job, or organization size (Lee, 2007). High turnover rates create the need for shorter, more informal hiring practices (Lee, 2007). In the case of social network hiring, the training of employees often falls on the shoulder of the members of the network, further reducing the costs to the employer. Ethnic niches often provide manual services that can be completed in a short period of time, require little training, and include low start-up costs (Lee, 2007). Entrance into ethnic niches varies by ethnicity and gender, as do the roles in ethnic niche industries (Lee, 2007). The existence of ethnic economies demonstrates the structural inequality of local labor market. Lee explains this concept well in the following excerpt:

“[Lee] found that the ethnic economy does not offer any substantial disadvantages to hours worked per week, hourly wage and yearly income when compared to the mainstream economy, and that the ethnic economy has a positive effect on children’s educational achievement, it should be made clear that [Lee’s] purpose is not to celebrate the entrepreneurial success of Asian immigrants. Nor does [Lee] believe that these results support the myth of the model minority. The ethnic economy does not arise out of entrepreneurial spirit and the American Dream; rather, it is a consequence of both historical and contemporary racial and ethnic discrimination in the mainstream labor market. The fact that there is a need for the ethnic economy highlights the inequalities that exist within the mainstream labor market” (Lee, 2007: 209-210).

As a result of social organization, ethnic niches allow immigrants to create their own labor market boundaries inside of which they can share resources, information, and opportunity (Scott eds, 2001). Networks alone cannot explain ethnic niches as they are formed within and around industries in which social networks are already lead by specific immigrant or native groups (Waldinger, 1994). The development of an ethnic niche creates new social norms based on the type of occupation as well as the group involved (Waldinger, 1994). As niches become mainstream and successful, they often become considered protected niches whereby outsiders include any individuals who are not part of the ethnic group. The successes and development of protected niches often result in ‘increased social hostility’ as well as stereotypes that seek to explain the success of the niche not to skills or experience but rather to inherent advantages (Lee, 2007). For example, Vietnamese

manicurists have internalized the notion that Vietnamese Americans possess exceptional inherent skills for nail technicians, a sentiment that is reflected back through customers' eyes. At any level, if an ethnic niche achieves social closure, the hiring processes can be protected, which also perpetuates the class structure (Bauder, 2001). The next section will explore the positive and negative returns to ethnic niche employment.

### 3.2 Agency of Vietnamese Immigrants in the Creation of the Nail Niche

There are specific benefits and setbacks to individuals employed in ethnic niches. Wilson (1999) finds little support for the notion that ethnic niche employment offers advantages to first generation immigrants as compared to the likelihood of unemployment and difficulty with barriers to the general local labor market. Wilson's research demonstrates employment in ethnic niches as an advantage for those with poor domination of the English language, with disadvantages such as underemployment and low earnings (Wilson, 1999). Occupational outcomes show a pattern that niche employment may be linked to restricted employment mobility, which could also be a result of local labor surpluses (Wilson, 1999). Studies also show that urban concentration of immigrant groups is linked to ethnic niche development, especially for many Asian immigrant groups (Lee, 2007). Residential concentration is also a strategy for immigrant children's educational, occupational mobility and as a home base for subsequent immigration (Lee, 2007).

Immigration theories that study occupational attainment of first generation immigrants often use wages and education to measure immigrant outcomes; however, looking at ethnic niches as a labor market strategy within a segregated labor market allows for a better understanding of the agency of immigrants faced with differential occupational

negotiations (Wilson, 1999). Formal education, U.S. job training and credentials, English language ability, and social networks are all culturally valued prerequisites for employment that can place immigrants at a disadvantage in local labor markets (Lee, 2007). “According to human capital theory, differences in skills (gained through work experience, training, and ability) determine an individual’s capacity for productivity, which determines wage rates” (Becker, 1962 in Lee, 2007: 19). As niches exist outside of recent immigrant groups, there is clearly economic value in the formation of ethnic niches (Wilson, 1999). What is noteworthy about ethnic niche formation is that immigrants of color disproportionately represent the lowest earnings (Lee, 2007). Even the most successful ethnic niche employment might represent underemployment as a result of barriers to entry in more desirable labor markets (Lee, 2007).

Advantages to ethnic niche employment include, but are not limited to, access to rotating credit, entrepreneurial skills, the ability to start their own businesses, work longer hours to balance lower wages, payment under the government radar with cash instead of checks, a sense of trust and obligation, a net income advantage, and the avoidance of intimidating unfamiliar conditions of local labor markets by allowing for adjustment to new homes while continuing customs and language of the country of origin (Lee, 2007). Niches provide underemployment instead of unemployment, especially for female immigrants and the benefits of working in a niche differ among ethnic groups (Lee, 2007). However, it has been shown that the ethnic economy may only benefit those who lack English proficiency to obtain primary labor market employment and that career mobility may be restricted as a result of working within ethnic niches (Lee, 2007).

Across ethnic niches, research shows that employers pay roughly 17% less to immigrant employees, with Filipino Americans earning more than most groups and Vietnamese Americans earning significantly less (Lee, 2007). Ethnic niches, therefore, can signal both exclusionary and inclusionary hiring practices, providing advantages of job opportunities based on the inverse of similar language and ethnicity barriers faced by immigrants (Lee, 2007). Lee's (2007) dissertation highlights the need to demonstrate the diversity in the labor market experiences of Asian American immigrants in the United States because of the differential historic incorporation of Asian immigrant groups. Asian Americans embody no less than twenty-four separate heritages by nationality that were differentially received based on immigration quotas before 1965 (Lee, 2007). First generation Asian Americans also represent an extremely large diversity in educational levels, upholding the stereotype of 'the model minority' because of overall high school graduation rates (Lee, 2007). As a result of these variations, the significance of the ethnic niches is not the same even among Asian niches, much less all immigrant groups (Lee, 2007).

There are many examples of ethnic niches specifically placed within personal care/services: Vietnamese manicurists, Korean green grocers, Hispanic maids, Indian motel owners, and Filipino nurses (Eckstein and Nguyen, 2011). The similarities of the majority of these niches are that they are unsustainable as they are physically demanding, require long hours, pay low wages, and often involve hazardous working conditions (Eckstein and Nguyen, 2011). The degree of dangerous conditions and social stigma related to jobs is often correlated with labor market hierarchies among immigrant groups that place Asian immigrants at the top and Hispanics at the bottom (Eckstein and Nguyen, 2011). Within this structure, Vietnamese, Cambodian and Laotian immigrants represent the lowest mean

average of years of education which is understood as justification for the lowest income and least prestigious jobs. While there is more at work than simple racial stratification, the agency of immigrant groups is intertwined with class and race.

Ethnic niches are often framed, in both academic and public discourse, as dangerous due to long hours of work at little pay, which assumes that individuals are overworked (Lee, 2007). However, often in ethnic niches wage rates are constant across the field and the longer work hours are an employee strategy in order to increase take home income and balance out low wages (Lee, 2007). Studies also show that female immigrants who have stronger English language skills earn approximately 20% more than those who have lower English skills (Lee, 2007). “The fact that there are still ethnic difference in hourly wage even after controlling for gender, age, family formation, and human capital suggests that there are some omitted variables that are correlated with both ethnic group and wage. This is most likely related to occupation, as there is still an occupational hierarchy” (Lee, 2007: 153). The next section will discuss the intertwining of stereotypes of Vietnamese women with employment negotiation through the development of the nail salon niche in the U.S. and beyond.

### 3.3 Development of the Nail Niche

Nail salons are not a part of Vietnamese traditions; in fact, there are no exact words in Vietnamese for manicurist; the phrase ‘tho nail’, or nail worker, was created with noticeable English language influence (Tran, 2008). Vietnamese culture expressly scorns the handling of others’ feet (Eckstein and Nguyen, 2011). Several circumstances aligned at once for the development of the Vietnamese nail niche, starting with the timing of the influx of Vietnamese refugees, refugee camp training, and the glamorous trend of Hollywood stars



wearing acrylic nails lead, and the development of cheaper nail services that started in California, where the largest population of Vietnamese Americans lived (Eckstein and Nguyen, 2011). The nail industry was propelled forward as a result of the development of inexpensive acrylic nails in 1979 as well as improvements in glues and plastic nail tips, opening new areas for innovation in the larger nail industry. “The arrival time of Vietnamese, in relation to the technological advances in the manicure business, helped them create and dominate the occupational niche” (Nguyen, 2010: 58). In 1975 when Vietnamese refugees first began arriving in the U.S., there were few registered manicurists and no free standing nail salons. As of 2007, there are approximately 57,800 nail salons across the U.S. and roughly 40% of nail technicians are Vietnamese immigrants (Miller, 2007).

