Viewpoint

Strengthening Transnational Community through Social and Cultural Empowerment: A Case Study of Second Generation Thai American Descendants.

Ploy Umpornpet[a] Suvicha Pouaree[b]

Abstract

This paper explores the social and cultural empowerment factors that strengthen the Thai community in its transnational setting, including the second generation and the latter descendants. First, how does social and cultural empowerment contribute to strengthening the Thai community. Second, what are the leading social and cultural empowerment factors that strengthen the Thai community through second generation Thai American Descendants. In-depth interviews were conducted with ten key informants using a qualitative methodology, and snowball sampling was employed. It is determined that there are three significant ways in which social and cultural empowerment contributes to strengthening the Thai community and five leading social and cultural empowerment factors to support in strengthening transnational communities. The study further finds that the First generation provides a foundation for the second generation to understand the relevant social and cultural factors to strengthen their communities globally.

_____

[a] Ph.D.(candidate), School of Social Development & Management Strategy, NIDA. E-mail:ploy.ump@stu.nida.ac.th

[b] Asst. Professor, School of Social Development & Management Strategy, NIDA. E-mail: pouaree@yahoo.com.au

Introduction

Through the number of accumulated years since the migrated individual adapted self to the host country, simply reflecting on the acquired skills and absorption of experiences, e.g., the foreign-born have characteristics and skills that differ from those of the host community, there are potential gains from trade and with those embedded cultural capabilities (Hatton and Leigh, 2011). This paper continues to observe and describe a 'two-way' inter-related relationship through strengthening forces between the host country and the (immigrants) community, which may influence the host country's government policy and civil society. The United States is the most significant corridor drawn from small economies to them (McAuliffe and Khadria, 2020). A "melting-pot" tradition, often referred to due to the most significant number of minorities (most immigrants), is an important aspect of the country; nations have an ever-changing demographic and social and economic identification (Pollard and O'Hare, 1999).

The Second-generation Thai American Descendants, hereafter "STADs," are smaller in proportion compared to other Asian groups of different ethnicities in the United States. but with similar characteristics to other Asian Americans, they adopt several different identities—ethnic, hyphenated-American, pan-ethnic, or multiracial— that are not mutually exclusive (Lee and Zhou, 2004). The Thai community in the United States, unlike other Asian communities in the same vicinity, can be differentiated by integrated experiences and shared portraits. The community also has experienced the process of "assimilationists," focusing on the relationship between migrants and a specific migrated land. Some researchers have now reassessed the assimilationist process, where it is inevitable for the ties of transnationalism between migrant assimilation and integration (Schiller, 2013). This paper under the transnational community aspect extends to *the "transnational community – the second-generation*." Levitt and Waters (2002) have concluded that accumulated significant number of the transnational lives of the second generation in the United States, most of the contributions were found to have solid relationships and tendencies towards assimilation can coexist with significant participation in transnational social fields, with second-generation transnational 'ethnic culture' activity

such as homecoming visits to expose the foreign-born of their parent's country of origin (Levitt et al., 2003). Therefore, this paper adhered exclusively to the perspectives of the transnational community and viewed the STADs with the potential to be strengthened to develop the Thai communities through their Socio-Cultural Empowerment (SCE). Thereby, an intention to explore extensively both social and cultural factors may evolve with and underlying individuals' empowering attitudes to act with a motivational drive to strengthen their community, to re-discover perception abilities through the empowerment process, whether it can be developed as a *"model path"* for the community, starting from within the core by its community members.

This paper identified areas in Los Angeles and Orange Counties in Southern California, United States of America. A total of ten key informants were selected for in-depth interviews. These key informants are regarded as STADs, divided into a three main target groups from within STADs, six general persons from within the STADs criteria, two parents or guardians of STADs, and two community leaders and influencers.

Objectives

1. To comprehend a community-strengthening process through SCE contributing factors suitable for transnational communities globally.

2. To learn and report the underlying factors of motivational drive for community strengthening from the viewpoint of second-generation descendants, as well as to report problems, limitations, and suggestions for future study.

3. To propose an empowerment model path through social and cultural dimensions deemed effective for transnational community development.

