

Migration of Hmong to Rochester, Minnesota: Life in the Midwest by Cathleen Jo Faruque, CSW, DAPA, Ph.D. Hmong Studies Journal, 2003, 4:1-50.

**Migration of Hmong to Rochester, Minnesota:
Life in the Midwest**

By

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ABSTRACT

This study was designed to investigate one of the newest refugee groups to the Midwestern United States, the Hmong refugees from Laos, China, Vietnam and Thailand. This study broadly examines how multigenerational Hmong families are adjusting and adapting to life in Rochester, Minnesota. The following questions guided this study: (1) What effect does non-voluntary migration have on the acculturation levels as measured by cultural awareness and ethnic loyalty of the Hmong in Rochester, Minnesota? (2) How do the Hmong perceive their host Anglo culture? (3) How do the Hmong adjust to their host social system in the United States? (4) How much do Hmong learn about their new environment? (5) How do the Hmong retain traditions within in the United States?

Qualitative interviewing through in-depth individual interviews and participant observation was the method of data collection. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, volunteering, and snowball sampling techniques. Criteria for inclusion in this study were: 1) Being Hmong; 2) Residing in Rochester, Minnesota, and; 3) Being at least 13 years of age or older. Grounded theory methodology was the primary tool of data analysis.

The findings clearly demonstrated that the Hmong subjects interviewed for this study showed a high degree of discrepancy between the acculturation levels based on age and country of origin from point of migration. This discrepancy has created an acculturation gap, which is related to the younger Hmong's increased identification with the American culture and their decreased identification with their family's culture of origin. This shift has created family difficulties and communication gaps between the generations.

Introduction

Rochester, Minnesota is a small city of 70,997 people located 85 miles southeast of Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota (United States Census, 1990). In the mid 1980's less than 40 Hmong were residing in Rochester, Minnesota with the vast majority of

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Hmong residing in Minneapolis and St. Paul (United States Census, 1980). By the 1990 census, there were 200 Hmong living in Rochester, representing three percent of the total Asian population in the area. By 1998, the Hmong population had grown to over 300 Hmong in the area with every indication that this trend will continue (Lee Chang Interview, 12/14/98).

The increase in the Hmong population in the Rochester area has been noted by the local community. Without an adequate knowledge base of the Hmong people, psychologists, therapists and other helping professionals may not be able to effectively help the Hmong community in overcoming the obstacles related to their acculturation in the Midwestern United States. The Hmong are new Americans and Midwesterners and as such need the necessary support in order to contribute to the economic, social, political, and educational components of their new host community. To maximize productivity as new Americans, the Hmong need to be provided equal opportunities for successful adaptation to the United States. Without an adequate understanding of the needs of the Hmong people, services and programs offered to this group would be ineffectual. Posavac and Carey (1992) stated that “when needs or the context of the people in need are not assessed accurately or only partially understood, program services cannot be as efficient or as effective as possible.”

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to record some of the recollections of the Rochester area Hmong and their process of migration to the Midwest. This research examined to what degree cultural identity has been maintained and Anglo conformity has been established.

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This study explored the following research question:

What effect does non-voluntary migration have on the acculturation levels as measured by Cultural Awareness and Ethnic Loyalty of the Hmong in Rochester, Minnesota?

Specific research questions within this study were as follows:

How do the Hmong perceive their host Anglo culture?

How do the Hmong adjust to their host social system in the United States?

How much do Hmong learn about their new environment?

How do the Hmong retain their traditions in the United States?

These questions were addressed and studied to build a knowledge base about Hmong immigrants and their unique acculturation needs. This knowledge base can be utilized to formulate workable strategies in responding to the Hmong's needs in order to empower them to be active members of the greater Rochester community.

Research Expectations

This study was expected to increase the understanding of Hmong refugees who have chosen to migrate to the Midwestern United States. The study sought to understand the refugee migration experience and reasons why Hmong have migrated from California to Minnesota in large proportions in recent years. This study also examined levels of adaptation of the Hmong to life in the Midwestern United States as it related to awareness of the American culture and the Hmong's interest in maintaining their culture of origin.

This study examined adaptation needs specific to the Hmong refugee population. It was hoped this study would become the foundation for further research of the Hmong

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and the capacity of the Midwestern United States to effectively deal with adaptation issues related to this population and refugees in general.

Description of Research Design

A conceptual framework explains either graphically or in narrative form the key factors, constructs, or variables to be studied and the presumed relationships among them. Conceptual frameworks are the “current version of the researcher’s map of the territory being investigated” (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This means that the framework evolves over time as the study develops.

This study approached the research question from a phenomenological perspective. The phenomenological perspective seeks to understand the life experiences of individuals and their intentions within the world around them. It answers the question: “What is it like to have a certain experience?” (Crabtree and Miller, 1992).

The role of the researcher in this design was that of interviewer and observer-participant. The interview role was outlined in the guide of questions. The role of observer-participant versus participant-observer was chosen in order to show a more focused intent on observation of Hmong in their natural environment with less focus on the participatory role.

Observer participation allows the researcher to become part of the environment and to develop a rapport with the subjects being studied. When observing, researchers see first hand how the actions of the subjects correspond with the interview data. In writing about observation, Stakes (1995) notes, “In designing their studies, qualitative researchers do not confine interpretations to the identification of variables and the development of instruments before data gathering and to analysis and interpretation for

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the report. Rather, the researcher conducts fieldwork in the form of observations to record objectively what is happening.” During the observations, the researcher simultaneously finds reasons for what is happening and then redirects the observations to refine or substantiate those suppositions.

This study utilized a correlational method, which relies on careful observation of the subjects within their own setting. This method relies on recording and classification of behavior in order to determine relationships between variables. The correlational method is most often used when manipulation of variables is not possible for practical or ethical reasons.