Vietnamese refugees were relocated upon arrival in the U.S. as mandated by the Refugee Dispersal Act, often forcing the separation of extended families. Without family or community support networks, Vietnamese refugees’ credentials failed to transfer or their skills were no longer considered marketable, which pushed the vast majority into low wage, low-skilled jobs (Do, 1996). The months that the newly arrived Vietnamese Americans spent in U.S. refugee camps were productive for men who were offered English language courses and job training, but women were presumed to be housewives and were left out of all such training (Nguyen, 2010). Surveys taken a year after Vietnamese refugee camps closed showed that Vietnamese immigrants who had previously held professional jobs as businessmen, managers, and technicians became overwhelmingly underemployed: 73% found blue-collar work, 17% found clerical and sales work, and 10% were able to find equivalent work to previous employment in Vietnam (Nguyen, 2010). The majority of the refugees were employed in secondary labor markets, paid minimum wage, had no benefits or

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job security, and close to 50% qualified for welfare assistance (Nguyen, 2010). In the 1990s Vietnamese refugees began to regroup in locations such as California, forming communities and in some cases ethnic enclaves. Members of the ‘Little Saigon’ enclave began working in nail care in large numbers in the early 1990s when they discovered that licensing in the state of California required little training and limited English (Federman, Harrington, and Krynski, 2006).

Salons that catered exclusively to nail care did not exist until the late 1970s. Before the 1970s and the arrival of Vietnamese Americans, manicurists worked on the fringes of beauty salons (Nguyen, 2010). By catering nail services to all income levels regardless of class and social status, Vietnamese nail technicians created a new market for manicures and began opening stand alone nail salons (Nguyen, 2010). Perfectly manicured hands were traditionally a marker of class, of idleness, of leisure, and of wealth in the early to mid-1900s. Before Vietnamese immigrants created the discount nail salon, only upper class women could afford manicures (Nguyen, 2010). Many Vietnamese refugees had found other employment upon arrival to the U.S. and chose to become nail technicians as the niche developed (Eckstein and Nguyen, 2011). Soon nail care companies grew as well creating new salon appliances such as “whirlpool pedicure spa chairs”, which were designed to enhance the customer’s experience and also to ease the nail technician’s posture (Nguyen, 2010: 89). The nail niche has brought new jobs to the market, found underserved clients and created demand for manicures and pedicures across class and ethnic lines, and used innovative strategic practices (Eckstein and Nguyen, 2011; Nguyen, 2010). Vietnamese manicurists have become successful because of their ability to service demands outside of the ethnic group (Nguyen, 2010).

By creating a broad client base and creating a market specifically for nails, Vietnamese nail technicians worked very hard to build the nail industry from the ground up (Eckstein and Nguyen, 2011). Vietnamese workers have niches in a few sectors: nail salons, manufacturing, and engineering in Silicon Valley (Maples, 2012). Much of the manufacturing done by Vietnamese companies is the production of nail care supplies and products for organized groups of salon owners (Maples, 2012). As the majority of nail salons owned by Vietnamese immigrants are owned and operated by families, Vietnamese American entrepreneurs were able to expand from nail salons to nail care suppliers, using ethnic niche networks for exclusionary practices of sales (Maples, 2012; Eckstein and Nguyen, 2011).

Vietnamese nail salons are considered a protected niche due to the demand for Vietnamese skills, the consolidation of Vietnamese immigrant communities, and the shaping of nail industry policies to include Vietnamese language training and testing (Maples, 2012). “Nail salons are products of the economic and occupational adaptation process developed after Vietnamese immigrants came to the United States. For many early Vietnamese refugees, self-employment was a response to joblessness, discrimination, and government neglect, a reflection of social exclusion rather than a vehicle of integration” (Nguyen, 2010: 89). Many Vietnamese women found nail work to be the fastest return on their investment of licensure as it requires low startup costs, a short training period, and little English language prerequisites as a result of the network of Vietnamese American owned salons (Eckstein and Nguyen, 2011; Nguyen, 2010).

Vietnamese American nail technicians are overwhelmingly first generation immigrants; in fact, only 3% of licensed manicurists are born outside of Vietnam or the U.S.

and less than 1% of Vietnamese nail technicians were born in the U.S. (Nguyen, 2010; Eckstein and Nguyen, 2011). There are many nail technician success stories of individuals who earn middle class salaries from opening and working in their own salons as well as nail salon chains, some of which are connected to corporations like Wal-Mart (Eckstein and Nguyen, 2011; Nguyen, 2010). Business models of nail salons are in a perpetual state of growth as the industry has only been developed within the last thirty years (Crowley, 2008).

Vietnamese Americans are credited with the development of the nail industry, having overcome the possible barrier of licensure and employed social networks to pool capital and provide labor (Eckstein and Nguyen, 2012). In 1998 Vietnamese Americans surpassed all other ethnicities in total numbers of registered manicurists, which doubled within the next five years (Eckstein and Nguyen, 2012). Studies also show that nail technicians as of 2006 had similar earnings and work hours regardless of ethnicity (Eckstein and Nguyen, 2012). There are so many nail salons in Southern California that it almost seems that Vietnamese refugees were given every advantage in developing the nail niche; however, this was not the case as high-end beauty salon owners fought the development of Vietnamese owned 'discount' nail salons, accusing the services of being 'unsanitary and unhealthy' and negative stereotypes of Asians flared (Nguyen, 2010). The saving grace of Vietnamese nail salons was the establishment of a robust customer base, as Americans voted 'in essence, with their hands and feet' (Eckstein and Nguyen, 2011). "San Diego comedian Dan Phat jokes that 'the plan is to take over American from the toes up' " (Nguyen, 2010: 62).

As local markets become saturated, Vietnamese manicurists become trained locally and then open their own businesses in new towns, cities, states and even countries (Nguyen, 2010). Many young women in Vietnam who are waiting for their visa paperwork have

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already received job offers from relatives, friends or acquaintances and take nail technician classes in order to be prepared to work as a manicurist in the U.S. (Nguyen, 2010). Many Vietnamese American females also take manicuring classes when they are visiting Vietnam on vacation because it is more economical and has fewer requirements (Nguyen, 2010). Some Vietnamese manicurists believe their work to be simple and profitable, and are unsure why other ethnic groups haven't joined the business, citing pioneers who have paved their group's paths over ethnic superiority (Nguyen, 2010). The lure of opening your own salon, being your own boss, has more symbolic meaning than the job itself (Nguyen, 2010). Vietnamese newspapers and magazines, many of which are free and can be picked up from any Vietnamese store, advertise job opportunities, advances in technology, and strategies to incorporate increased clientele (Nguyen, 2010).

The belief that Vietnamese nail technicians do a better job than other ethnicities is not just a belief in the U.S., as the nail niche has expanded internationally, magazine articles across Europe reflect these sentiments as well (Nguyen, 2010). The common use of the English word 'nail' reflects the transnational influence of the ethnic niche as the nail industry has become a transnational phenomenon (Nguyen, 2010). Trang Nguyen, an instructor for the California State Board of Cosmetology, founded a nail company that has become so successful that he has visited over thirty countries to teach students across the world (Bui, 2007). Nail services have even sprouted up in Vietnam offering different types of 'salons' for different customer bases, from manicure peddlers to luxury salons (Nguyen, 2010).

Stand-alone nail services have become so commonplace that different specializations have developed, all promising lavish pampering treatments (Nguyen, 2010). Manicures and pedicures cross between the health and beauty industries as certification includes hand and

foot massage training (Nguyen, 2010). Health related trends that nail salons offer are organic spa-like treatments that emphasize natural ingredients such as fruit extracts and essential oils, and boast skin nourishment (Miller, 2007). Fashion trends have developed in the fashion industry, using nails to set seasonal color styles and make statements (Singer, 2008). “In a retail climate dominated by accessories, however, nails also help move merch[andise]” (Singer, 2008: 2). Artistic trends of painting vignettes on nails have also developed with competitions and websites dedicated to the artistry of nail technicians.

Flying under the radar, as it were, nail salons grew in popularity in a matter of decades captured by the media in the late 1990s because the market had become saturated and competition had set in (Nguyen, 2010). It seemed incredible that the nail industry had gone from virtually non-existent in the 1960s to a billion dollar market that employs over 300,000 individuals in 2010 (Nguyen, 2010). “Had the Vietnamese been more numerous in size, more economically well-off, unionized, or their profession more glamorous, the nail salon niche would have received more attention” (Nguyen, 2010: 108). Nail services are subject to different government agency regulations, as mentioned in the first part of this literature review. The next section explores the specific regulation of nail technicians in Illinois.