Concepts, Theories, and Relevant Research

Concepts of Transnational Community are interlinked and vary in terms and definitions for the concepts of *"community."* Herein lies different meanings, referrals, and conclusions in its terms and definitions to understand its dimensions from various scopes in the views of sociologists, anthropologists, and educators. Community – place, and sense

of belonging, according to Habibi (2008) as cited in (Sakhaeifar and Ghoddusifar, 2016), with the place as the central element in the resident's identity. An individual (humans) achieves understanding and senses by understanding the place through different images and spaces that come through the mind (Sakhaeifar and Ghoddusifar, 2016). Community - individual and group (immigrants) assimilation. This paper prioritized the importance of both parts within the literature findings: 1) immigrants as individuals and 2) groups (of immigrants) assimilation. An individual may possess characteristics such as thriving for personal achievements and seeking ways to improve their quality of life; for example, they can be highly educated, those individuals can be called; *"Human Capital,"* with future mobility to move side steps and ways beyond.

Transnational community: the second generation; while some admit that global activism may be necessary for the first generation, they predict these ties will disappear among multinational children. Many of these children have been raised in households saturated by homeland influences; even those who express little interest in their roots have the knowledge and skills to activate these values and identities (Levitt et al., 2003). The second generation, or as *'hostage to fortune'* by King and Christou (2010), with all sorts of complications in its definition.

Sense of community, the level of community social capital influences community development in two broad ways: *structural* and *cognitive* (Phillips and Pittman, 2009). Narrowing down to the scope of people and community development, it is essential to first understand from the ground up of community the social capital supports and reenergizes thriving community development majorly in both structural and cognitive (Phillips and Pittman, 2009). The elements of self-efficacy for reflexivity indeed paired up with the *four elements* of a sense of community. 1) Membership is the feeling of belonging or sharing a sense of personal relatedness; 2) Influence, a sense of mattering, of making a difference to a group and of the group mattering to its members; 3. Integration and fulfillment of *(Reinforcement)* is the feeling that members' needs will be met by the resources received through their membership in the group. It is a motivator of behavior and is a cornerstone in behavioral research, and any group can maintain a positive sense

of togetherness; 4. Shared emotional connection, commitment, and belief that members have shared and will share history, shared places, time together, and similar experiences. A shared emotional connection is based partly on a shared history, (Phillips and Pittman, 2009).

Theory of Change, elements can be adapted to comprehend and build a roadmap recommended for a community–based study. As suggested by Janzen et al. (2016), it is essential to note that what elements constitute a theory of change is not standardized. Focusing on these core elements seems appropriate when designing a generic theory of change for community-based research projects. Additional elements can also be incorporated when tailoring a theory of change to a particular community-based research project (Janzen et al., 2016). 1) Activities: refer to the set of actions that a particular intervention intends to conduct (Janzen et al., 2016) 2) Outcomes: Outcomes refer to the changes that are anticipated to occur when the activities are implemented as expected. They are typically written so that they begin with a word denoting and 3) Indicators: every outcome/preconditional outcome in a Theory of Change needs to be observable. An indicator may be quantitative or qualitative (a description such as new characteristics of a community) (Taplin et al., 2013)

Social Empowerment – The Five Domain Indicators, empowerment with aspects of processes through which people gain greater control over their lives, take an initiative-taking approach in their communities and develop critical understandings of their sociopolitical environments (Zimmerman, 1995, as cited in Christens, 2012) This paper adopts five domains' indicators of social empowerment (Herrmann, 2012) to assess the study findings of influential SCE factors; 1) Knowledge base: describe the extent to which social mobility is based on knowledge and the ability to apply it. 2) Labor market: describe the advantages gained and hindrances faced in the workforce and labor market as a Second-generation Thai American Descendants. 3) Openness and supportiveness of institutions: describe how Second-generation Thai American Descendants benefit from first, a political system, the existence of consultation processes, and direct democracy. 4) Public space: openness and supportiveness of political, Economic, and Organization. 5)

Personal relationships: describe how they feel as Second generation Thai American Descendants benefit from providing services supporting physical and social independence and the percentage of national and local budgets devoted to specific groups of people.