Materials

Thirty-seven subjects in fifteen different Hmong families were interviewed using a questionnaire with 145 questions that were designed by the researcher. The questions were structured and designed to lead the subjects into an in-depth discussion in the following categories: socio-demographic characteristics, housing, employment, family, health, social environment, maintenance of ethnic identity, understanding of American culture, sponsorship, nutrition, and education. The questions were designed to encourage further response by interviewer probing of categories in which family members experience difficulty in individual interpretation and culture adaptation.

Each participant was asked to sign an informed consent form. A Hmong translator, who was a bilingual specialist for the Rochester School District, was available for those subjects with limited English speaking abilities. Family members were notified that all information would remain anonymous and participants were assured that they were free to decline from answering any question to which they felt uncomfortable

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addressing. Subjects were provided with a detailed participant instruction page describing the purpose of the study, how responses would be used and the extent of anonymity within the study.

Selection of Subjects

The research relationship that is created in a qualitative study is conceptualized as gaining entry or establishing rapport with the participants. The relationship is often complex and changes over time. In the qualitative study, the researcher is the instrument by which the research is completed. This relationship not only has an effect on the participants in the study, but on the researcher and other parts of the research design (Maxwell, 1996).

Hmong families residing in Rochester, Minnesota were selected to participate in this study. This study used purposeful sampling or criterion based sampling as a strategy for subject selection (Maxwell, 1996). This strategy was chosen because subjects and sites were selected deliberately based on recommendations and referrals from interviewed subjects in order to provide important information that could not be achieved as well from other sources. The sample size was fifteen multigenerational families and based on availability and willingness of family members. Thirty-seven participants from the fifteen families were interviewed ranging in age from 13 to 80 years.

It is important to keep in mind that the Hmong culture has changed due to the length of time this group has resided in the United States. Some Hmong that were interviewed were born in the United States and some of the subjects had completed a post secondary education. There were religious differences of subjects and varying degrees of

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acculturation even among members of the same household. To assist in establishing a positive research relationship it was necessary to explain the purpose of the research project very clearly and decide what main points to communicate to the family members studied.

Procedures

The Hmong culture is rich in family and tribal traditions. In order to establish a relationship that allowed the researcher to interview multigenerational Hmong families in the Rochester community, permission first had to be acquired from the Rochester Hmong Clan Leader. Similar to a Human Subjects Review Committee, the Hmong Clan Leader read and approved the proposal before granting permission to proceed. This permission was granted in a formal interview with a Rochester area Hmong elder on April 1, 1999.

Interviews were conducted with each family member in the household over the age of 13 that expressed a willingness to do so. Younger family members were not interviewed to avoid potential change within power structure of the family unit and to provide for accurate answers to the questions in the interview.

Description of Instrumentation

Subjects were interviewed using a series of structured questions that were developed by this researcher. The questionnaire was basically a structured interview schedule with open-ended questions designed and intended to establish a conversation with participants. The structured questions were designed to lead into further discussion in the following categories: socio-demographic characteristics, housing, employment, family, health, social environment, sponsorship, nutrition, and education. The questions were designed to encourage further response by interviewer probing of categories in

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which family members experience difficulty in individual interpretation and cultural adaptation. The primary goal of the questionnaire was to allow the participants the flexibility to frame and structure their responses through the use of open-ended questions.

Data was coded and analyzed using WinMax computer software. WinMax is specifically designed for qualitative research using the phenomenological perspective. WinMax can be used for grounded theory oriented code and retrieve analysis as well as Boolean, proximity and semantic retrieval. WinMax is a Scolari software product sold in the United States by Sage Publications.

While the qualitative process was often overwhelming, this approach provided the most appropriate framework for an in-depth study of a phenomenon not readily utilized in quantitative research. Through interviews and participant observations, the meanings that participants gave to their experiences living in the Midwestern United States contributed to a more in-depth understanding of the reasons these families chose to live in Rochester, Minnesota.

Demographics

Thirty-seven Hmong persons were interviewed in fifteen families. The subjects ranged in age from 13 to 80 years. Eleven subjects had attained United States citizenship status. The remaining twenty-six subjects were United States permanent residents. There are eighteen surnames in the Hmong culture, representing eighteen family clans. Eight family clans or surnames were interviewed in this study. These represent each of the Hmong surnames currently residing in Rochester.

The families interviewed lived in the United States for a mean of 9.93 years. Eleven of the fifteen families had chosen Rochester as their United States destination

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city. One family, arrived in Rochester, Minnesota when coming to the United States, and later moved to Austin, Minnesota for three years. The mother commented on their return to Rochester:

“We live for three years in Austin, Minnesota. We don’t like it there because there is no Hmong there and no Asian foods there, so we come back to Rochester.”

The remaining four families claimed the following other cities as their United States destination: Des Moines, Iowa; Sioux City, Iowa; Green Bay, Wisconsin; St. Paul, Minnesota; Winona, Minnesota; Austin, Minnesota; Sacramento, California; and Stockton, California. The families interviewed lived in Rochester, Minnesota for a mean of 8.26 years. Some of the reasons families chose to live in Rochester were: family members who were residing in Rochester; a local Hmong church that sponsored Hmong families from Thailand refugee camps; the small city size of Rochester; and less crime.

The city of Rochester is divided into four quadrants, which consist of Southeast, Southwest, Northeast and Northwest Rochester. The Hmong families were scattered throughout Rochester, with no clearly defined “Hmong neighborhood.” Six of the fifteen families reside in the Northeastern quadrant of the city. Two of these six families identified one other Hmong family as living within their “defined neighborhood.” Five of the families interviewed live in the Southeastern quadrant of Rochester. Two of these families live in the same mobile home park. Three of the Hmong families interviewed were living in the Southwestern quadrant of Rochester. One of these families live in a rural area of the city, quite a distance from the city’s center. One family lives in the Northwestern quadrant of the city and indicated they are not aware of any other Hmong families living within their neighborhood.