### 3.4 Regulation of the Nail Salons in Illinois

State based institutional conditions that contribute to niches include: regulation and licensing requirements, access to visas and green cards that “make specific lines of work more or less accessible”, but also non-governmental institutions such as bank lending practices and private sector trainings that restrict training by language (Eckstein and Nguyen,

2011: 642-643). Vietnamese owned enterprises had the lowest sales, smallest firms, and the fewest employees of all Asian immigrant groups in the 1980s (Eckstein and Nguyen, 2011).

As mentioned in the previous section on the role of industry, the first documented salons with nail technicians in the U.S. date back to the mid-1800s, and in 1939, the Board of Cosmetology in the state of California developed manicurist licensing (NailSchools.com, 2012; CA Dept. of Consumer Affairs, 2011). State governments control the licensing requirements of manicurists, regulating hours of training, language of exams, and the use of translators, which can be granted but also taken away (Eckstein and Nguyen, 2011).

The Illinois Barber, Cosmetology, Esthetics, Hair Braiding, and Nail Technology Board is composed of 11 persons, 6 cosmetologists of varying sized firms, one licensed barber, one licensed esthetician or esthetics teacher, one licensed nail technician or nail technology teacher, one licensed hair braider or hair braiding teacher, and one public member who holds no licenses issued by the Department (Illinois General Assembly, 1985). It is important to note that the majority of the board members do not actually need licenses for the industry they are regulating. There is also one manicurist on a board with 6 cosmetologists, which alone constitutes a quorum, deciding on licensing examinations for the state of Illinois (Illinois General Assembly, 1985). State cosmetology licenses include tuition fees, licensing exam and renewal fees, and state and federal taxes. As licenses are regulated by state governments, the requirements vary by region, raising questions such as: what is the difference between 90 hours for hygiene and skill development and 350 hours that some states such as Colorado require (Federman, Harrington, and Krynski, 2006)? The addition of board members may or may not be a solution to this clear monopoly of industry leaders, but

it certainly explains why professionals are required to take up to 400 hours of cosmetology classes in order to become licensed manicurists.

Industry licensing creates a level of necessary knowledge and skill in order for a technician to enter a trade; however, it has also been demonstrated to bring higher status for the producer of services at the price of higher costs to the consumer, reduced competition, narrowed opportunity for aspiring youth by increasing the costs of entry into a desired occupational career, and artificially segmented skills so that needed services, like health care, are increasingly difficult to supply economically (Gellhorn, 1976). Licensing focuses on certifying quantitative inputs rather than qualitative performance, essentially changing occupational competition that is only further exacerbated by course and testing fees (Dorsey, 1983). As demonstrated by the nail industry, written licensing exams can become separated from the actual practices of a trade, rewarding educational skills such as literacy and test-taking ability in the place of industry specific knowledge training (Dorsey, 1983). In instances such as that of nail technician licenses, written tests may be an unsuitable form of measurement for the desired skill level of an industry (Gellhorn, 1976).

In 1996, Vietnamese language versions of manicurist licensing exams were introduced in California and soon after the industry's trade magazine created a glossy Vietnamese language magazine: VietSalon (Federman, Harrington, and Krynski, 2006; Tran, 2008). Currently only 8 states offer licensing exams in Vietnamese, but 14 states allow for modifications such as translations and interpreters on request (<http://www.manicure.com/illinois-nail-tech-licenses>). Vietnamese manicurists are blamed for ethnic displacement; however, their role in the growth in the nail industry led to exponentially increasing employment as nail technicians (Federman, Harrington, and



Krynski, 2006). Moreover, Vietnamese immigrants in the U.S. are responsible for innovations in accessibility and marketing of manicures, such as the stand-alone nail salons, that has increased convenience and demand for manicurists and thus dampened any displacement of U.S. citizens (Federman, Harrington, and Krynski, 2006). There are many institutions that protect and regulate nail technicians, the next section will explore the informal power relationships that differentially affect Vietnamese immigrants as they negotiate employment in the U.S.

### 3.5 Differential Power Structures

Statistics show that specific immigrant groups are able to develop different ethnic niches in the U.S., depending on the creation of demand, the displacement of native-born workers, and filling a vacuum in stigmatized jobs (Eckstein and Nguyen, 2011). The relationship between niche industries and immigrant groups is based on the dynamics between the group and the communities into which they settle, geographic location and specific labor market gaps, as well as institutional conditions such as certification requirements (Eckstein and Nguyen, 2011). Social dynamics are based on the context of reception of immigrant groups at a specific point in time in the development of a niche, allowing for cultural values, language, and social networks to serve as informal hiring preferences (Eckstein and Nguyen, 2011). Some Vietnamese Americans place emphasis on the connection between employment experience in personal care services in Vietnam and the niche of Vietnamese nail technicians (Bui, 2007).

Kang (2003) explains the presence of Asian women in the industry in part due to the fact that nail salon work reflects larger systems of status and power as immigrant manicurists

learn to cater to different races and classes in customer service as well as nail work.

“Through their shared race, gender, and class locations, Asian women have been coveted as productive and docile workers, whose ‘nimble fingers’ make them desirable and exploitable in an increasingly feminized, impoverished, and unprotected labor force” (Kang, 2003: 824).

The practices of physical and emotional labor that are performed in nail salons are seeped with race and class meanings through which immigrant women learn and continue to reinforce social hierarchical structures of inequality and difference (Kang, 2003). Class differences came to the forefront in the development of Vietnamese nail salons as prices became more reasonable for larger client bases, and elite salons found ways to subtly equate cheap manicures with health hazards (Nguyen, 2011).

Assigned stereotypes about groups of newcomers that begin to attach meaning about skills and traits lead to further organization of immigrant identity, leading to exclusionary labor market practices that can be used as an advantage when creating ethnic niches (Schrover et al., 2007). As stereotypes gain social ground, ethnic niches allow for the monopoly of an occupation or industry (Schrover et al., 2007). Specific groups of legal immigrants are welcomed with benefits and their skills are put to work while other groups of legal immigrants that come to the U.S. on employment visas or family reunification visas are legally allowed to work though their skills and education are selectively recognized. As refugees, Vietnamese immigrants faced challenges that voluntary migrants did not experience, which was exacerbated by relocation policies that separated refugees from what little social networks they were able to maintain (Lee, 2007). Labor market incorporation is dependent on social networks but also the relationship of an immigrant group with the larger

society, and as immigrants begin to assert their identities, there is often an undertone based on occupational attainment as self-images form around labor market roles (Finnan, 1981).

Immigration is worthwhile for individuals from countries with less occupational opportunities at home than abroad, even when new skills must be attained to access new labor markets (Duleep and Regets, 1997). Immigrant labor market studies often equate occupational attainment with education and experience, which is dependent on culturally valued experience and education (Lee, 2007). However, nail niches have arisen in part due to the attributes assigned and asserted by Vietnamese women, as well as the resources of community (Wilson, 2003). “The effects of ethnicity and family formation on labor market segment vary by gender, and the effects of gender and human capital characteristics vary by ethnic group” (Lee, 2007: 100). The nail salons in which first generation immigrant women are employed can be broken down into multiple layers of power and various forms of politics. The experiences of Vietnamese immigrants as imported service providers have symbolic as well as economic significance (Cheng, 2006). Their status of servitude at the hands and feet of their customers helps consolidate the hierarchical distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’, racially, ethnically, religiously, culturally, and nationally (Cheng, 2006).

Asian immigrants in the U.S. have historically experienced institutionalized racism, from the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 barring Chinese laborers to the Gentlemen’s Agreement in 1908 when Japanese immigration was restricted (Lee, 2007). Asian labor market incorporation has historically been linked to low-skilled service industries and mining in California (Lee, 2007). It is no coincidence that Vietnamese immigration is a direct relationship between the Vietnam War and American involvement in the Vietnam War (Eckstein and Nguyen, 2011). Immigrant sending countries that have longer histories than

Vietnam tend to have more ease with labor market entry upon arrival (Lee, 2007). Filipino immigration was legal as the Philippines was a U.S. territory, but upon independence in 1935 the Tydings-McDuffie Act set Filipino immigration quotas of 50 individuals per year (Lee, 2007). Such overt institutional discrimination is intrinsically linked to ethnic solidarity and the formation of ethnic niches for future generations of Asian immigrants to the U.S. (Lee, 2007). The next section will explore the role of gender in the labor market incorporation of Vietnamese immigrants.

