Self in Context: Integrating Family Dynamics, Cultural History, and Home Design[1]

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Abstract

In the time of rapid transitions and global conflicts, there is an increase in the desire for stability and safety among young adults. As they seek answers and ideas to understand these uncertainties and clarify confusions, the pursuit of self-discovery becomes particularly relevant in educational settings. This study aims to explore students' learning about self-discovery through a project, which involves uncovering the multidimensional aspects of their family, culture, and space across the past, present, and future. The project is drawn from a course that combines family science and interior design. This interdisciplinary course is a unique and effective context to invite self-exploration and out-of-the-box thinking to enhance student learning and development. Using a qualitative, phenomenological lens, this study analyzed three exemplary final projects selected through instructor assessment of depth and creativity. Each artifact was examined through thematic and content analysis to identify elemental meanings and the culmination of major learnings and insights emerging as a result of the projects. The results of this study affirmed that the project successfully achieved its goal of fostering deep insight, meaningful reflection, and a strong sense of personal integration among students. The emergent themes were "*Family bonds, Adaptation and Resilience, Historical architectural significance,* and the *Tension between old and new*" and showed students' deeper understandings of themselves, their family dynamics, history, and historical family homes, and the environments that shape their lived experiences.

Keywords: Interdisciplinary education, Self-discovery, Family dynamics, Interior design, Culture

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Introduction

In the 21st century, society has been marked by rapid transitions and significant changes driven by global economic shifts, political upheavals, and remarkable advancements in information, communication, science, and technology. These crises and critical events can produce feelings of destabilization and confusion in the emerging adult population as they take on the task of identity development (Ackerman, 2018). Amid the chaos and transformations, there is an increase in the desire for stability and safety, where individuals are seeking to understand themselves within the context of their family, culture, and environment (Hermans & Diaggio, 2007). This pursuit of self-discovery has become particularly relevant in educational settings, where students are encouraged to explore their personal histories and cultural backgrounds as a means of enhancing their psychological and emotional development (Milliken, 2004; Vasoya, 2023).

As society becomes more global, where connections are made that transcend national borders and families become more transnational, there is a need to gain an understanding of how this impacts individuals. The historical journeys that families have made across the globe, how they have made and kept homes, how their cultural values and familial dynamics have evolved, and how they maintain their cultural heritage all influence the individual in direct and indirect ways (Cohen-Scali & Erby, 2021; Graham, et al., 2012). Gaining an understanding of these origins not only provides a strong foundation from which to grow, but also may uncover deeper self-discoveries of strength and resilience.

It is the contention of this article that interdisciplinary courses are a unique and effective context to invite self-exploration and out-of-the-box thinking to enhance student learning and development. Additionally, when the subject area allows for personal applicability and phenomenological exploration, it provides a fitting environment for these self-discoveries (Patton, 2023). This research is drawn from an interdisciplinary course that is taught by professors of psychology and interior design.

While there is a broad push for interdisciplinary pedagogy and courses across most universities, faculty may find the process of constructing such courses daunting based on the volume of effort and coordination. Interdisciplinary courses and programs are valuable and have been shown to encourage students to "take a deep approach to learning, they seek meaning, reflect on what has been learned, and internalize knowledge by creating personal understanding" (Ivanitskaya et al., 2002, p. 101; Xu, Wu, Xu, Lu, & Wang, 2022). For this course, the instructors found common ground and excitement in the possibility of encouraging students' self-exploration by connecting with the concepts found in psychology, family science, and their connection to design, with a specific aim of increasing Global Awareness. The course needed to be engaging and go beyond a simple understanding of content, but in true interdisciplinary fashion, it needed to both complement and enhance the understanding of the respective fields and also create novel learning and knowledge.

The connection between psychology and design may not be immediately apparent to some. However, as the world grows more complex, interdisciplinary approaches are essential for gaining a broader and deeper understanding of human experiences (Hawkins & Suh, 2022). Both psychology and design are inherently tied to human behavior, so this course focuses on helping students explore their sense of self by examining their family and cultural backgrounds in relation to home design. Through this collaboration, students learn how human relationship is affected by spatial organizations and how the home environment is the reflection of their family and culture. As they work on their home design projects, they not only gain personal insight but also develop a deeper understanding of their families and history, envisioning ways to improve and strengthen family relationships.