Four of the fifteen families were currently renting their dwellings. One family rented a single dwelling unit under government subsidy at \$135 per month. The other three families who were renting lived in multi-unit dwellings. The lowest market-rate rent paid by a family was \$250 per month and the family with the highest market-rate rent was \$540. Two families had purchased older, single-wide mobile homes. These two families paid a lot rent of \$195 per month. The remaining nine families were purchasing their homes. All of these families resided in single dwelling units. The lowest mortgage payment was \$300 per month and the highest mortgage payment was \$1500 per month.

Fourteen of the families interviewed were White Hmong. One family was Striped Hmong. This male described the identification of color to one's clan:

"We are Striped Hmong. For our people, we only have four kind of Hmong. My wife was a White Hmong and I was a Striped Hmong. This is only to identify by the clothes that we wear. It doesn't really mean anything, it is according to the clothes. Doesn't matter who marry who, for in our culture, the woman goes to the man's family and she start wearing their clothes. See, we go by the last name in Hmong. The Hmongs only have eighteen last names, like my name and my wife name. When she marry, she become one of me and is no longer a part of her family."

A majority of the subjects interviewed and their family members were born in the country of Laos. One subject describes his family's heritage and how they came to live in Laos:

"We are from Laos. I was born in Laos, but my father's parents were from Peking in China. They moved to Laos with their family many years ago. I can understand what the Chinese Hmong are saying, but I don't speak their language. We, all the Hmong people, speak some Hmong, but we have different ways to speak it when we live in the different country."

All the families interviewed spent time in Thailand refugee camps. The average length of stay in a Thailand refugee camp was 6.53 years. There were a number of

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household members who were born in Thailand. Some of the younger adults interviewed were born in Laos, but do not have recollections of it, but remember a childhood spent in refugee camps in Thailand.

This recently married, nineteen-year-old female was born in Laos, but was an infant when her family left. She identifies with life in the United States because it is the only place she has a strong recollection of living.

“I have traveled many places. But I only really live here. I was born in Laos, but I was young when we leave. I can’t really say where in Laos, because I was too young to remember it. I have lived in a refugee camp in Thailand for two years, this I remember.”

This fifty-year-old male shares how they lived so long in Thailand, that all of his daughters identify themselves more as Thai persons than Hmong.

“We lived in a refugee camp in Thailand for nineteen years. All our younger daughters were born in Thailand, they never see Laos. But my wife and I, we remember Laos.”

Many of the younger family members were born in the United States as noted by the lengths of time families have resided in the United States. One family member was born in Cambodia and was non-Hmong. The remaining families have members who were born in Laos, Thailand and the United States. This 60-year-old man, resides in a home with three generations of his family. He shares that he is from Laos, and some of his children were born in Laos. However, his younger children were born in Thailand during a ten year stay in a Thai refugee camp. His older children who were born in Laos, are now married and have children of their own, which were born in the United States.

“I come from Laos and my wife come from Laos. My oldest sons, all three, were coming from Laos. My other children born in Thailand. My son’s children, some born in Thailand and some born were in the U.S.”

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The families interviewed had a median family size of 6.4 people with a median income of \$1822 per month. Ten of the families (67 percent) interviewed received their monthly income from employment. The majority of persons employed did assembly line work in factories. One family had a household business translating videos into the Hmong language. Three families (20 percent) received their monthly household income from disability or SSI payments and one family (13 percent) was on Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF).

Sharing the Findings – Themes and Dimensions

The questionnaire was organized in a developmental fashion, from the demographics and family information, to information about housing, employment, and language acquisition, to ethnic preservation and culture. All interviews were coded using WinMax software as a coding tool. Miles and Huberman (1994) recommend organizing codes into themes or categories with the goal of seeking patterns in the data. Although the questionnaire was designed in an organized fashion, the themes were allowed to emerge in an inductive fashion. No prior assumptions were made about the interrelationships among the data prior to the observation and analysis process.

For purposes of analysis and discussion, I will refer to the Hmong interviewed as older Hmong – ages 76-50 years; young adult Hmong – ages 49-21 years; and teenage Hmong – ages 20-13 years.

Four dominant themes emerged from the analysis of the interviews: 1) Cultural Awareness 2) Ethnic Loyalty; 3) Migration Experience; and 4) Religion (see Table 1).

Parents and children revealed the ways that language barriers led to communication obstacles and difficulties in intergenerational relationships. Family members discussed their ethnic loyalty through the ways they retain their culture,

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particularly through celebrations, clan gatherings and holidays. Parents and children discussed ways in which their culture is lived and shared in the household as well as how American values are incorporated into the family and the household. The experience of each family’s migration was a source of great stress and ultimate struggle for all. An unexpected and interesting fourth theme that emerged through the interview process was the concept of religion and the role it has played traditionally and in the present time for Hmong families.

Table 1 – Themes and Dimensions

THEMES	DIMENSIONS
Cultural Awareness	English Ability Education Employment Health Care Family Relationships Community Integration
Ethnic Loyalty	Hmong Language Traditions and Rituals Family Structure
Migration Experience	Post War Stress Refugee Experience Prejudice
Religion	Traditional Religion Christian Influences

THEME 1 - CULTURAL AWARENESS

Older Hmong reported a number of obstacles and difficulties in communicating with their children, employers and the community at large. The younger Hmong interviewed expressed less difficulty in communicating and negotiating within their community because of mastery and higher comfort levels with the English language.

However, this resulted in greater misunderstandings between the younger Hmong and their parents or grandparents.