### 3.5 The Role of Gender

The reality for Vietnamese women of all classes was that during the war, they had become an integral part of the economy and supporting their families. Female Vietnamese refugees that had served as teachers, business owners, and government officials were taught how to do manicures in refugee camps as a means to make a living in the U.S. (Nguyen, 2010). The job skills and training that men received focused on jobs that had been done by women in the U.S. during the war (Nguyen, 2010). As the training female refugees received was the role of housewife and thus revolved around beauty and shopping, it was fitting that the first jobs that women received training for were in nail care (Nguyen, 2010). Eckstein and Nguyen explain that while social networks are used by all ethnic groups, first generation immigrant women are especially reliant on networks, which tends to channel them into specific clusters (2010).

As the realities of local job markets set in and Vietnamese men adapted to the perceived feminized occupations open to them, nail care as a career option became 'less objectionable' though still not a career that would have been pursued in Vietnam (Nguyen,

2010). Men were left to assimilate to U.S. culture and traditions which portray Asian males as “wimps, geeks, and emasculated asexuals” (Nguyen, 2010). This exclusion from mainstream notions of masculinity translated into labor market roles, channeling Chinese males into laundry work, Japanese males into domestic servants, and Filipino males into domestic duties within the Navy (Nguyen, 2010).

Over 70% of the nail care work force, as well as the beauty industry overall, is female dominated. 21 percent of Vietnamese working age women, or one in every five, are employed as nail technicians (Nguyen, 2010). Family owned and operated nail salons created space for the incorporation of Vietnamese males into nail technician work (Nguyen, 2010). NAILS Magazine reported that as of 2008, of the 130,000 Vietnamese nail technicians, 28% of Vietnamese nail technicians are males, which is striking considering that only 4% of Vietnamese males are employed in the nail industry overall (in Nguyen, 2010). “The fact that Vietnamese males have worked in the nail business since the onset is a unique feature that defies gender norms and distinguishes the cultural pattern of Vietnamese from other Asian entrepreneurs in the industry” (Nguyen, 2010: 55).

Family support is a secondary factor in outweighing gender norms for Vietnamese men despite patriarchal values; interestingly enough it is not the same case for Korean men despite the overlap in patriarchal cultural values (Nguyen, 2010). This is not to say that Vietnamese or Korean males do not face social stigma in the U.S., but rather to demonstrate that both pre-migration and post-migration culture looks down upon male involvement in what has been deemed a female role that Vietnamese males have been able to overcome as a result of the benefits gained by their family. Studies show that many Vietnamese men would be comfortable leaving nail salon work if suitable options with matching income were

Labor Market Channels: Perceptions of Vietnamese Immigrants on Accessing Jobs in Chicago available (Nguyen, 2010). Some Vietnamese men reported that the discrimination they faced was both with salon owners and clients, one such experience was that a male worked for free for five months in order to gain employment among nail technicians and customers who did not want a male in their female dominated space (Bui, 2007). At the same time, however, Vietnamese males are growing in the ranks of nail technicians and salon owners, investing in techniques as well as salon equipment to give their work every advantage in the saturated market (Bui, 2007).

“Male employment in female-dominated fields is unusual, and often brief when it occurs. The majority of men seem to enter female-dominated occupations not through a revolving door but rather through a ‘trap door’- most were not seeking such entry” (Nguyen, 2010: 161-162). Studies show that Vietnamese men working in nail salons found ways to decrease their humiliation, quoting Vietnamese proverbs that speak to the necessity of doing degraded work when facing hunger (Nguyen, 2010). Some Vietnamese male nail technicians truly enjoy their occupation, putting graphic design skills to work on small canvases, but the majority report that the deviation from gender norms is purely an economic adaptation as nail care had been seen in Vietnam as humiliating work (Nguyen, 2010). Some men reported changing careers from mechanics, engineers, computer technicians, and even 1.5 generation immigrants who had local college degrees turned to nail salon work because of the lack of job offers, expensive and time consuming training and certification periods, larger investments for equipment, and less profitable work than nail care (Nguyen, 2010).

Work that has been historically female-dominated is relegated to lower status, decreased recognition, and lower pay than male-dominated occupations (Nguyen, 2010). The nail industry is no exception; however, as an immigrant female-dominated work place, nail

technicians have always been understood as performing degraded work (Nguyen, 2010). Research shows that age and marital status increases employment probability for immigrant men, but decreases employment probabilities for immigrant women (Lee, 2007). English language skills also signal increased employment probabilities in both niche employment and primary segment employment (Lee, 2007). The relegation of female immigrants into degraded work cannot be solely due to family obligations or assumed low levels of skills; the prominence of gender in labor market channeling needs further study as factors such as female immigrant preferences and confidence levels could play a role in degraded work choice (Lee, 2007). Research demonstrates that female immigrants have lower earnings, facing a double jeopardy that stems from gender and perpetual foreigner status (Joshi, 2009; Lee, 2007). Males have a stigmatized identity only when they are members of visible minorities, while females have stigmatized identities regardless of the minority/majority membership in the labor market (Joshi, 2009).

### 3.6 Conclusion

Ethnic niches demonstrate the complex interplay of race, class, and gender in the negotiation of employment for first generation immigrants. The development of the nail care niche is especially interesting as the industry has grown along with the expansion of its customer base. The many power structures at play in the entrepreneurship of nail salons have all been confronted as the industry has been dominated by female Vietnamese immigrants. “Women are not mere victims of the production process, because they resist, challenge, and subvert the process at various junctures” (Mohanty, 1986: 345). The difficulty with class issues with immigrants involves the differences in classes across national borders, and the

fact that immigration is expensive and risky is not at all reflected in the reception of immigrants in the U.S. Regardless of class in Vietnam, Vietnamese immigrants who are able to afford moving to the U.S. have much broader experience than they are understood to have.

One fiction of labor markets is that employers and employees have a mutual dependence and therefore perform a ‘symmetrical exchange’, when in fact labor market incorporation is loaded with race, gender, and class relationships (Wolf, 1982). Gender places significant regulations on individuals’ labor market attainment, and the meaning of female and male dominated labor have specific historic contexts (Mohanty, 1986). The combination of ethnic and gender roles is reflected in the higher proportion of immigrant female incorporation in ethnic niches than their male counterparts (Ellis, et al, 2007). This chapter expanded on agency of Vietnamese immigrants, which I will further develop in the next chapter through my field research. As nail salons are relatively new, studying the development of nail salons provides the opportunity to look at the specific combination of ethnicity, gender and class work.



## **Chapter 4**

### **Case Study of Vietnamese Immigrants in Chicago: Field Study**

My thesis set out to understand how first generation female Vietnamese Americans negotiate employment in Chicago. My secondary data, in chapters 1 through 3, addresses a number of aspects by which Vietnamese immigrants face barriers to primary labor market employment as well as ways in which Vietnamese immigrants overcome these obstacles. The first part of my case study detailed the history of nail care and the development of the ethnic niche of Vietnamese nail care in order to better understand the experiences of this population. My primary research, presented in this chapter, addresses the perceptions of nine individual Vietnamese immigrants on their experience entering labor markets in Chicago.

As a starting point to construct interview questions, I conducted informal observations at several urban nail salons in Chicago as a customer over a period of four months. I engaged manicurists in short conversations about their families and reasons for coming to Chicago, noting afterwards which phrases and questions led to or halted conversation. As the conversations were informal, I did not speak to the manicurists about my thesis and did not take notes during the conversations. During a research methods course, I led a sociology class to a nearby nail salon where we each conducted informal interviews and then debriefed afterwards on how I could further strengthen my interview questions. Ultimately I determined that the client-manicurist relationship would not be strong enough to recruit participants for more in depth interviews about their personal experiences. Instead, I increased my participation in two local community groups where I developed relationships that were disconnected from work and later recruited participants for interviews.

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I had been attending events at a local Vietnamese parish, Parish A, for three years and joined the parish choir three months before I began recruiting participants for my study. I had also been teaching English as a Second Language as a volunteer with a community based organization, Organization B, for two months before I began recruiting participants. Parish A is located in the northernmost neighborhood of Chicago known as Rogers Park, which as of 2010 is a diverse lower middle class neighborhood in Chicago with a high population of renters (City of Chicago, 2015). The Parish provides several masses in English and several masses in Vietnamese, as well as Vietnamese language classes after mass on Sundays. The Vietnamese congregation is of an older generation who are well established in the U.S. and of higher socioeconomic status, many of whom came to the U.S. as refugees. Organization B is located in a neighborhood on the north side of Chicago known as Uptown, which as of 2010 is a predominantly white neighborhood but like Rogers Park is comprised mostly of lower middle class community that rent their housing (City of Chicago, 2015). Both of these neighborhoods, Uptown and Rogers Park, are located on the north side of Chicago, are lower middle class, but also have high immigrant populations.