Community empowerment is both a process and outcome of increasing the control of decisions necessary to a particular group of people who are bound by common social ties, experiences, interests, and perspectives, a collective human activity that has structural aspects aimed at changing social systems and creating structural alternatives possibly community that influence its future (Sadan, 1997, as cited in Hiruy, 2014) The empowerment process focuses on how a group can collaborate or participate in society to enhance their influence on, control over, or ownership of decisions that affect their interest (Hiruy, 2014). Coinciding with this paper, an empowered community is a community that takes the initiative to improve its situation by responding to challenges in the community and providing an opportunity for its members to participate.

Second generation Thai American Descendants as Human (development) Agency, according to Herrmann (2012), when the empowerment process is under consideration, the first and most important question to ask is: who benefits from empowerment or what a person shall be empowered by? (Herrmann, 2012). This paper aimed to explore STADs' perspectives on social capital and their role as change agents to empower Thai communities in the US through socio-cultural development factors.

Hiruy (2014) developed an adaptation of integrative empowerment theorization and institutional analysis through his research of bottom-up driven community empowerment: the case of the African community in Australia. Within an ethnographic area of study, led by researcher participation and an observer in community activities, 50 interviews were conducted, more than 40 events were attended, and relevant documents were collected. With identified key actors, they help develop the resources and structures necessary for empowerment, and their interactions with African communities shaped empowerment outcomes (Hiruy, 2014). Huynh (2022) conducted case study research focused on transnational organizations from the perspective of first-generation migrants and how cross-border interactions shape their identities. There is also global activism

among the second-generation children of refugees, specifically on how refugee status affects second-generation transnationalism. By analyzing the case study of Vietnamese refugees in the United States, the article analyses an originally curated database of transnational organizations and a survey of 80 organizational leaders. Participation in activities in Vietnam overcomes generational silence as the American-born generation learns about their history and sees Vietnam as an alternative for expanding their options and views for socioeconomic mobility (Huynh, 2022).

Research Methodology

This study is based on an embedded particular case study, commonly called a complex case; embedded design is developed when within the single case incorporated subunits of analysis. Using a qualitative method can generate detailed insights into participants' thought processes and focus on the reasons behind a phenomenon (Creswell, 1994). Ten selected STADs' key informants were native-born in the United States or with mixed percentages and seen as human agencies for in-depth interviews using snowball techniques to saturate points in responding to the study's questions, and they were regarded mainly as STADs. Six were general STADs persons, while four others were based on the criteria of parents/guardians of STADs, Thai community leaders, or influencers. A conceptual framework has been developed by synthesizing multidisciplinary concepts of social actors and community empowerment to strengthen the transnational community. The analytical framework for this study focuses on both the Maximizing Stage and the last Transformational Stage for community development, as it helps support creating a new transformation order. This framework plays a key role and illustrates the interplay between the actions of social actors and their self-efficacy during the maximizing stage. It has then evaluated sociocultural empowerment through five

indicators, creating a cycle that can be implemented to enhance the community's position. This cycle will also allow for reassessment of the initial stage when needed.
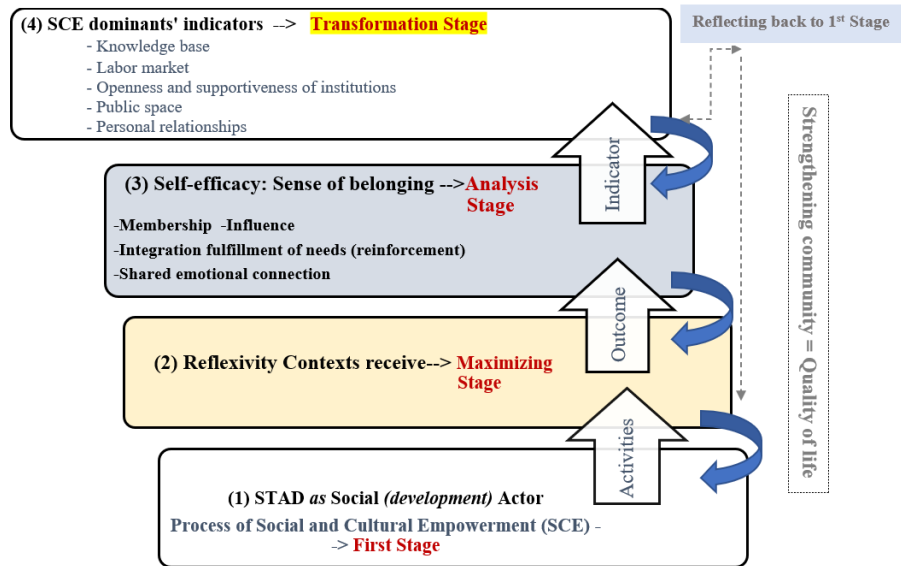