The dimensions of education and employment were distinctly tied together. Many of the Hmong who were born in Laos had limited formal education, which affected their current and future employment possibilities. Younger Hmong were more likely to have completed some formal education in the United States, however, they were also expected to work part-time while in school in order to contribute to the family's meager income.

English Speaking Ability

Parents and children discussed at great length, and at different times during the interviews, communication and language obstacles that occurred in their relationships. Many of the older Hmong interviewed had difficulty speaking in English, a language, for the most part, their younger children felt quite comfortable conversing in. Much diversity existed in the preferred languages both in and between parents and their children and from sibling to sibling. All of the parents reported the greatest comfort level in speaking Hmong, whereas a majority of the interviewed children expressed a greater comfort level conversing in English.

The older Hmong all recognized their children's English speaking ability was far superior to their own. For many of the younger Hmong family members, English was the preferred language. Some of the middle-school aged children within families did not speak Hmong at all, which created communication and cultural gaps between young and older Hmong. This 55-year-old male shared his views on the communication differences between his own children and himself.

“I think that my children know English better than they do Hmong and I know maybe ten percent. Our children and our grandchildren are speaking more English, they know this country better than us.”

All of the Hmong interviewed believed that their children would become more Americanized and accepted this as a natural occurrence. This 23-year-old mother of a newborn is acutely aware of the importance of her daughter’s ability to learn English as her primary language. As a result, she speaks to her daughter more in English than in Hmong.

“My daughter will be an American more than a Hmong, so I speak to her in English, she needs to know English good, not so much Hmong.”

The older Hmong interviewed clearly saw their childrens’ English speaking abilities as an advantage for the family. Younger Hmong are able to serve as translators and negotiators for their families when dealing with the outside world.

The children interviewed expressed their own frustrations when communicating with their parents. Frequently, the interpretation of the children was not so much that their parents were unable to speak in English, but more so that their parents did not understand American culture. This 14-year-old girl describes how difficult it is to make her mother understand the younger generations and after school activities such as dances, games, and parties.

“My mom sometimes don’t understand me. Like maybe when I learn something new from my friends or from school and then I like want it or like I want to do stuff, then my mom goes, like you can’t do that. But all the other kids are doing it.”

Hmong parents frequently described the need to rely on their children to negotiate with the outside community. This reliance on the children to serve as translators was

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based on their excellent ability to converse in English and to understand the nuances of the mainstream or dominant culture. This 50-year-old woman, describes her dependence on her daughter to serve as a translator when communicating with the non-Hmong speaking community:

“I try to learn English, but I don’t learn it so good. I have a memory problem. Now, I have to ask my daughter to speak for me when I talk to Americans. I don’t know what else to do. My daughter, she knows more about American ways than I do.”

Most of the Hmong parents shared concerns about their children wanting to be more like Americans and less like Hmong people which resulted in family tensions. The parents who were interviewed believed that the school system heavily influenced their children as well as their peers from school, resulting in defiance to parental authority at home.

In the traditional Hmong family, the father would have the authority to impose corporal punishment on a disobedient child. However, all Hmong persons interviewed understood that corporal punishment was illegal in the United States. The older Hmong parents perceived this protection of children against abuse as disempowering for the parents, who would virtually have no control to manage their children. Many of the older Hmong interviewed believed that their children could report them to the police for being “bad” parents and have them arrested. This 50-year-old man family shared his feelings of frustrations when his children did not listen to him.

“They don’t listen to us. We tell them and they don’t care. They are interest in their school and friend. Even my daughters are equal to their brothers in this country. They go to school with the boys. They are getting an education and can make their own minds. In this country, they don’t have to listen to the parents.”

The parents’ lack of English skills not only affected their ability to communicate

with their non-Hmong speaking children, this also proved to be a challenge for Hmong in negotiating within their work and community. The older Hmong that were interviewed expressed a number of difficulties in communicating with their employer and fellow co-workers. This resulted in a majority of the persons interviewed being dissatisfied at their work. Even the younger adult Hmong who were able to communicate relatively well in English shared secret fears of losing their jobs if they should speak out at work

Of those who were fortunate to work with other Hmong, they had little opportunity to speak with each other and usually only during their break times were they able to communicate in Hmong. A young man in his twenties, spoke of the difficulties Hmong face in adjusting to work life in the United States due to cultural and language differences with co-workers.

“Sometimes it is very difficult. There are no Hmong at my work so I speak always in English. There are a lot of Hmong working in my work place, but we are all in different places. It is hard to let go of the past and it is hard to work here and make your way here. I wouldn’t say letting go, but when we used to live in Thailand, we were different. We had to change a lot of our ways and we had to learn English and how to live and work in America.”

The inability to effectively communicate in English with their employers was especially difficult for the older Hmong. Frequently, the older Hmong were forced to take jobs that were beneath the positions they held in Laos or Thailand.

The majority of older Hmong shared a desire to communicate and establish a relationship with their non-Hmong speaking neighbors. Most of those interviewed, believed they lived in a good neighborhood and shared a desire to be a more active member within their community. This 76-year-old man talked about his neighborhood and attempts to establish relationships without being able to converse in the same

language.

“We have good neighbors I think. They smile to me and wave to me. They try to talk to me and say hello. But I can’t speak to them. All I can do is say hello. I don’t speak English. My son has to help me when I speak to them. When I go for a walk or I ride my bicycle, people smile and wave to me. They are White people, no Hmong. I wish I could talk to them. I think we could be friends if we could speak to each other. This is very difficult for me.”