A long-standing member of each organization introduced me to potential participants and I then explained my research goals before asking if the individual was interested in participating. Both of my community ‘sponsors’ knew my background as well as my research goals. Since completing my interviews, I have become more involved in both communities and have also begun to learn the Vietnamese language, which I had been interested in doing since I became familiar with Vietnamese culture several years ago. I had hoped that the introductions would help the participants to see me as an insider, but the language barrier

made the distinction even more sharp. As a result, I had a difficult time eliciting trust from the participants which in turn stifled my analysis.

#### 4.1 Methodology

After gaining the necessary Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, I formally interviewed nine Vietnamese immigrants regarding how they sought employment, the establishment of their social networks, and recommendations they would make to future Vietnamese immigrants upon arrival in Chicago. My interview questions were structured into three main sections to better understand the labor market experiences of immigrants: demographics and residence, previous jobs and social networks, and current employment. I asked questions such as, “How did you decide to move to the U.S.?”; “What do you think of the neighborhood or town where you live?”; and “How did you find your current job and how did you decide to become a manicurist/alternate career?” I used separate sets of interview questions for manicurists and non-manicurists, which can be found in the appendix.

As U.S. labor market entry is based on skills, education, and social networks, I asked about previous employment in Vietnam and the U.S. and the ways in which respondents found work in the U.S. The interview then focused on the certifications needed to find current and future employment, which culminated in the question of what recommendations individuals had for new arrivals. Each interview lasted on average 13 minutes, and so when I approached individual for interviews, I made sure to explain the time commitment of up to 20 minutes. Many responses during the interviews were short with little help of follow up questions, and my analysis suffered as a result.

The interviews were conducted before and after mass for participants recruited through Parish A in a room connected to the Church, and before or after class for participants recruited through Organization B in a room connected to the classroom. In this way, the interviews were held in a comfortable environment that the participants knew well. Four of the individuals who participated in my study were employed as manicurists, one participant had been a manicurist and now owned her own salon, and four of the individuals were occupied in variety of other fields and occupations. The variety of employment outcomes better informed my research in understanding the decision whether or not to become a manicurist.

In approaching immigrants as individuals, I addressed my work as a project for graduate school and any participation as voluntary help for me to better understand the individual's experience finding jobs as an immigrant. Before the interview started I explained that if any questions made the participant uncomfortable, they should say so and we would skip the question completely. I wrote shorthand notes but also transcribed the interviews, coding for social networks, employment trends, reasons for seeking primary employment, and recommendations to future Vietnamese immigrants. I also wrote 4 thematic memos that helped me to better understand the common themes that emerged throughout the interview process as well as what was left out or avoided during the interviews. My findings will thus be broken down into social networks, employment history, decisions on seeking specific employment, recommendations, common themes, and what participants left out of their interviews.

#### 4.2 Social Networks and Place

Social networks and residential location are greatly intertwined, especially for immigrants, as social networks help individuals decide where to live and in turn help inform newcomers to job openings. When asked about the construction of their local social networks, I understood that many networks were transplanted from Vietnam to Chicago and consisted of both friends and family, which is a common theme of high immigrant sending countries. Some participants noted that their local Church was a space in which they found community, though this was not surprising in that many of my participants were recruited from my connection with a Parish A. Time seemed to be the largest constraint, as participants explained to me that they worked every day of the week and barely had time to go to school for English much less meet up with friends. These same participants also noted that they lived in residential areas with both Vietnamese neighbors and Vietnamese businesses, which afforded them access to networks even if the relationships were based in grocery shopping and errands.

In order to better understand the relationship between location preference and employment opportunities, I asked participants specifically about their residential neighborhood. The majority of participants in my study said, “I had no choice in where to live” and resided in neighborhoods based on proximity to family members. Seven of the nine of the participants I interviewed live in urban areas, the other two resided in the suburbs. Of those who lived in the city of Chicago, half live in Uptown and a quarter live in Rogers Park, which makes sense based on their relationships with Parish A and Organization B. Of the four participants who reside outside of Uptown and Rogers Park, three of the four participants live in higher income neighborhoods. It impressed me that some of the participants spoke about social networks along the lines of coworkers or neighbors as sources

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of information regarding job openings as these opportunities were often outside of nail tech jobs. This denotes a larger impact of residential location on social networks in that Chicago is known for its tight knit, often ethnically segregated, neighborhoods. Those who expressed frustration in unsafe neighborhoods or in unstable jobs seemed bittersweet about their ‘choice’ to move to the U.S. while those who spoke positively about their education, employment, or residential location contributed it to their choice to move to Chicago.

The words “quiet” and “safe” were used in almost every interview to describe desirable neighborhoods, where participants either lived or would like to live, such as Skokie, Lincolnwood, Rogers Park, and Sauganash. As I recruited immigrants who attended Mass or class in the north side communities of Rogers Park and Uptown, it’s not surprising that I did not have any participants who lived outside of the northern neighborhoods in Chicago and its surrounding suburbs. One participant noted that she felt as though she was the only Vietnamese person in her neighborhood in Wilmette, which she almost whispered during the interview as though the observation made her uncomfortable. She did not speak of safety in her neighborhood, but rather quiet and clean air, only noting her status as the sole Vietnamese person when asked about the community.

When I addressed the question how did you choose your current career, the majority of participants avoided answering directly saying instead that it was just a job or that everyone needs a job. Most participants noted that the most common ways to find jobs were to look in magazines (for nail technicians only), to speak with family about openings with their employer, or to speak with family and friends regarding any available work in their nail salon or restaurant. This is similar to U.S. concept of social capital, encapsulated by the common knowledge that “it’s not what you know but who you know” which alludes to the

stronger need for a personal reference than education in job searching. For immigrants, social networks are even more important as they have more limited employment opportunities than U.S. citizens on the basis of U.S. education and experience. These U.S. certifications and degrees are often additional to degrees earned in immigrants' home countries, which is common to many immigrant narratives, except white western European immigrants.

Two of the nine individuals that I interviewed spoke about how their employment was close to their house, one who owned her own business and one who was newly on the job market and heard about the job openings in person. Three individuals spoke about how far away their employment was from their home, which was exceedingly inconvenient as they had to work every day of the week and weekends. Three individuals focused not of the location of work, but rather of the tasks of the job that they liked most. As social capital is influenced by residential location, those participants who lived in areas with high immigrant populations reported different degrees of safety but also access to a wider network of jobs that needed very little English. The biggest reward to having Vietnamese neighbors, as opposed to the advantage of living near Vietnamese businesses, then was not only the feeling of community, but the importance of introductions to employers.

#### 4.3 Employment History

I asked participants about their previous employment in order to better understand the shift between previous careers in Vietnam and their options in the U.S. There were several commonalities in employment histories of the participants, but not along the lines of occupation or even profession. Several participants had worked for family businesses in Vietnam, whether that was on a family farm or making and repairing shoes, which suggests

the existence of social capital along strict family lines. The notion of opportunity in the U.S. therefore seems appealing, except that the stark inequality in the U.S. greatly rewards those with social capital at the expense of those without it. The other participants I spoke with worked in sales or as translators, but two of the nine participants came to the U.S. when they were still in high school and did not yet have jobs in Vietnam. Three of the nine participants had worked in several different careers in Vietnam and held several different jobs in the U.S. as well, but of the seven participants who had been previously employed, none of their careers matched up to what they had done before. Good jobs in Vietnam were drastically different than the perception of good jobs in Chicago, regardless of their experience, which made me wonder about the extent they felt restricted in U.S. labor markets. Easy jobs seemed to be the jobs within family companies in Vietnam, but in the U.S. 'easy jobs' were defined as those with a low requirement of speaking and writing in English. I'll speak more about good jobs and easy jobs in a later section as it was a common theme across interviews, but I wanted to highlight the change between desirable jobs in Vietnam and the U.S. Some of the participants' dreams were therefore limited not by experience but rather due to language barriers, even with the participants who spoke English the most comfortably.

When asked why participants changed their careers, some noted that they simply could not or did not want to continue with that occupation in the American context, whether it was in travel services or education; in the U.S., these participants used the easier access to education to change their access to careers. One detail that became clear to me was that the U.S. provided access to education which allowed for a variety of careers, in essence opening the doors to the decision to change occupational fields. Across the divide of current employment between manicurists and Vietnamese immigrants employed in other fields, I



noticed the trend of education being the means not necessarily to earn more money but rather to do interesting jobs where participants could learn and grow into further employment.