Figure 1 Study Conceptual Framework

The study adhered to the data analysis along the process of qualitative method data collection by using both data verification according to triangulation technique and data classification to verify and set up patterns from contexts received for both typology and taxonomy following the study's objectives and possible causal relations among dominations of phenomena, followed by supporting descriptive statistics, such as frequency and percentage. Then, the thematic analysis concerning both similarities and differences in responses.

Second Generation Thai American Descendants to Strengthen the Thai Community. This paper examined the synthesized context and keywords that coordinate significant discoveries and outlined how the SCE of STADs can achieve a maximum stage of empowerment to strengthen the Thai community in a transnational setting. The data summary depicted in Figure 2 demonstrates the connection between

the study conceptual framework and the classification of verbal and non-verbal responses and contexts into the MIRE theme. This facilitates more in-depth analysis and prioritization of important responses and indicators.
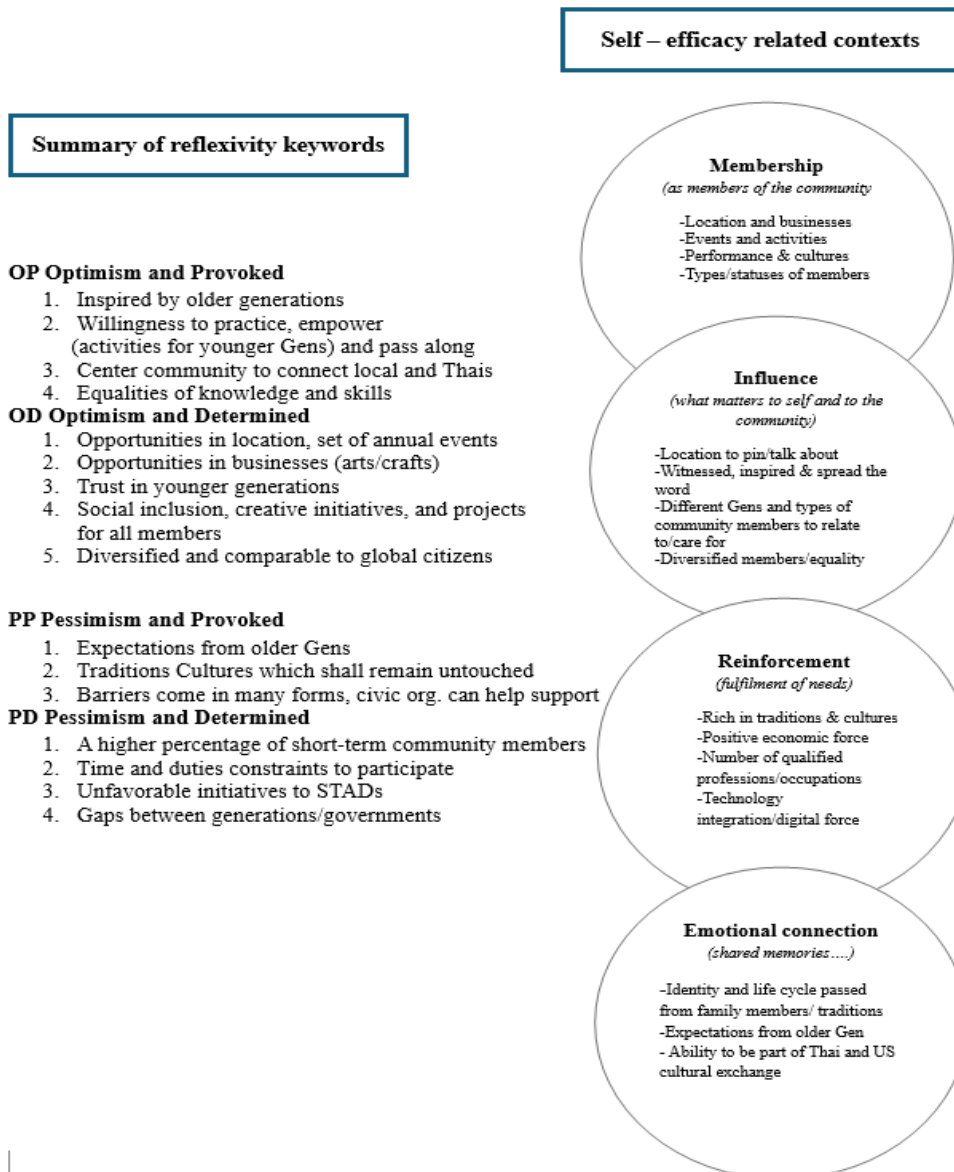
Self – efficacy related contexts