Three of the Hmong families (20 percent) interviewed shared personal experiences of conflict with one or more of their neighbors. These conflicts all resulted from a lack of understanding on the part of a white neighbor of the Hmong culture. A 68-year-old male, discussed his difficulty establishing a positive relationship with his neighbors and that his problem with a particular neighbor was not easily resolved:

“I think one of our neighbor, he don’t like us. He live across the street and sometime he shout at me. I don’t know what he is says. But, I see he giving me the finger, and I know what this means. I think he don’t like we have children so many. We don’t want trouble, but he don’t like us. He is just like that. I am U.S. citizen now, so I put American flag outside my house. I hope he sees that I am respectful American now.”

Education

Education levels were diverse and unique according to the age of each family member. Eight of the persons interviewed (29 percent) had not received any formal education. Three of the respondents (8 percent) completed a four year college degree and three subjects completed their two year technical degree. Five of the six respondents who completed between grades first through sixth received their formal education in Laos. The remaining subjects who had received a formal education completed this while residing in the United States. Achieving a higher education was considered important by

all the Hmong interviewed. Most of the younger adult Hmong who were married, believed that completing a high school diploma was necessary in order to find decent employment.

The older Hmong expressed a desire to learn English and to study reading and writing. All subjects reported that ESL courses offered in Rochester were readily available and adequate. The number one reason cited for not attending ESL classes was the lack of available time. Many of the subjects did not feel they were learning English quickly enough. These respondents did not hold the ESL classes or instructors responsible, but believed their difficulties in learning English were the result of memory problems.

Employment

Employment and the difficulties of attaining a livable wage were of tantamount importance to the families that were interviewed. Many of the older Hmong interviewed for this study had no former history of working for an employer prior to moving to the United States. Most of these older Hmong were farmers in Laos. Three of the older Hmong were Shamans, (one still practicing), and one was a carpenter. The lack of a prior work history, and an inability to communicate in English has been a challenge for all the older Hmong who have sought work in the United States. This 55 year old male described some of the difficulties he had faced in finding and keeping employment in the United States.

“I worked for IBM, but I got lay off. I have to take job as janitor in nursing home. I don’t like my work, but I am not speaking English good, so I can’t find another job. In Laos, I have a nice clean job as a nurse. I was trained by a doctor in Laos to be a nurse. I was good at this, because in Laos, I was a Shaman and I am good at healing people, it is what I was made to do in this life. Now, in this country, I

am not a nurse, but a janitor.”

Most of the Hmong interviewed worked in factories or in blue-collar positions. The fear of losing one's job was a prevalent theme among all of those who were working. This 34-year-old father had eleven children and an elderly mother who have relied on his income to support the family. He shared his decision to go back to school and earn a technical degree so he could eventually go into a home business. He stated he came to this decision following the uncertainties of working in a factory in Iowa and being laid off.

“I been doing my own business since I move to Rochester. I don't look for a job. When I was in Des Moines, I work in a beer factory, but I don't like it. When they had a strike, I don't go to work and then I have no money to feed my family. I hate this, I have a job, but I not allowed to go to work, because we strike, so then I have no money. It was then that I decide to start my own business.”

A number of the families interviewed relied on the earnings of the mother. Most of the older Hmong females had husbands who were considerably older. Several had husbands who were retired, or too old to find suitable work. Reliance on the income of the female head of the household is a role reversal for the Hmong families, as women traditionally were responsible for the care of the home, managing of household finances, and the keeping of culture and traditions. With a lack of work skills and English speaking capabilities, the women interviewed in this study that were working to contribute to the support of their families found jobs in assembly lines in factories or in housecleaning.

Traditional practices such as religion, play a key role in the lives of many Hmong. The belief in Animism and the concept of the spiritual world existing in all living things, resulted in one older Hmong person's inability to find suitable work. This

60-year-old man family discussed the unique problems he had faced as a practicing Shaman in locating suitable employment that would not interfere with his responsibilities as a healer:

“One time I work as a janitor, but I don’t do that no more because they make me use chemicals that smell bad and it make for me to do my work as a Shaman, it mess up my spirits. The cleaning fluid spirits was working against my spirits and making difficulty for me as a Shaman. I had no choice but to leave this job. I am looking for another work, but I cannot find work. No one is looking for a Shaman or a teacher from Laos. No one will hire me to be a teacher, I have no education for teacher and I don’t see anyone say they look for a Shaman.”

Welfare Reform has resulted in many single, divorced and widowed women having to seek employment or face reduction or termination in their welfare benefits. A 61-year-old mother who was estranged from her husband lived in a subsidized rental with her two children, ages 14 and 9. She feared termination of her Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) benefits because she was not actively looking for work. As a result of physical and mental health problems, an inability to speak English and a lack of work experience, she feared being pressured to get a job.

“My financial worker, she say that I need to go to work, but I never work before in my life. I am 61 years old. The worker, she don’t help me. She say to me, go to IBM, go apply IBM. How do I get a job? I don’t know how to get a job. Who will hire me? They want me to get a job, but no one help me.”

Many of the families interviewed relied on the income generated from their teenage children. Income earned by each member contributed to the survival of the entire family. Four of the eight teenage Hmong interviewed worked part-time in such areas as fast-food, grocery stores, and cashier positions. All eight of the teenagers were currently looking for work.

Health Care

Twenty of the subjects interviewed (54 percent) reported having seen a medical doctor in the last four years. Visits to health care practitioners were based on how the subject was feeling and not on preventative care. All the subjects interviewed only saw a doctor when they believed it was necessary.

Most of the older adult Hmong preferred to practice oriental medicine and were reluctant to take allopathic medications. One 50-year-old man shared his experience taking allopathic medicine. He related that the medication made him feel drowsy and “not like” himself and he discontinued taking it.

Fifteen of the thirty-seven interviewed subjects (41 percent) had seen a dentist in the past four years. Only one respondent, a fifteen-year-old female reported going for regular dental check-ups and cleanings every six months because of gum problems. The remaining subjects reported only going to the dentist when they believed it was necessary.