Three participants expressed a desire to help others that was largely missing from the participants who worked in nail care, which leads me into my next section about the choice to work as a nail tech.

#### 4.4 Reasons for and Against Seeking Nail Care Employment

Many of the participants used social capital to access specific job opportunities through their social networks, whether that was neighbors, family, or friends. Most individuals didn't speak in terms of the jobs they wanted, but rather the jobs they could do. They explained the need to gain confidence in English, which could be done on the job doing nails, or working at a restaurant or coffee shop. When speaking about what individuals didn't like about a job almost every participant employed in nail care mentioned the point of view that everybody needs a job or that it's just a job. The individuals employed outside of nail care expressed the same sentiment about needing a job, but added that they felt that they were lucky to have a job or spoke about how much they enjoyed helping people, which again was not expressed by a single participant employed in nail care.

One participant went back to school multiple times for different jobs and recommended to any future Vietnamese immigrants that they go to school for something they were good at as opposed to doing something that was considered easy in the U.S. I had the impression after nine interviews that school was something that was difficult to make time for, and while only one participant noted the need to send money to family in Vietnam, all participants suggested that there was a significant amount of learning English that could take

place on the job. Four individuals spoke about taking English classes at a local college as well as the need to go back to school to find jobs outside of nail care. Three of the nine participants were currently in school and had varying degrees of employment between part time jobs and unemployment. Two of the three women were supported by family, while the third noted the need to support family back in Vietnam.

I found it significant that all nine participants expressed an understanding that college was the ladder out of nail employment; however, age and dependents were the deciding factors on who was able to go back to school and who was not. Only one of the participants with children went back to school, while those with family members in the U.S. were able to go back to school while their husbands or parents supported them. With nail care, participants who owned their own business seemed to be satisfied, but those employed within the nail care industry seemed as though it was only one stop along the way. The single participant that spoke about sending money back to Vietnam was also the only participant who had no family support in the U.S., but was also in school and unemployed at the time of the interview. Essentially, she was the only one of nine participants who was able to put her future first and focus on school in order to attain a good job and provide family support down the line.

Also notable was that only two participants, who were both in school at the time of the interview, spoke about a dream job which would become attainable with a degree. More common was the mention of good jobs that participants had or currently were working towards in school. The word dream was used not confidently, but rather quietly, with body language that demonstrated almost embarrassment to have a dream job despite the fact that they were en route to achieve these dreams. The younger of these two dreamers advised new

immigrants from Vietnam to “work to learn, not work to earn” while the elder of the dreamers simply noted that her part time job as a nail technician was necessary to pay the bills while she established the skills and certifications for her dream job. Nails, then, seemed to be the “fall-back” plan that many Vietnamese immigrants started out to get ahead and few left. My concern was whether this was due to the frivolity of dream jobs or the reality of employment opportunities in Chicago.

#### 4.5 Suggestions for Future Vietnamese Immigrants

This part of the interview was the most enjoyable to me as participants gave a sense of optimism and hope, which was expected as part of a larger immigrant narrative. However, their responses were also mixed with caution, which I attributed to the context of reception of Vietnamese immigrants in particular. When asked to give advice to future Vietnamese immigrants, the respondents often gave advice that mirrored their experiences, but just as often went in the opposite direction of what they sought for employment. I heard encouraging phrases such as “work to learn, don’t work to earn” and “don’t give up” which held immigrant sentiments of strength and hopefulness, but also alluded to the fact that life in the U.S. is harder than they expected. There was constructive advice such as “first learn English, then go to school” and “find an easy job”, but also “don’t only look for easy jobs”. I’ll go into more detail about good jobs versus easy jobs in the next section.

Seven out of nine participants recommended working at an easy job, emphasizing that new arrivals could practice and learn English at an easy job. The remaining two participants recommended finding good jobs with benefits, noting that English would be the hardest obstacle to overcome, that they would advise new immigrants to work hard and be patient.

Another participant went so far as to recommend that new arrivals not have high job expectations, that they are young and need to learn much more before they can find good jobs. Only one participant, in thinking about the advice she would offer to her brother who might eventually come to the U.S., recommended that he continue with a job that was previously held in Vietnam. This could be because the advice was to a male, but also could be as it was more specific to someone with skills and experience; however, the fact that it was not advised by any other participant made it stand out the most.

#### 4.6 Emerging Themes

Two main themes emerged from these qualitative interviews: the expression of good jobs versus easy jobs and the feeling of little choice on where to live in Chicago. While finding low wage jobs is known as an easy job to most of the population in the U.S., the wording of easy jobs and good jobs was specific in all of the interviews and combined strategies from many other immigrant group narratives such as niche employment and inter-ethnic owned businesses. The feeling of choice on where to live in Chicago again mirrored many other immigrant group narratives in that individuals followed family or social networks in deciding on where to migrate. However, the fact that each of the participants used the phrase “I had no choice” is distinct to female immigrants, but also denotes a lack of ownership and pride in their current location as well as a wistful tone that their entire families could be elsewhere.

##### 4.61 Easy Versus Good Jobs

During each of my interviews, I heard mention of easy jobs for Vietnamese people that would be helpful starting points for employment in Chicago, including working in a nail salon, a Vietnamese restaurant, or a coffee shop. The word easy came up in almost every interview, as well as the mention at least two of these three specific jobs. The reasons that they were easy jobs ranged from: language commonality, easy to do, or easy to find work as one could work for family or find out about job openings in a magazine very quickly. There was very little mention of Vietnamese training or a faster training period than a college degree, though these two advantages are definitely present. However, these jobs do not have benefits and range from grueling hours to part time, but they provided the money needed to pay rent and food as well as opportunity to practice speaking and hearing English. What was not mentioned at all was the danger to one's health or the hours bent over at the feet of American customers, but I'll get more into that detail in a later section of this chapter.

The majority of participants also spoke of good jobs, either using the phrase good jobs or mentioning one ideal job by name: as a nurse in a hospital. The commonality of the occupation as nurse as the good job struck me as slightly different than the American ideals of doctors and lawyers, but there was no mention of any other occupation as an ideal job. One participant spoke about wanting to be a lawyer when she first arrived in the U.S., but language being too much of a barrier as she spoke Vietnamese and French. Another participant spoke Chinese and Vietnamese and at the age of 19 worked part time as a translator in Vietnam, but she was still searching for her exact ideal job noting that she only knew that she wanted to work in a hospital. Again I was reminded that only two participants spoke of dream jobs and how only one of those dream jobs was outside of the medical field. These two responses stood out even more from the rest of the interviews as they veered from

the ideal “good” job for Vietnamese immigrants, but also because of the tone of the responses for the dream jobs.

When I asked what other jobs participants would like to do in Chicago, many were quiet, uncomfortable, and reverted to the “it’s just a job” mentality. When I asked what each participant would recommend, even if participants were recommending good jobs, they still mentioned the notion of easy jobs and the need to find more than something that was easy to do, something that offered benefits, and for a company where they could learn. While the notion of easy jobs for immigrants seems to be a commonality regardless of country of origin, the separation between ethnic niches has strict boundaries. As I’ve demonstrated in the first two chapters of my thesis, I believe that U.S. society’s role in the boundaries between ethnic niches can be understood through the context of reception of specific immigrant groups, the history of migration from countries to the U.S., and socioeconomic spaces created by industries, entrepreneurs and communities. For the nail care niche, the arrival of immigrants and refugees coincided with advances in nail care technology to play important roles in the development of Vietnamese immigrants.

My question then becomes: to what degree are Vietnamese immigrants channeled into the nail care niche? The degree of choice in residential location and difficulty in pursuing further education in the U.S. seem to be the main indicators that differentiate those who are able to choose beyond the nail care niche from those who were effectively channeled into the nail industry. However, several of my participants were able to open their own nail salons, which is one of the benefits of the ethnic niche and also demonstrates a certain degree of choice in the decision to enter into the nail care niche. I was unable to further explore the degree of choice that participants felt in entering Chicago labor markets, but I’ll go into

further detail in the next section on residential location selection and its relevance to employment.

#### 4.62 Little Choice- Following Family

When asked why participants chose to move to the U.S., only one single participant spoke about job opportunities in the form of the American Dream. She added that she and her family were not rich by any means, but that they were happy, which was her dream. All nine participants spoke about family that had moved to the U.S. prior, whether it was a sibling, spouse, child, or parent. The move seemed to be bolstered by the fact that there were more job opportunities, but that being together with family was the goal, no matter how long it might take. There was no negative sentiment attached to the event of immigration; in fact, most of the participants who came to the U.S. after a family member spoke about those back in Vietnam, several adding that they hoped to sponsor them in the U.S. soon.