Summary of reflexivity keywords

OP Optimism and Provoked
1. Inspired by older generations
2. Willingness to practice, empower (activities for younger Gens) and pass along
3. Center community to connect local and Thais
4. Equalities of knowledge and skills

OD Optimism and Determined
1. Opportunities in location, set of annual events
2. Opportunities in businesses (arts/crafts)
3. Trust in younger generations
4. Social inclusion, creative initiatives, and projects for all members
5. Diversified and comparable to global citizens

PP Pessimism and Provoked
1. Expectations from older Gens
2. Traditions Cultures which shall remain untouched
3. Barriers come in many forms, civic org. can help support

PD Pessimism and Determined
1. A higher percentage of short-term community members
2. Time and duties constraints to participate
3. Unfavorable initiatives to STADs
4. Gaps between generations/governments

Membership
(as members of the community
-Location and businesses
-Events and activities
-Performance & cultures
-Types/statuses of members

Influence
(what matters to self and to the community)
-Location to pin/talk about
-Witnessed, inspired & spread the word
-Different Gens and types of community members to relate to/care for
-Diversified members/equality

Reinforcement
(fulfilment of needs)
-Rich in traditions & cultures
-Positive economic force
-Number of qualified professions/occupations
-Technology integration/digital force

Emotional connection
(shared memories....)
-Identity and life cycle passed from family members/ traditions
-Expectations from older Gen
- Ability to be part of Thai and US cultural exchange

Figure 2 Summary of Data Synthesis of Important SCE Reflexivity Keywords and Context to Strengthen the Thai Community

Social and Cultural Empowerment Contributions to Strengthen the Thai Community. The study examines the relationship between the SCE process and the emergence of transnational communities, focusing on their contributions to strengthening the Thai community through Sustainable Community Development. The interview results have been analyzed and summarized into distinct indicators that address the study's question of whether SCE contributes to strengthening the Thai community. The findings confirm that the SCE process begins with a sense of inclusivity and involves community members in simple stages, such as decision-making. It also emphasizes the values and traditions of different generations, ultimately contributing to the well-being of individuals and society. This process aims to achieve a common goal of community development and improving quality of life. Significant stages of identity formation in this context can be observed from the foundation of SCE. Elements such as self-efficacy and connectedness are crucial in fostering collaboration within the community and with diverse ethnic groups. A community is believed to grow stronger through acceptance and acknowledgment from other societies.

Leading SCE Factors Contributing to Empower Second Generation Thai American Descendants. The empowering factors for STADs as noted from both key informants' responses and document research are 1) Education and reference in diverse learning institutions in Southern California as a platform for the enhancement of Thai community through STADs. 2) Mentorship and role models, the Thai community is characterized by first generation role models who are focused on providing education and important information to the second generation and younger generations. 3) Community engagement and participation form part of SCE factors that influence STADs. 4) Strong family ties: the ties have laid a foundation for the education of STADs on the traditions and customs of the community. 5) STADs as an individual agency, concerning active participation, the effectiveness of different cultural and community events carried out in the Thai community depend on the active participation of STADs. 6) The social and political landscape of the Thai community in Southern California has changed over time

due to the active involvement of STADs. Most descendants are not actively involved in political advocacy but implement different strategies to ensure social advocacy. STADs can harness the power of both "Thainess" and SCE to enhance the well-being of the Thai community. However, it is crucial to consider global issues and align Thai community goals for future generations. Furthermore, this approach can serve as a model for developing and safeguarding transnational communities, particularly ethnic groups, aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals on a global scale.