One 19-year-old girl had experienced considerable tooth pain for the past year. She finally went to a dentist who recommended she have a tooth filling. She did not return to the dentist as she was afraid of a procedure she had never had before.

“Well, I went to the dentist six months ago because I have this pain in my tooth. He said I need to having filling, but I think this will hurt me more, so I won’t go back.”

A number of Hmong did not go to the dentist due to a lack of dental insurance and the inability to pay the expenses of dental care. This 17-year-old boy related how he is willing to see a dentist when needed, but his family can only afford emergency dental care.

“I went to the dentist one time when I had a pain in my mouth and I got filling. But I don’t have insurance to go, so I don’t go anymore, unless I need because I get another pain in my tooth again.”

Finally, Twenty-two of the interviewed subjects (59 percent) reported never having seen a dentist in their lifetimes. All of the subjects who had not seen a dentist before reported seeing no reason for such a visit.

Eight of the thirty-seven respondents (22 percent) had been to an eye doctor in the past four years. Ten of the respondents reported having had their eyes checked while in high school or that they had passed the visual examination for the driver’s license. They equated these functions with having an eye examination.

Several older Hmong would just purchase non-prescription glasses at the drug store. One 60-year-old male, reported a need to wear glasses in order to read. Without adequate vision insurance, he was unable to afford an eye examination and prescription glasses.

“I need glasses to see good, but I just go to the store and buy glasses, this is good enough for me.”

Only two of the thirty-seven subjects interviewed (five percent) reported ever having gone to see a psychologist or mental health professional. One respondent was a male, age 52, and the other was a female aged 50. Both reported suffering from stress and depression. The 52-year-old male served in the Laotian army during the war. He shared his experiences with mental illness.

“When I first come to U.S., I got very sick. I had to see a psychologist and the doctor gave me lots of medicines. I was very tired all the time and I could not get out of bed. I had no energy My wife was very worried for me. The psychologist said to me that I had too much stress, it was so much stress that the doctor

said I could not work, I had to get SSI. The psychologist didn't help me at all. He talk to me, but this is not a problem that is helped from talking. If I want to talk, I can talk to my family."

This 50-year-old woman suffered from horrid memories of the Asian wars and the grief she felt as her husband became missing in action.

"When I first come here, I was very worry. My husband is missing in Laos and I am here alone with my children. I would hear the noises of the war, but I would be in my room here in the U.S. I couldn't forget the war. My son is scare for me and take me to the hospital. A psychiatrist say I have depression and so much stress that I am disable person. They gave me medicine. So they disable me and give me SSI income."

Three of the respondents reported having mental health related problems and having sought the help of a general practitioner. This male, age 50, describes suffering from insomnia and intense preoccupation with his past life in Laos.

"The doctor gave me some medicine once because I think so much about the past and then I can't sleep. I worry so much about the past. This medicine don't help me. I don't like to take it because I feel tired and then I can't work. So I stop taking it."

The majority of subjects interviewed reported that they had no reason to see a mental health practitioner and saw the family as a means of support and help in overcoming feelings of depression and stress. This male, age 25, reported he didn't know how talking about his problems would help him.

"Why would I go to talk to someone about my problems? Can they bring back my father? No, he is gone and they can do nothing to change this."

Three of the 37 subjects (8 percent) were currently taking a prescription medication. Seven respondents (19 percent) reported having to take a prescription medication at least once in their lives. Twenty-seven (73 percent) of the interviewed subjects reported never having to take a prescription drug in their lifetime.

Sixteen respondents (43 percent) reported they were currently taking or do take herbal remedies to treat health related problems. Two subjects (6 percent) reported taking daily prenatal vitamin supplements while pregnant, but had since discontinued. Twenty-eight of the thirty-seven Hmong (77 percent) interviewed reported having taken over the counter medications. All twenty-seven of these respondents cited Tylenol as an over-the-counter medication of choice for anything from headaches to flu to stomach ailments.

The subjects varied in their responses on how they learned about taking medications. The two women who had taken prenatal care vitamins reported that their obstetrician had prescribed the vitamins while they were pregnant. Subjects who were taking over the counter medications reported knowing how to take Tylenol when they were in the refugee camps of Thailand as it was readily available.

Older subjects who were unable to read or write in English reported asking a son or daughter how to take a certain medication. Those who were proficient in English noted asking the doctor or a pharmacist how to take a certain medication. Some respondents reported reading the instructions on the bottle and sharing this information with non-English speaking family members.

Subjects who were taking herbal remedies reported receiving these medications from family members who were still in Laos or Thailand. Subjects also noted asking an elder person who had knowledge of herbal remedies how to take them.

Family Relationships

All subjects interviewed reported positive and rewarding relationships with family. However, each subject noted how family relationships had changed since

moving to the United States. One 25-year-old man saw his relationship with his wife as being more American than Hmong. He realized that his children will retain even less of the Hmong culture when they get older.

A 76-year old man believed that what was most important for his children was not so much retaining traditional Hmong values but that they should focus on building a new life in the United States. He shared his belief that being a good role to one's children would ultimately pay off in that they would likely become good adults and positive role models for their children.

“It doesn't matter what country you are living in, as long as you work hard and be a good role model to your children. If you do this, you will have good food to eat and a place to live. Your children will grow up and be good role model for their children. This is more important to me than if my children are more American or more Hmong. I want them to work hard and to be good people.”

Most of the older Hmong expressed how their relationships with their children were different than the types of relationships parents had with their children in Laos.

These changes resulted in some family conflicts as parents attempted to gain control over the relationships with their children. The children expressed similar concerns in that their parents did not understand how life in America was for children. They perceived the parent's interventions as unreasonable.

Many of the married, young adult Hmong saw the changes in their children to a more American lifestyle as a positive occurrence. They pointed out that life in the United States was better for their children. Education and job opportunities were cited the most frequently as presenting opportunities for their children to have a better life.