When asked about the neighborhoods or towns that the participants reside in, two of the participants demonstrated a sense of longing to be elsewhere, whether it was mention of a different part of town that was safer or how life is better in a smaller country. This was difficult to get at as often participants instead focused on the fact that they had little choice in where to live due to family obligations. One participant mentioned that the government helped her find her apartment in a dangerous neighborhood, but had troubling explaining any further. Future research could search more in depth about why couples or families chose to move to a specific neighborhood in order to better understand the degree to which residential segregation played a role in their access to social networks as was alluded to in these interviews.

#### 4.7 Left Out

Only one participant, employed as a nail technician, asked to skip a question. This skipped question involved negative perceptions about a current occupation. In fact, most of the participants employed in the nail care industry made no mention of any specific parts of work that they disliked, instead they answered by speaking about how everyone needs a job. I worried that participants may think that I wanted to hear about complaints of high maintenance customers or demanding bosses, complaining about all others at work. The fact that I didn't hear about the long hours spent bent over around dangerous chemicals also worried me. My identity as a white, native born U.S. citizen who does not speak Vietnamese likely prevented me from gaining the full trust of the participants, which I'll discuss in the next section on limitations of my research.

Higher education in the U.S. is a means for immigrants to gain local certification and experience as well as to achieve higher wages in employment outside of self-employment. The theme of higher wages did not come up in any of the interviews, which could be due in part to the framing of the interview questions. I was surprised that no one spoke about 'getting ahead' as we do in U.S. culture, linked as it is with job opportunities in the U.S. which did come up in several interviews. One participant mentioned that the U.S. was a much bigger country where many more jobs existed, but had nothing to say about earning more than in Vietnam. Another participant made mention to the fact that she did not seek riches or wealth, but that she lived a happy, comfortable existence, which was her dream.

#### 4.8 Limitations



This is a finite study that has several limitations. First, I am not Vietnamese immigrant and I do not speak fluent Vietnamese. My knowledge of Vietnamese immigrant experiences comes from research and personal connections, which presented some challenges to my primary research. I encountered a language barrier in my interviews as many of the participants had problems with words like decide and choose in the interview questions. Most confusion was cleared up quickly, however, I do feel that more in depth interviews might have been possible through the use of a translator, which I did not have. My access to first generation Vietnamese immigrants is also biased in that after conducting informal observations in nail salons in Chicago, I spoke with individuals connected through Parish A and Organization B. While participants for my study came from two separate networks, I realize that they are very specific networks and are not necessarily representative of the greater Vietnamese community in Chicago.

Furthermore, I thought that there would only be a power differential in my role as a volunteer teacher as teachers are revered in Vietnamese culture. However, I found that in seeking to understand the immigrant experience as an outsider, I held power in the 'othering' of Vietnamese immigrants and the very notion that I was challenging: that my experience finding jobs would be different than theirs based on their otherness as immigrants. The participants each verbally expressed anxiety through phrases such as um and uh, which worried me as to the degree to which they trusted my motives and my study. While only one participant asked not to answer a specific question, which was honored without hesitation, I felt that some participants were uncomfortable with a question and avoided verbalizing any discomfort by sidestepping the question. As a result, I did not follow up on those questions that were avoided unless I felt that the participant did not understand what I was asking. I

made sure to focus on the biases I brought into my study as I went along, consistently reflecting on what the reasons for discomfort on my end as well as on the part of the participants.

#### 4.9 Conclusions

As I've established throughout my thesis, the goal of my research is to understand the factors which lead first generation Vietnamese Americans towards or away from employment in nail salons. The research I presented in this chapter supports the following key understandings that the experiences of female Vietnamese immigrants on choosing nail care employment in Chicago: the delineation of work in terms of easy or good jobs, the difficulty in finding support to go back to school and support family, and the lack of specific reasons for immigration. The immigrant narrative traditionally stresses a hard work ethic but also compensation for such hard work that is becoming unrealistic for many immigrant groups in the U.S. Many earlier Vietnamese immigrants have made significant earnings in the U.S., but the narrative that I heard in my field research was based on finding jobs that are easy to learn in order to pay the bills instead of seeking higher earnings. The humility of the reasons for immigration alongside the lack of American Dream vocabulary lead me to believe that the experience of Vietnamese immigrants is different than the historic immigrant narrative but also different than many other current immigrant groups. This is consistent with my literature review findings that based on the context of reception in the U.S., employment negotiation in Chicago, and the development of the nail care niche, Vietnamese immigrants have a unique experience finding jobs in the U.S.

Despite the limitations of this study, I believe that the findings are significant. While the female Vietnamese immigrants I spoke with considered themselves prepared to work hard, they understood that the only way to find a job was to go back to school regardless of education and experience in Vietnam. This includes going back to school to become a nail technician, which is the shortest path to certification and often included instruction in Vietnamese. This is not to say that every Vietnamese arrives at the same decision of whether or not to work within the nail care niche upon arrival. Instead, I emphasize that this study demonstrates that based on social, historic, and economic factors, Vietnamese immigrants are more likely to find employment in nail care to be “easy” employment. This delineation that nail care work is easy is further bolstered by social networks, language advantages within the niche, and the assumption that as Vietnamese immigrants, they possess an innate dexterity that provides them with a competitive advantage in nail care.

The role of U.S. society in the boundaries between ethnic niches can be understood through context of reception, history of migration, and socioeconomic circumstances created by industries, entrepreneurs and communities. For the nail care niche, the timing of the influx of Vietnamese refugees and immigrants was pivotal in the development of the nail care industry. Once the ethnic niche had been established with chains of production from nail salons to nail care supplies, the boundaries became stricter as language and ethnicity served as barriers to entry. With the establishment of the niche, to what extent are Vietnamese immigrants then channeled into the nail care niche? My interviews have focused on the differences in residential location and challenges in pursuing further education in the U.S. as the indicators of niche employment, demonstrating a clear connection of entry into niche employment for Vietnamese immigrants.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Conclusions**

My thesis set out to establish the factors that lead first generation female Vietnamese immigrants towards or away from employment in the nail niche. The labor market experiences of first-generation immigrants vary in key ways from that of individuals born and raised in the United States. Employment history, education credentials, language skills and social networks are among the most well-known factors that lead immigrants towards niche employment. However, niche employment is also a result of discrimination, socialization in the U.S., stigmatized work, devalued skills, and social stigma. The development of protected niches is an employment strategy used by many immigrant groups to avoid the secondary labor market as well as to create opportunities for self-employment. Specifically for the nail care niche, industry advances and entry of Vietnamese immigrants were large indicators of niche development. As I have demonstrated in my thesis, the channeling of immigrants into the niche is based on differences in government and family support, residential location, and English language domination as the pursuit of further education in the U.S. became the path away from the niche.

My thesis engages with immigration studies by providing a more holistic look at the employment achievement of Vietnamese immigrants and understanding the impact of life in the U.S. in terms of occupational attainment. As many immigration studies focus on wage rates as the unit of measurement of immigrant earning potential, I hope to provide further detail in understanding the many factors that first generation Vietnamese immigrants face upon entry into local labor markets that affect earnings. Furthermore, the concept of wages and employment are both social negotiations that are inevitably laced with cultural bias.

There are many factors that have affected first generation Vietnamese immigrants upon entry into the U.S. over the last 40 years, from the context of reception of the first immigrants from Vietnam, changing immigration policies that has led to anti-immigrant times, the socioeconomic conditions in the 1970s through today, the construction and relocation of Vietnamese immigrant communities, the role of ethnic and racial identities and their regulation of social and professional life, as well as the devaluation of Vietnamese skills and education in local labor markets. My thesis studies Vietnamese immigrant entry into labor markets from the roles of employers, industries, government policies, and communities in order to better understand the dislocations they experience. As Vietnamese immigration to the United States began as a result of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War, first generation immigrants are inextricably linked to the stigma of the U.S. loss in an unpopular war. The development of the nail niche has created a space in U.S. labor markets and beyond for Vietnamese immigrants to reject secondary labor markets by using cultural advantages such as Vietnamese language instruction and ethnocentric social networks.