Conclusion and Discussion

This paper has successfully met its objectives by comprehensively addressing the study question. In response to the first study question on how social and cultural empowerment contributes to strengthening the Thai community, the three significant ways identified are 1. Activities of the Second Generation Thai American Descendants; 2. Roles of the First Generation, and 3. Involvement in Community Leadership. The study also found that self-efficacy provides an opportunity to create strong social networks. In the Thai community, maintaining social connections is essential for building a strong community. With the creation of such a community, the community members understand the different traditions and customs.

On the aspect of the leading Social and Cultural Empowerment factors contributing to strengthening the Thai community through STADs. Based on the information collected in this study, five specific key factors are 1. Enhanced diversity and inclusivity, 2. Improved access to education and training, 3. Gender equality, 4. Community engagement, and 5. Technology integration. Notably, this study aligns with several empowerment factors discovered and seen throughout the observation and interview phase. Through several forms of empowerment, including individual (self-efficacy), community, and societal empowerment, these findings underscore the importance of SCE and fortify the community.

This paper recommends the three stages of the SCE model and is adaptable to different community settings, conditions, and change agents. The First stage:

Understanding the change agents or human capital is crucial for comprehending the purpose of this study and the specific population group involved in designing the model process. The Second stage (SCE implementation stage): The subsequent stage presents a theory of change that assesses activities, outcomes, and indicators among key informants. It is crucial to comprehensively document all positive, negative, or opinionated occurrences within community development, particularly in transnational community settings. The Third stage: Consider this the final stage of empowerment, which is crucial for establishing a roadmap for sustainable community development. This stage involves reflection and the creation of what can be called an "invisible contract" between community members for the development of the community. It aligns with the adapted SCE process by Herrmann (2012), focusing on the higher natural law of reason and individual responsibility.
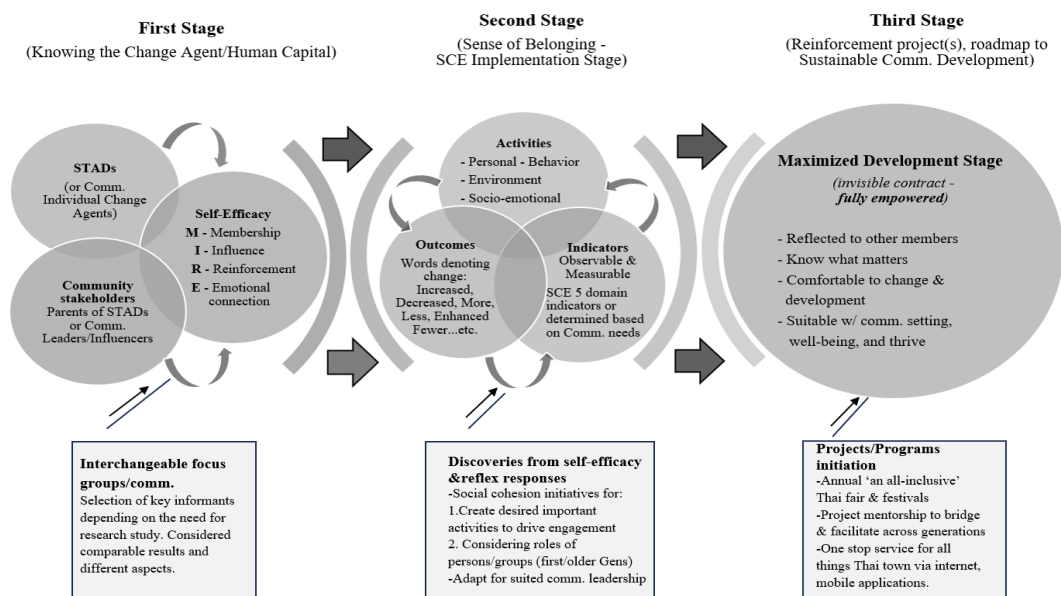

Figure 3 Recommended Social and Cultural Empowerment (SCE) Model for Sustainable *(Transnational)* Community.