Community Integration

Assessments of integration into the community involved several different components;

1) Understanding of the American Legal System; 2) Banking and Credit; 3) Driving and Transportation; and 4) Shopping.

Twenty-seven of the respondents (73 percent) reported they had little or no understanding of the American legal system. The ten respondents (27 percent) who reported having some understanding of how the American legal system works shared that they had learned about this in an American high school.

Older Hmong reported they had no knowledge of how the American legal system works. They believed that this information was not important as it did not apply to them. This 76-year-old male thought as long as you don't get into trouble with the law, then there is no need to know about how the legal system works.

"I don't know anything about this. Maybe my son knows. I do know that you should obey the police and you won't get in any trouble."

Eleven of the thirty-seven subjects (30 percent) reported having a checking or savings account. Of the twenty-six subjects who did not have a checking or savings account, ten (27 percent) were aged 13 to 19 years old. Five of the older subjects (14 percent) interviewed reported having a son manage their finances for them. These same five subjects reported their son as the responsible person for handling the family budget and paying the bills.

Ten of the subjects interviewed (27 percent) reported having a credit card. All the subjects who had credit cards reported using them for an emergency only and paying off the entire amount when the bill came due. Several of the subjects reported not having

an interest in a credit card as they believed this only encouraged people to buy what they could not afford.

Eight of the respondents (22 percent) reported having a small savings account. The remaining twenty-nine respondents shared similar concerns about an inability to save due to lack of financial resources. Three of the respondents (8 percent) had small investments in retirement accounts, cds, money markets, or mutual funds.

Seventeen of the subjects interviewed (46 percent) had a valid Minnesota driver's license. Four of these subjects (11 percent) reported having a speeding ticket in the past four years. None of the respondents reported ever having an automobile accident.

Of those respondents who were of legal age to drive but did not have a license, the majority reported the reason as being an inability to pass the written examination because of a lack in English skills.

Fourteen of the fifteen families owned an automobile. All fourteen families reported carrying automobile insurance and understood that this was the law in the state of Minnesota. The one family who did not own an automobile relied on public transportation when venturing out in the community.

All thirty-seven respondents reported easy access to shopping. There are six Asian grocery stores in Rochester and all subjects reported an ability to find the types of food preferred for a Hmong diet. All respondents reported eating Hmong foods a majority of the time and that they believed this type of diet to be healthy.

Eight of the respondents (22 percent) reported knowing how to cook some American foods. The American foods most prepared by the Hmong interviewed were;

spaghetti, pizza, hot dogs, and hamburgers. All thirty-seven subjects reported eating American food at least occasionally. The most commonly cited American food was going out to eat for pizza.

THEME 2 - ETHNIC LOYALTY

Hmong Language

All of the persons interviewed for this research reported the first language they learned to speak was Hmong. Twenty-one of the thirty-seven persons interviewed (57 percent) reported the language they were most comfortable speaking in was Hmong. Eighteen of the thirty-seven interviewed subjects (49 percent) could read in Hmong. Fifteen of the thirty-seven interviewed subjects (41 percent) could write in Hmong.

The Hmong language in a written format was not available until sometime in the 1950's. Formal education for the majority of older Hmong was virtually non-existent in Laos. Most of the eighteen subjects who were able to read and write in Hmong were older males. The average number of years in formal education for the Hmong who went to school in Laos was three years or the equivalent of third grade in the United States.

Many of the Hmong interviewed lived in remote villages and farms where formal schools were not readily available. Those that were able to receive some sort of formal education were living in the larger cities of Laos.

Not one of the teenage Hmong that were interviewed for this research project were able to read and write in Hmong. The opportunity to learn reading and writing in this language is not readily available for these younger Hmong in the United States. Many of these teenagers were not interested in learning to read and write in this language.

Traditions and Rituals

In this research, I have intertwined the topics of ethnic loyalty and cultural awareness. Ethnic Loyalty relates to the Hmong desire to retain a sense of Hmong identity while at the same time, Cultural Awareness refers to the Hmong willingness to try to learn American values and beliefs. The range of ways that a refugee Hmong could show their Hmong identity after residing in the United States is limited. In Laos, the Hmong language, home life, work as farmers in the mountains and entrepreneurs, specific rituals at the New Year, particular treatment of the deceased, dressing according to one's clan, political loyalty to one's own clan, and certain assumptions about social hierarchy within the clan and the household provided the backbone of what it meant to be a Hmong person.

The importance of the New Year to the Hmong people cannot be overstated. Each year in December, some 400 Hmong people come together at the Olmsted County fairgrounds to attend the New Year celebration. This event lasts for twelve hours and offers food, drink, music, dancing, native costumes and speeches from clan elders. All of the fifteen families that were interviewed discussed with the researcher the significance of the New Year to their identity as a Hmong person. The New Year is the only formal holiday celebrated and recognized by the Hmong people. Families believed this event to be very meaningful as it provides their children an opportunity to experience the Hmong culture first hand.

A number of the young Hmong who were born in the United States were not as enthusiastic as their parents about attending the Hmong New Year celebration. One male, age 26, feared that the younger Hmong children did not have an interest in

attending the Hmong New Year in Rochester. He believed that over time, this holiday would fade away and Hmong traditions and culture would pass away with it.

“I think the Hmong New Year is very important and the children can learn about the Hmong culture this way. But I think the young children are not so interested, and their children will be less interested. I am afraid they will not want to know about the Hmong ways. Then they will be Americans all the time. They won’t want to know about Hmong ways and it will be lost over time.”

The families interviewed have had to make some accommodations in the way family matters are handled since moving to the United States. This is in large part due to the younger Hmong exposure to the United States educational and social institutional systems. Despite this, many family roles remain intact. This 25-year old male believed the eldest son had a responsibility to care for the parents in their old age. He shared his view of the elder son’s responsibility to his parents.