The course was constructed with a series of continuous integrated content that built upon each step to a culminating product. Family science instructor created lectures and used readings that provided students with a foundation for which to understand family systems and dynamics, along with cultural psychological concepts and values. Then, the understanding of the concepts was applied to design a home based on the learnings from the interior design instructor regarding the meaning of home, spatial design that impacts human behavior, and cultural references of home design, color, and materials. The effect of the environment and its relation to the self is often neglected (Yalcin, 2015), and the course

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directly addresses this connection and its impact on one another. Both instructors provided students with activities each week that challenged them to apply and critically analyze concepts to their own contexts while exploring the historical and cultural values within their family as they significantly interrelate to their home.

The purpose of this research is to explore students' learning about self-discovery through their projects, which involve uncovering the multidimensional aspects of their family, culture, and space across the past, present, and future. Drawing conceptually from ecological and systemic theories of human development, the study situates identity as emerging within relational, cultural, and environmental systems that evolve over time (Van Der Gaag, et al., 2025). By delving into these dimensions, students are able to gain insights into how their familial dynamics, cultural heritage, and spatial environments have shaped their identities. The ecological perspective illuminates that identity is understood as emerging through nested, bidirectional influences between individuals and the broader systems in which they are embedded (Branje, et al., 2021) and students are invited to explore these aspects of themselves. This exploration not only fosters a deeper understanding of oneself but also integrates psychological learning into the practice of living in environments that support personal well-being. This study presents the outcomes of the final project that was designed to expand students' self-awareness through learning about their family dynamics, history, and historical family homes, current living space, and culture.

This case study describes and analyzes the final course projects of the top three students, which demonstrates the culmination of major learnings of the course. For this final course project, students were asked to go beyond the recent past of their family and cultural group, and look at where and how their ancestors lived. This project required an exploration of the historical contexts of their great grandparents- how their family was organized as it was reflected within the home design, what cultural values were prioritized, what cultural practices were celebrated and how architectural and design features connected with their family's culture, and what it was like for someone of their age in their family at that time. Students were also invited to recreate and draw from images of the typical home layout of that time to explore how families used the home and what functions it served. Finally, students were asked to design their future home integrating a) historical cultural artifacts, and b) family dynamics and values. The project helped students imagine and conceptualize how life was for their ancestors, how it is now, and how it could be in the future. Students delved into how space impacts human relationships, how family relationship impacts space, and how culture impacts spatial relationships.

The deliverables for this Final Project involved a presentation where students had the opportunity to orally present their findings and designs, and also engage with their peers in class about each other's projects. This allowed each student to showcase their work and share the reflection of their family historical backgrounds and how some key aspects are continued till now. Research has demonstrated the importance of ethnic and racial identity and belongingness as it impacts self-esteem (Hernandez, et. al. 2003; Nesdale & Mak, 2003). Additionally, they were exposed to other historical-cultural learnings and how they informed familial values and living spaces, truly embodying the Global Awareness direction of this course. The pedagogical methodology in this interdisciplinary course increases understanding of oneself in relation to others and one's home environment as students learn about how multidisciplinary factors of psychology and design can work together to create meaningful learning experiences.

The questions that the study aimed to address are: What do students discover about themselves through an interdisciplinary psychology and interior design project? What connections do students make relating to family, culture, and space when asked to integrate interdisciplinary psychology and interior design learning?

Method

The purpose of this research was to explore students' self-discovery through the multidimensionality of their family, culture, and space through time. This was a qualitative study that analyzed the artifacts for thematic and visual elemental meanings, using a phenomenological lens. As a research methodology, phenomenology is uniquely positioned to facilitate the deeper understanding of individual lived experiences, such as in the exploration of person within place (Wilding & Whiteford, 2005). Following

Moustakas (1994), this study grounded its analysis in the systematic identification of meaning structures and thematic patterns that emerge through subjective materials. Giorgi's (2009) descriptive phenomenological procedures guided the coding and thematization of the artifacts, ensuring a disciplined yet open process that honored participants' experiences as expressed through creative forms. Creswell's (2013) discussion of phenomenology within educational and interdisciplinary research further supports this alignment, emphasizing how this approach captures the essence of human meaning across diverse contexts. Phenomenological research is dedicated to the lived experience and meaning of a phenomenon, and in this course, students were tasked with examining their experience in their spatial context and the meanings embedded within their family, culture, and space (their artifacts). Consistent with these principles, the researchers approached the analysis of the artifacts with a phenomenological lens.