The Thai community, especially in Southern California, is dispersed but willing to participate and preserve their culture as long as they can still prioritize self-development (study and work) before community development, so any initiatives should consider their availability. The recommended model for sustainable community development involves studying the community, reassessing and prioritizing issues, and building trust with key informants. This approach can engage and involve the community members, empowering them during the study and implementing the findings accordingly. The model aims to strengthen the transnational Thai community, acknowledging the differences in heritage, family ties, and Western environments. The focus of change agents and active citizens can be adjusted based on the community's needs. This paper emphasizes the significance of SCE in supporting and empowering the Thai community towards better development.

Acknowledgments

References

Christens, B. D. (2012). Targeting empowerment in community development: A community psychology approach to enhancing local power and well-being. *Community Development Journal, 47*(4), 538-554.

Creswell, J. W. (1994). *Research design: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Sage.

Hatton, T. J., & Leigh, A. (2011). Immigrants assimilate as communities, not just as individuals. *Journal of Population Economics, 24*, 389-419.

Herrmann, P. (2012). Social empowerment. In L. J. G. van der Maesen & A. Walker (Eds.), *Social quality: From theory to indicators* (pp. 198–223). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-230-36109-6_9

Hiruy, K. (2014). *Bottom-up driven community empowerment: The case of African communities in Australia* [Unpublished doctoral thesis]. University of Tasmania. https://figshare.utas.edu.au/articles/thesis/Bottomup_driven_community_empow erment_the_case_of_African_Communities_in_Australia/23237345

Huynh, J. A. (2022). Assimilation through transnationalism: Second-generation refugees and Vietnamese transnational organizing. *Ethnic and Racial Studies, 45*(14), 2631-2650.

Janzen, R., Ochocka, J., & Stobbe, A. (2016). Towards a theory of change for community-based research projects. *Engaged Scholar Journal: Community-Engaged Research, Teaching, and Learning, 2*(2), 44-64.

King, R., & Christou, A. (2010). Diaspora, migration and transnationalism: Insights from the study of second-generation 'returnees'. In R. Bauböck & T. Faist (Eds.), *Diaspora and transnationalism: Concepts, theories and methods* (pp. 167–183). Amsterdam University Press.

Lee, J., & Zhou, M. (2004). *Asian American youth: Culture, identity, and ethnicity* (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203490549

Levitt, P., DeWind, J., & Vertovec, S. (2003). International perspectives on transnational migration: An introduction. *International Migration Review, 37*(3), 565-575.

Levitt, P., & Waters, M. C. (Eds.). (2002). *The Changing Face of Home: The Transnational Lives of the Second Generation*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

McAuliffe, M., & Khadria, B. (2020). Report overview: Providing perspective on migration and mobility in increasingly uncertain times. *World Migration Report, 2020*(1), e00011.

Phillips, R., & Pittman, R. H. (2009). A framework for community and economic development. In R. Phillips & R. H. Pittman (Eds.), An introduction to community development (pp. 3–19). Routledge.

Pollard, K. M., & O'Hare, W. P. (1999). America's racial and ethnic minorities. *Population and Development Review* (pp. 431-466). Psychology Press.

Sakhaeifar, A., & Ghoddusifar, S. H. (2016). Impact of location-behavior on sense of belonging to place. *Modern Applied Science, 10*(5), 1-57.

Schiller, N. G. (2013). The transnational migration paradigm: Global perspectives on migration research. In D. Halm & Z. Sezgin (Eds.), *Migration and organized civil society: Rethinking national policy* (pp. 25–43). Routledge.

Taplin, D. H., Clark, H., Collins, E., & Colby, D. C. (2013). Theory of change technical papers: A series of papers to support development of theories of change based on practice in the field. ActKnowledge.