I have demonstrated that labor market incorporation is inevitably intertwined with race, gender and class. All three identity markers have patterned histories, evidenced by the fact that more female immigrant are employed within ethnic niches than male immigrants across different nationalities. Industry regulations and employer strategies have made room for the degradation of work, which when combined with racial and ethnic differentiation creates specific job categories for immigrants and minorities. The overall U.S. labor market requirements of education and certification were reflected in the distinction between easy and good jobs by the participants in my field work, despite the fact that nail care was considered an easy job and required licensing and education. Social networks are clearly impacted by

residential location, especially in a city such as Chicago which is known for its tight knit, often ethnically segregated neighborhoods. Ethnic niches provide the similar employer strategies for a newly protected class of low wage workers, with different political negotiations of racial hierarchy than secondary labor markets. The female dominated nail care industry is further degraded with lower pay, status and recognition for their stigmatized identities. However, at the same time, as an industry led by immigrant women, the notions of hierarchy become increasingly complex as socially disadvantaged women hire within their protected niche with the ability to become self-employed within a span of five to ten years.

Immigrants entering the United States labor markets have historically been subjected to culturally interpreted skills valuation and socialized to work in specific service industries. As a result, many first generation Vietnamese immigrants feel that they have little choice beyond underemployment in low wage jobs while struggling to earn a living. As the participants in my study noted, one method to decrease differential access to labor markets is to gain educational certification in the United States. However, for those who were unable to support themselves and/or their families, had narratives far different than the American immigrant narrative. In the U.S., hard work is known to be rewarded by better opportunities. The participants in my study, in contrast, spoke in terms of limited entry choices and path dependence, sometimes to the point of being trapped in an unsatisfying career. It is important to understand ethnic niche employment not only for its economic role in the lives of immigrants, but as a complex intersection of skill valuation, social capital versus human capital, politics of exclusion, the creation of advantage where it had not previously existed, and a protected cultural identity through industry authority.

Ethnic niches in the U.S. exist throughout a range of salary and occupational levels, which provides a unique opportunity to study the combination of gender, ethnicity and class in immigrant labor market incorporation. I hope that my research offers a more nuanced approach to immigration studies. This in depth look at the context of reception, labor market negotiation, and development of the nail care niche all demonstrate the cultural advantages and disadvantages that channel first generation female Vietnamese immigrants into employment as nail technicians. As a result of these historic, social and economic influences on this population, nail care has become easy employment, often meant to provide income during the process of incorporation into American life. Barriers such as the internalization of the social and political factors that led them to the United States and the social networks that provide access to employers often leads first generation Vietnamese American women to stay within the nail care niche. As ethnic niches have become normalized in the U.S., the permanence of employment in ethnic niches reflects a much larger issue within local labor markets.

Future research includes surveying a wider group in Chicago, but also comparing and contrasting values such as ideal employment and social network construction between different immigrant groups as well as with native born citizens. I recommend focusing on differential notions of American Dream between different immigrant groups and native born U.S. citizens. Research shows that there exist a different understanding of opportunities between first and second generation immigrants of different backgrounds, demonstrating a much more optimistic and hopeful outlook for first generation immigrants. However, I believe that the American Dream mentality which supposedly exists as an immigrant native, is strongest in native born citizens who are fourth or fifth generation and believe themselves

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to be living proof. Lastly, I would like to see future research compare specific ethnic niche employment across ethnic and gender identities to better understand the complexity of occupational channels in the United States.



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### **Appendix I: Interview Questions for Manicurists**

#### Demographics/Neighborhood of Residence:

1. How old are you?
2. What neighborhood or town do you live in?
3. What do you think of the neighborhood or town?
4. Can you describe the Vietnamese businesses in that neighborhood or town?
5. How did you decide where to live?
6. What year did you arrive in Chicago? What year did you arrive in the U.S.?
7. Where were you born? Where were your parents born? /grow up? [country, city]
8. What year did you begin working at this salon?

#### Previous Jobs/Social Networks:

9. (Whatever you feel comfortable telling me) How did you decide to move to the U.S.?
10. How did you learn English?
11. How many of your family members live in the U.S? How close do they live to you?
12. Have you made any non-family friends? If so, how?
13. Did you have any other jobs before becoming a manicurist? What & where were they?

#### Current Occupation:

14. How did you decide to become a manicurist?
15. What do you like about being a manicurist?
16. What do you not like about being a manicurist?
17. What other jobs in Chicago were you interested in before becoming a manicurist?
18. How did you learn the skills and knowledge to become a manicurist?
19. Have you attended a nail school? Which one(s)? When did you attend?
20. If not, how did you obtain your license to work at a nail salon?
21. How did you obtain your job at this particular salon?
22. If you wanted to look for another job, how would you go about looking for one?
23. What advice do/would you give to anyone looking for a job as a manicurist?

**INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH STUDY**

**Labor Market Channels: Perceptions of Vietnamese Immigrants on Accessing Jobs in Chicago**

**Principal Investigator:** Barbara Colleen Keefe

**Institution:** DePaul University, USA

**Faculty Advisor:** Dr. Shaijla Sharma, International Studies

I am examining the processes that female Vietnamese immigrants negotiate in work. I would like to interview you because as a Vietnamese immigrant, I would like to better understand your experience as you negotiated employment. If you agree to be in this study, you can choose to be asked questions in a location that you are comfortable in that offers privacy for the interview at a time that works for you and me. If I have more questions after our first interview, I will contact you about setting up a second meeting. I will record our conversation with my cell phone, please let me know now if you do not agree to being recorded. You may request that the recording stop at any time. I will ask you questions about what kinds of work you did before your current job, and what factors led you to choose your current employment. I will also ask a few personal information about you such as your name, age, and employment history; however, this personal information will be stored safely and not affect your work in any way. If there is a question you do not want to answer, you may skip it.

The interview will take about 20 minutes of your time. Your information will be kept confidential and your name and place of work will not appear in my thesis, instead this information will be kept separately and will only accessible to me. I will record the interview on my cell phone to make sure that I am accurately representing your responses to my questions. The audio files will be stored on my personal computer and permanently deleted after two years.

Your participation is voluntary, which means you can choose at any time not to participate. There will be no negative consequences if you decide not to participate or change your mind later after you begin the study. Your decision whether or not to be in the research will not affect your job or the nail salon in any way.

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about this study or you want to get additional information or provide input about this research, please contact Colleen Keefe at [keefecol@gmail.com](mailto:keefecol@gmail.com) or on my cell phone 202-595-4610.

If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact Susan Loess-Perez, DePaul University's Director of Research Compliance, in the Office of Research Protections under the Office of Research Services at 312-362-7593 or by email at [sloesspe@depaul.edu](mailto:sloesspe@depaul.edu). You may also contact DePaul's Office of Research Protections if:

- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
- You cannot reach the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.

You may keep a copy of this information for your records. Thank you.

**\_\_\_\_ Personal Release for Audio Recording**

I authorize B. Colleen Keefe record interviews with me for her master's thesis: "Labor Market Channels: Perceptions of Vietnamese Manicurists on Accessing Jobs in Chicago." I understand that B. Colleen Keefe will own the audio recordings of me and that I will not be given any financial compensation.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Printed Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix II: Interview Questions for Non-Manicurists**

Demographics/Neighborhood of Residence:

1. How old are you?
2. What neighborhood or town do you live in?
3. What do you think of the neighborhood or town?
4. Can you describe the Vietnamese businesses in that neighborhood or town?
5. How did you decide where to live?
6. What year did you arrive in Chicago?
7. Where were you born? Where were your parents born? [If unknown: Where did you grow up? [country, city, neighborhood if Chicago]
8. What year did you begin working at your current job?

Previous Jobs/Social Networks:

9. (Whatever you feel comfortable telling me) How did you decide to move to the U.S.?
10. How many of your family members live in the U.S? How close do they live to you?
11. Have you made any non-family friends?
12. How did you learn English?
13. (Whatever you feel comfortable telling me) Did you have any other jobs before this one? What were they? Where were they? What jobs did you have in Vietnam?

Current Occupation:

14. How did you decide on your current type of work?
15. What do you like about your current type of work?
16. What do you not like about your current type of work?
17. What other jobs in Chicago were you interested in before finding this job?
18. How did you learn the skills and knowledge for this job?
19. If you wanted to look for another job, how would you go about looking for one?
20. What advice do/would you give to anyone looking for a job?

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**Principal Investigator:** Barbara Colleen Keefe

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The interview will take about 20 minutes of your time. Your information will be kept confidential and your name and place of work will not appear in my thesis, instead this information will be kept separately and will only accessible to me. I will record the interview on my cell phone to make sure that I am accurately representing your responses to my questions. The audio files will be stored on my personal computer and permanently deleted after two years.

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If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about this study or you want to get additional information or provide input about this research, please contact Colleen Keefe at [keefecol@gmail.com](mailto:keefecol@gmail.com) or on my cell phone 202-595-4610.

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Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Printed Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_