Data

The final projects in this course included the student's analysis of cultural values, lifestyle, and home design of their ancestral family, the cultural values, lifestyle, and home design of their current family, their design of a future home, and their reflection of this process. The project provided students with the opportunity to integrate learning from two separate fields, describe their reflection on the analysis of their family, culture, and history, and apply their findings in the design of their future home. This study used criterion-based purposive sampling (Patton, 2002), by selecting student projects that met the assignment requirements and demonstrated strong engagement with the interdisciplinary course objectives. This allowed for information-rich cases rather than broad generalizations. The inclusion criteria for this study were final projects that met the assignment requirements and received points over the 50% threshold. Three final project papers were selected that meet these criteria and have received an above-average grade on the assignment. Students were invited to participate in this assignment after the term had been completed and grades were finalized to avoid any pressure or coercion. Informed consent forms were collected from these students before the analysis of the papers.

Analysis

Thematic analysis was chosen because it is designed to interpret and explore latent meanings, underlying patterns, and subjective experiences rather than to quantify the frequency of specific words, as is conducted in content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analyses capture the "essence" of experiences which was an essential fit with this study's focus on multidimensional constructs, such as family, culture, design, and space. The analysis involved three phases: 1) initial coding using in vivo coding procedures by each researcher separately, 2) within-case thematic analysis where the codes were grouped and organized and code categories were identified by the researchers together, and 3) across-case thematic analysis where the code groupings were read and re-read until themes developed. First, the data was read by each researcher and coded to produce the first-level in vivo codes using the words of the participants to produce codes that represented the participants' words closely. Second, the codes were grouped into categories with shared units of meaning to be analyzed within each case to develop emergent themes. This process produced 4-5 categories per case. Lastly, the themes across each case were analyzed to develop overarching themes that are prevalent across the cases and a visual representation of their lived experience (See Figure 1).

Ethical Considerations

The involvement of students' work necessitated care and intention in how the research study was conducted. The research design was reviewed by the institution's internal review board. The selected students were provided with the details of the study and invited to opt in or out of the study after the course ended and grades were submitted. Steps were taken to ensure that students would not experience any coercion to consent for their work, the artifacts, to be included in the study. The artifacts were scrubbed of any identifying information, and there was no further participation from the students beyond their consent for their work to be included in the analyses. The data (student's projects) were collected in the summer of 2023.

Findings

This study attempted to explore students' self-discovery through the multidimensionality of their family, culture, and space through time, and utilized an analysis of the students' writing to arrive at that understanding. Three students' works were selected for the study based on their thoroughness and completeness, focusing on how each student explored the context of self through family, culture, and space.

Through the iterative analytical process of coding and thematic analyses of the selected students' work, four themes emerged. While participants' heritage, families, and stories spanned different cultures and continents, there were connecting themes throughout their papers that were significant. The themes identified were "*Family bonds, Adaptation and Resilience, Historical architectural significance,* and the *Tension between old and new*".

Figure 1
Thematic Analysis of the Three Cases
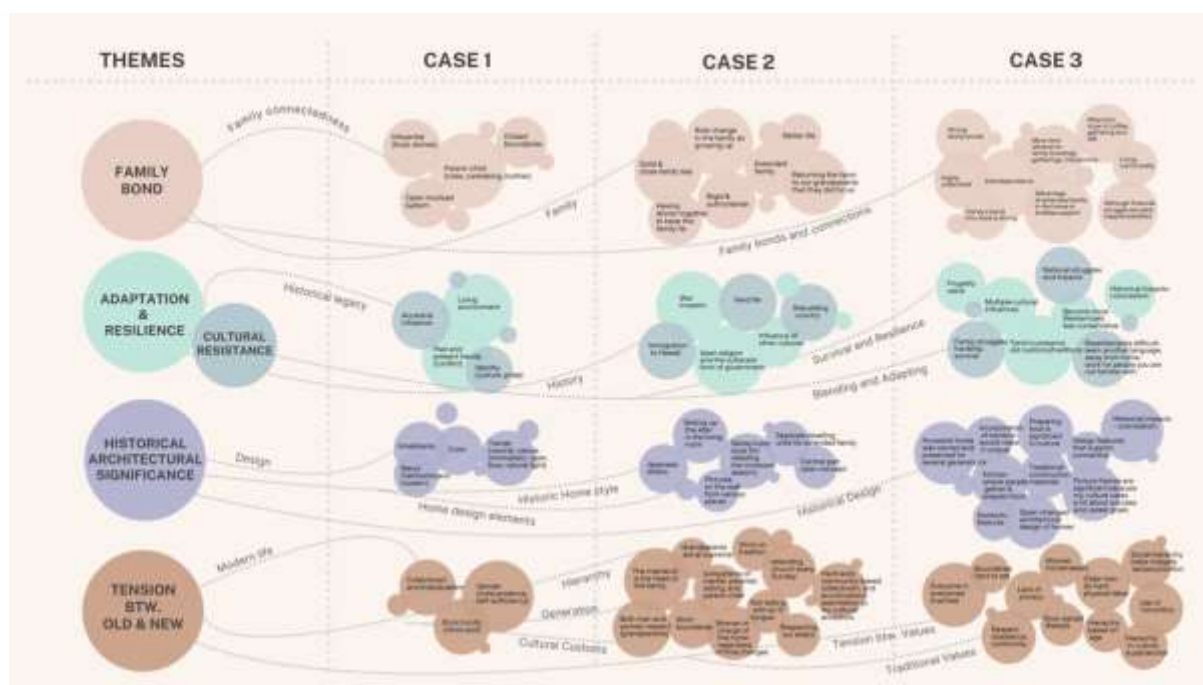
Source: Originally created by the author, 2025.

Figure 1 is organized around four central themes: Family Bond, Adaptation & Resilience, Historical Architectural Significance, and Tension Between Old & New, which emerged across the students' reflections and home design projects. Each column represents one case, with thematic color-coded clusters. The bubbles within each case illustrate the nuanced and personalized ways that students connected with the themes. The dotted lines linking themes across the three cases represent common conceptual threads, such as Family connectedness or Historical legacy, that reveal areas of overlap while also allowing space for each student's distinctive perspective. A significant sub-theme of Cultural Resistance emerged, connected to Adaptation & Resilience in a unique way, and can be observed as both separate and connected to the larger theme. For instance, across all three cases, Adaptation & Resilience are dominant; however, each student also described how their family both leveraged and protected their culture as a form of Cultural Resistance such as taking pride within their identity (Case 1), rebuilding their country (Case 2), and resettling to survive after experiencing struggles in their

home country (Case 3). The sections that follow will further elaborate on each theme, illustrating how they were expressed in the students' projects and offering deeper insights.

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Family Bond

Family bond emerged as a significant theme from the participants' projects and was identified consistently as a defining characteristic. The participants' narratives and stories depicted the different dimensions of family bonds in shaping their day-to-day life and important facets of their life as a whole, such as their identity and values.

Participants explored the dynamics within their family, utilizing descriptors of strength and connection, even in using the word 'family' to describe their values, "*My family is an incredibly influential piece of my identity and I am proud of my culture and family history. Family is one of my core values, as it has been for generations…*". The connection between family members was described in both abstract and practical terms. One participant noted that "(we) *place high regard and put importance on their family before anything else*", and another stated "*the advantage…is that family support is endless*". Daily interactions in families that embodied connection were also noted, with all participants describing shared time with family.

> Having coffee and snacks on the patio (is) an afternoon ritual for family members to hang around and talk about anything…
> My family's most crucial relational connection is having dinner together at least once a week…while growing up, all the grandkids stayed at my grandparents' house as we went to school within the vicinity, and our parents would pick us up after work.
> We cook for each other and are passionate about owning the space and creating delicious homemade meals… the living room where the rest of the family sits, butts in each other's business, shares stories and recent drama, and try to infiltrate and take over the kitchen in turns.

The connection between family and self was apparent in how the participants described the intersections of culture as well. In identifying their ethnic and racial culture, some identified larger theories that delineated how their family operated such as collectivism, "*Because of our vast traditional and religious values, we are structured in such a collectivist nature…our deep connection with family members and the community allows us to develop values that lean towards collectivism over individualism*", and "*..When compared to the U.S., it (my ethnic culture) is far more collectivist with concerns for the family*". Within the literature, collectivism usually relates to one's social orientation, specifically how one relates to family, and how one assumes duties and obligations towards their group (Triandis, 1995; Trommsdorff, Mayer, & Albert, 2004). The stories and descriptions of family dynamics by the participants confirmed this perspective that collectivism relates to the strong connection to family, even in the potential stress and inconvenience that may arise as a result of this closeness.

> (We) are highly collectivistic individuals. We have an exceptionally strong family bond which shows in our living accommodations. Everything in the home is usually shared with everyone, which restricts privacy, sometimes resulting in family tensions and conflict because everybody is in everyone's business.

The participants provided an elaborative picture of the connections they had with their extended family as well. They described a closeness that was proximal both physically and relationally, with a clear family practice of close living locations.

> (My cultural group) are known for having solid and close family ties. They place high regard and put importance on their family before anything else. In my family structure, it is an extended family living.

> (Cultural group) families both today and historically have been large, including the extended family- not limited to the nuclear family- and having an open system with seemingly few boundaries as being with the family is most important. Kids stay at home sometimes through their 30s, and parents come to live with their children when they get older.

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Participants described living in multigenerational homes or, when residing in different houses, maintaining a shorter distance by living within the same vicinity or area. They elaborated on specific developmental life cycle stages that benefitted from the extended family lifestyle, providing that these connections meant more support and shared resources.

> (My cultural group) are known for having solid and close family ties. They place high regard and put importance on their family before anything else. In my family structure, it is an extended family living.

> In my family, as a kid, you are taken care of, taught to cook, fed delicious food, and taught how important the value of family is and how lucky you are to have such a big family of people who love you. You are taught to rely on your family and be there for them in return.

There was also elaboration of how the participants' roles had evolved over time within their family: "*My role in this family has changed from being a child that went to school…I have become a young adult, where I help take care of my grandma and babysit my nieces and nephews, I cook dinner, provide groceries, clean the house, and continue my education*". Despite noting the pursuing of education and increased independence, participants described a maintaining of connection with their family, "*My role currently as a young adult is to branch out and find my passion, but still remain close to my family*". Participants also looked to the future to see how their lives would change and anticipated their place in their family.

> Growing up, my role in my family has changed quite a lot. I depended on my parents until I turned 19…I am now the primary breadwinner of the family. I help out my parents by financially supporting them, while they take care of my daughter. ..10 years from now when I am able to purchase a home for my own family, I would want my parents and my sister to live with me and my little family. Interdependence of parts is when members of a family are interconnected in such a way that when one member changes, it affects the others as well…my family relies on one another for almost everything…Basically, if someone needs help, we help each other - no questions asked.

This is congruent with research that emphasizes the importance of connection to family as support and security for the different transitions in the lifecycle including the launching and increasing autonomy experienced by college students (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005). The participants in this study described the significance that their family closeness as it related to their culture and lifestyle as well, not the least was their connection with meals.

All participants described the significance of food and cuisine as it related to familial connection, "*…there was more time allotted for family bondings, gatherings, and interactions…having coffee and snacks on the patio, for example, was an afternoon ritual for family members to hang around and talk about anything*", and "*the kitchen is where our recipe box resides as it's been passed down through the generations…this is where we cook, together or separately*".

Research has established that food processes such as preparation, cooking, presentation, and eating meals together as a family serve as a significant medium for connection (Jingxiong et al., 2007; Lyon

et al., 2011). There is also evidence that food habits are passed down as a legacy spanning multiple generations and can hold symbolic meanings such as care and nurture (Chen, 2010). The findings in this study corroborated earlier research relating to the significance of food in families.

In summary, the theme of family connectedness emerged as a significant theme in the participants' writing and provided a nuanced understanding of the different relationships beyond the concepts of collectivism, within the nuclear family and extended family, how the participant's roles evolved within their families, and the intersections of culture and other lifestyle facets such as food maintained their family connection.

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Resilience and Adaptation + Cultural Resilience

The second significant themes that emerged was Resilience and Adaptation with the subtheme of Cultural Resilience. As participants research the historical background of living conditions and home design that were required in the project, participants came to know about how their ancestors went through difficult times such as wars or conflicts in their home countries.

> Life was different, but they were rebuilding their country to be what it used to be, yet better. My grandpa decided to board a ship and come to Hawaii to work, make a better life for himself and his family.

From the stories from ancestors, participants gain self-confidence as they form part of their identity and sense of self with the gratification for their ancestors' sacrifice and care for their family (Moore, 2022).

> My family is an incredibly influential piece of my identity and I am proud of my culture and family history. Family is one of my core values, as it has been for generations both in the U.S. and in Italy.

One participant emphasized ancestors' resilience to overcome the challenges they faced at the time.
> They (ancestors) were colonized and occupied by other countries but still regained their independence. Filipinos are highly adaptable, which is apparent as you would see several overseas Filipino workers in other countries working very hard just to support their families back home. It is not easy to learn another language, be away from home for years, and work for people you are not familiar with.

It is evident that participants feel empowered and proud of their ancestors' resilience and adaptability to changes in their stories by understanding the degree and weight of uncontrollable exterior circumstances they had to face at that time. Also, family is at the center of this effort, and the support for the family is the primary reason for the hard work.

Another key descriptor is blending and adapting to multiple cultural influences. Participants see how multiple cultural and religious practices have been integrated in their family life today such as "*of setting up alters in the home*" or preserving a space, particularly a living room which is "*unique for the 25 years of my life, yet it stayed the same.*" Participants also recognize the changes that have occurred in their home in their family dynamics but family values from the tradition have been kept and its preservation effort is continuing in their family.

> While growing up, all the grandkids stayed at my grandparents' house. Over the years, as we got older, we lost that tradition. Over the past two years, we regained this habit as we are now grown up and returning the favor to our grandparents that they did for us…have family dinners once a week to catch up, keep our family firm, and keep my children close to their cousins.

It is important to note that the character of the adaptation alters as the generation changes. Research shows that one establishes personal identity from collective identity (cultural heritage) and relational (social, family) identity (Hong et al., 2007, p. 324). Cultural identity comes self-definition "with reference to a *knowledge tradition* (Barth, 2022; Hong et al., 2007)." Self-identity takes the changes of accepting old traditions in a different format. Participants understand that preservation of cultural or religious practices is important, but accept that adaptation came with the changes as well.

> Although Filipinos tend to preserve old customs and traditions, many of us are becoming less conservative and more Westernized, especially those who reside in urban areas.

Cultural identity, self-esteem, and resilience are all connected. Research shows that youth who learned about their culture and local values displayed improved self-esteem, promoting mental health and well-being of a person (Hunter, 2022, p. 3).

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It is evident that cultural resilience was identified from overcoming hardships and taking risks for a better life by immigrating to another country. Participants identified that preservation of one's cultural identity in the family provides a sense of belonging to a particular cultural heritage, and it gives a positive outlook on what their family and home will be with the appreciation of the past, cultural heritage, and family values.

> My cultural ancestors can be described as resilient to changes, even drastic ones. The fact that they were colonized and occupied by other countries but still regained their independence says a lot about their resiliency.

All participants expressed a sense of pride from cultural resilience they have learned from their ancestors' story. They iterated, "My family is an incredibly influential piece of my identity and I am proud of my culture and family history." The realization of cultural identity increases in self-esteem, and ability to build resilience for themselves (Hunter, 2022).

> I can apply the cultural values and concepts of time orientation, hard work, community-based, collectivism, and acculturation/assimilation to my cultural ancestors.

In summary, participants learn the sense of resilience from their ancestors' story, and their appreciation and gratitude for their resilience and adaptation inspire the participants as they move forward into the future and build their lives, understanding the story of their ancestors and family and their care for one another.

Historical Architectural Significance

Another significant theme that emerged from the study was historical architectural significance. Participants identified how historical home design styles are influenced by different cultures throughout major historical events. One participant mentions the project "*helped me learn about the architecture of the Philippines and how it has changed from the many different influences brought to the Philippines.*" This is the moment when participants recognize cultural influences are evident in the design of home, and the spectrum of the influences varies throughout history. This finding broadens the understanding of cultural influences to the design of the built environment, that multiple cultural influences are inevitable as people interact and move through different points of history (Chowdhurry et al., 2021).

This leads to how these influences are translated into the interior of home design. Participants start to recognize how certain design elements and features impact their family living.

> A specific design features in my home to support the connection would have wide open spaces, incorporate nature with the home…An open-concept design makes sense because rooms were open to space because they had sliders to divide the room as needed for certain things…Having good ventilation with many windows helps to incorporate nature within the home and reflect the mind by keeping it open.

Observations of these details allow participants to understand how certain design elements impact their living patterns and family connection in the home environment. Next, in the process of designing their future home, participants analyze how they want to deal with the design elements from history and ancestors. It is often positive and accepting with respect for their cultural heritage.

> There are many historical design elements from Sicily that I want to integrate into my future home. If I were to imagine what this home would look like, both from knowledge of Italian architecture and just imagining what I would like my home to look like, it incorporates much of cultural Italian design.

Participants also connect cultural meaning of the spaces to family, where the space starts to hold special meaning when the family uses it in bringing certain relational meaning. A participant recognizes the

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kitchen space in their current home as "*the kitchen holds the most significant cultural meaning in my home because that is where we cook our meals.*"

As it comes to how participants envision the design of their future home, they add their own personal preferences and characteristics that reflect who they are as an individual, such as "*Filipinos are flashy and known to be colorful. However, I would keep a neutral color palate.*" Another participant connects the space to certain cultural practices that strengthen their family connection.

> I am preserving this connection in my home by learning from my grandma her recipes. How she cooks so, I can cook for myself and my future family when I want Filipino home cooking.

Through this observation, participants see their personal connections to certain aspects of home design and start to articulate how they want to integrate cultural influences with what they want in their future home.

> I had no idea of the depth of my culture's influence on these aspects. For example, I've always known how important the kitchen was for my family and my culture and it makes sense that I want a large open kitchen to cook in and explore my love of food with family. However, I wasn't aware of how important open spaces were in Italian culture, but I've always enjoyed having open spaces in my home and it's something I want in the future.

Research indicates that this is a reflection of how home environment impacts individual identity, and the project helps an individual to expand their understanding of oneself in the context of culture and family in home design (Lien, 2015).

This makes them think about specific methods or ways to preserve certain cultural aspects they can carry over to their future home. It shows the desire to keep the connection between history, present, and future so their cultural and family identity alive in their lives as one participant states that kitchen in her new home "*strengthen the cultural connection of growing my vegetables, learning new Filipino recipes,...having the garden close to the kitchen…keeping kitchen can be as colorful as possible (in Filipino styles).*" The home becomes a culmination of who one is with the strong understanding of culture and family (Hummon, 1989). It is a place where "*keeps me connected to my family,*" as one of the participants remark.

Tension between Old and New

The tension between old and new emerged as a significant theme from the participants' projects and was highlighted consistently in the words of the participants. The participants' narratives and stories depicted how their family values and the influences of modernism and contextual factors created a sense of strain in the family and between the generations within their family. Participants explored this tension in the dynamics within their family, utilizing organizing concepts such as collectivism and individualism, gender, hierarchy, and age. Literature has indicated that for family members where there is higher interdependence, much like the participant's descriptions of their own families, loyalty to their family may be expected more than in other families with less interdependence (Hofstede, 2001), which supports this finding about tension between the old and new.

For some participants, the tension related to the closeness within the family system, and they described the complexities that arose as a result of it, "*We have an exceptionally strong family bond which shows in our living accommodations. Everything in the home is usually shared with everyone, which restricts privacy, sometimes resulting in family tensions and conflict because everybody is in everyone's business*". Another participant also described the lack of privacy as potentially increasing tension:

> For someone my age (childbearing families with the oldest child between birth and 30 months and families with preschool children) in my cultural ancestral family, I would say that they did not have much privacy in the home. This is due to (ethnic cultural group's) communal living situations….However, this can result in tension within the family. Also, the lack of privacy in the

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home could restrict us from having a sense of self because we think so much about other people's well-being that we forget about our own.

At times the tension between old and new was clearly described as a desire to protect culture and traditions and the seemingly inevitable changes that can happen in different contexts and locales "*Although (ethnic cultural group) tend to preserve old customs and traditions, many of us are becoming less conservative and more Westernized, especially those who reside in urban areas*".

Gender was a consistent concept mentioned by the participants in their exploration of family dynamics and the evolution within and surrounding their family's culture. This is consistent with the research that indicates that commonly, in more collectivistic cultures, the distribution of power within families is usually based on gender, age, and generation (Meredith, Abott, Tsai, & Fu Ming, 1994).

> Gender roles have also changed, as they saw a reform in the late 60s and 70s with divorce laws, and more women becoming involved in global feminist movements. The hierarchy of course used to be men at the head, working, and women minding the home and children. Today, this dynamic looks different with more equality, but many of the traditional roles still can be seen with women minding the home, and often sexist stereotypes can still be seen.

> …many of us are becoming more Westernized. The hierarchy in my culture was described as patriarchal. The head of the household was the oldest male, often the grandfather... The older men in the household would do hard, physical labor, while the women stayed at home as the homemakers.

Participants described the current hierarchy and structure of their families as shifting towards a more shared and egalitarian style in regards to the genders, as influenced by other cultures and modern values "*The hierarchy of course used to be men at the head, working, and women minding the home and children…today this dynamic looks different with more equality, but many of the traditional roles still can be seen with women minding the home, and often sexist stereotypes can still be seen*". Whereas for other participants, hierarchy was a mechanism that facilitated order and eased tensions.

> The subsystems during this time were composed of marital, parental, sibling, and extended family relationships. A typical (ethnic cultural group) household was usually composed of grandparents, parents, children, and in some cases, close relatives. Boundaries were quite challenging to set due to the lack of privacy. However, the existence of social hierarchy in the family helps mitigate tension and conflict between each of the family members.

> The hierarchy of the family is that the grandparents are supreme. However, my grandpa said that grandma is very important. My grandma says grandpa is very important. So as a married couple, you can see that they place each other very highly on their hierarchy scale. From my perspective, this is the generation of men respecting women and putting them on a pedestal because, without a wife, a man has nothing, no home, children, or life. My grandma has her husband at the top because he is the breadwinner. Without him, they have no home, no money, and no life, which equals them out at the top of the hierarchy scale, but the matriarch is the head of the family.

Often the concept of hierarchy was not just paired with gender but also age, and was discussed as a prevailing value to this day.

> The older men in the household would do hard, physical labor, while the women stayed at home as the homemakers. Another determination of hierarchy in the household would be age. The older you are, the more respect you will receive. The use of honorifics has been a part of my culture for decades. In this case, (ethnic cultural group) would use the words (honoring terms in cultural language) in every sentence when speaking to older people and authority figures. To show politeness, younger individuals would also use honorifics in speaking to their older

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counterparts like older brothers and sisters. These hierarchical practices demonstrated respect, obedience, and conformity.

> My great-grandparents, the head of the household, their kids, and my grandma's grandma lived with them… When my grandpa's mom was not around, the neighbors helped to take care of them, but my grandpa did not want to be a burden, and the oldest took charge of their household and his brothers.

The participants expressed an awareness of the evolving times. They described the push and pull of older values within their culture and the impact of external or current influences. This tension has also been described as an "acculturation gap" in the literature and can have a significant effect on intergenerational conflicts in families (Lee et al., 2000). The participants within this study described the cultural values and traditions or their ancestors as both creating tension in current relationships and also serving as an anchor and helpful structure at times. It may be that the project facilitated a more nuanced and multidimensional process of self discovery so that the participants were able to delve deeper and consider all sides of their experience, rather than focusing on one dimension.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings from this study have valuable implications for educational curriculum design, especially within interdisciplinary courses which aim to foster self-discovery and cultural reflection. Instructors utilizing reflective assignments can facilitate students' understanding of their heritage, family values, and cultural identity, which may, in turn, support personal growth and mental well-being. Additionally, the themes of resilience, family bonds, and historical architectural significance inform the development of culturally sensitive course assignments that emphasize identity formation and resilience, particularly for students from diverse backgrounds. The emphasis on architectural and spatial themes also suggests applications in fields like design and environmental and organizational psychology, where

understanding personal and cultural influences on space can lead to more personalized, culturally resonant designs.

Practically, the development of an interdisciplinary course which connects different academic disciplines and thus different methods can help instructors identify pedagogical elements in the classroom that help promote self-discovery. Remaining within a discipline silo may prevent such innovation and the opportunity for greater learning. To do so, instructors can design assignments and collaborative projects that invite students to bridge theoretical and disciplinary scopes, making learning an integrative and reflective process.

In these types of reflective assignments, prompt questions need to be constructed in the manner that draws personal reflections on their experiences and invites them to consult their family members, learning about cultural and family influences on the way of life. This study demonstrates and encourages the need of integrating self reflective components in the course where interdisciplinary nature of the subject matter serves as a driving force to draw the self-discovery through the process of completing the assignment.

This study sheds light on the complex interplay between cultural identity, family bonds, and self-concept among students engaged in a reflective assignment within an interdisciplinary course. Through a phenomenological analysis of student projects, four themes emerged—family bonds, adaptation and resilience, historical architectural significance, and tension between old and new—which underscore the importance of cultural heritage and familial influence in shaping students' identity and future aspirations. The integration of historical design elements into students' personal visions of their future homes suggests that the preservation of cultural identity can coexist with modernization, blending traditional values with contemporary lifestyles. This research reinforces the significance of educational practices that promote self-reflection and cultural awareness, fostering resilience, self-esteem, and a stronger sense of identity among students. Future research may expand on these findings with larger and more

culturally diverse samples to further explore how cultural identity shapes and supports well-being across various educational and personal contexts.

Limitations

This study's limitations stem from the small sample size, which consisted of three student projects, potentially restricting the generalizability of findings. This is not a typical limitation for a phenomenological approach as it attempts to gain in-depth insights, but the reliance on student artifacts may limit the data richness, as these artifacts were not initially intended for a research study. In the future, utilizing a follow-up interview of the students and having them talk about their experience would provide greater depth in the information.

Another decision made in this study, which aligned with the research question of this study but may have resulted in a limited perspective, was the selection criteria. In this study, only projects that met specific performance thresholds were analyzed. Having more variability in the cases may have yielded more diverse perspectives and impacted the range of themes identified.

Disclosure Statements

Contribution rate statement of the researchers:

Both authors contributed equally to this study.

Conflict of interest statement:

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

CRediT Authorship Contribution Statement

Junghwa Suh, Blendine Hawkins: Conceptualization, methodology, literature review, analysis, writing – review & editing.

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