“I think it is important for me to live near my parents. This is because my parents are getting older and they need me. I believe that we must take care of our elderly people. One day, when they are older and can’t take care of themselves, they will come to live with me and my family, so that I can take care of them. That’s why we have children, that’s what we, the Hmong people believe. Having children is for helping when you get older, that’s what we believe, what we believe.”

An interesting change to the Hmong patriarchal tradition since moving to the United States are the responsibilities of Hmong children to serve as cultural brokers and translators for their parents. This elder male shared how his role, as the oldest son in the family had changed to that of a leader in negotiations with the mainstream culture. In effect, on matters related to United States culture and community, his father, a clan elder himself, deferred to the son.

“I think the oldest son should be responsible for all his family. In the Hmong culture, the oldest son has this responsibility. Right now,

in this U.S. culture, I make decisions about American matters and my father makes decisions about Hmong matters. I think this works out good for us because I know more about U.S. things and my father knows more about Hmong things.”

Overwhelmingly, the older Hmong interviewed believed that their adult children, particularly the male children, should live close to their parents and provide them with support in their old age. In Laos, there would be no question of the responsibility of sons to live with and care for the older parents. However, the older Hmong interviewed indicated they would be supportive of an adult child’s desire, even the eldest son, to move if it was related to job prospects that would clearly benefit the family.

Teaching the young children in families about the Hmong culture was expressed by all the adult Hmong interviewed as important. However, all the families interviewed recognized that their children may not be interested in following or practicing traditional Hmong culture.

The teenage Hmong who were interviewed expressed a desire to date and ultimately make their own decision about locating, choosing and eventually marrying a spouse. This 53-year-old mother shared her concerns that the Hmong culture would be lost to her children, particularly when she and her husband were no longer around to share it.

“If my husband pass away and I pass away, all the old people, from the old country, we all pass away, then our Hmong culture will be lost. My son’s generation and my grandson’s generation, will no longer know about our Hmong culture and our history. Our culture and our history will pass away like we the people will pass away.”

THEME 3 - MIGRATION EXPERIENCE

Post War Stress

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th

edition (DSM-IV, 1994), persons who have emigrated from areas of considerable social unrest and conflict can have elevated rates of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder. Such persons may be particularly reluctant to discuss these experiences of trauma due to their vulnerability in a new country.

The Hmong faced many hardships before arriving in the United States. Many have painful memories of the Asian wars and their often traumatic journey from Laos to Thailand. Twenty-three of the subjects (62 percent) interviewed expressed having vivid, extensive, and painful memories of the war and of their family's journey from Laos to Thailand. The remaining 14 subjects (38 percent) were either too young to remember or were not born until after the family arrived in Thailand or the United States. Several of the older Hmong interviewed suffer from depression and post-traumatic stress disorder.

The older Hmong emphasized the differences between the United States and Laos throughout the interview process. An overarching theme was the anxiety faced by all of the subjects in having enough money or the lack of money. Worry about paying one's bills was heard by the majority of older Hmong.

Post-traumatic Stress can occur at any age, even in young children. Those Hmong who were interviewed that remembered the family journey from Laos to Thailand, overwhelmingly expressed feelings of intense fear and helplessness. Most of these younger Hmong shared how they were wakened in the middle of the night by their parents and became suddenly uprooted from the life that they once knew. Their experiences watching as loved ones disappeared or died in front of them continued to haunt them years later.

Refugee Experience

In the United States, Hmong live mainly in urban settings, dress like Americans, and make their living however they can in the available job market. There has been an upheaval in political loyalty as the Hmong strive for effective leaders within a new political system. English is the language of education, rituals are diluted and stifled because of community displeasure, and more Hmong have become Christian in an attempt to fit into a society they know little about. What then remains as the cornerstone of Hmong identity? For many families it is wearing Hmong clothes on special occasions such as the Hmong New Year, weddings and funerals, speaking Hmong at home, and maintaining some sense of traditional family social structure within the home.

Of the twelve teenage Hmong interviewed for this research, eleven were unmarried. These teens shared feelings of being misunderstood by their parents. They were overwhelmingly disinterested in Hmong tradition and culture, identifying most strongly with their perceptions of American culture. This 15-year-old girl shared the sentiments of the majority of Hmong teens that were interviewed for this research. Her desires to act like and do things similar to that of an American teenager was in direct conflict with her parent's wishes. These differences had created miscommunication and distinctive cultural gaps within her family.

“Sometimes my parents don't understand me. They want me to do things I don't want to do. They want us kids to go along with Hmong culture and stuff like that and I don't always like to do it. I want to do stuff with my friends and my parents will say no. Like I want to go to my friend's house and stuff and they don't want me to. They don't understand that this is what American people do. They just don't understand why this is so important to me. Like, I want to wear American clothes and stuff that the other kids in school are wearing. I try to do some of the Hmong things, but I feel like I have more American culture inside me. Cause I don't

talk so much in Hmong and I am not good at it. I feel Hmong but I like to do American things.”

The parents interviewed were resigned to their children losing many of the Hmong traditions and fully expected that their younger children would be more like Americans. Despite this resignation expressed by Hmong parents, they worried about their children and how the differences between the two cultures effected core values and beliefs. A middle aged woman shared that her younger children were becoming more Americanized because they were being raised here and had little understanding of Hmong life in Laos.

“My oldest children, they are like Hmong. The youngest children, they are not so good with this. They are becoming more and more like American. I think this is so because they live here and not so much they live in Laos or Thailand. They are more like Americans, because they know this life and no other. I don’t think there is anything to be done about this. They are here now and this is the way it will be.”

This resignation was shared by many of the older generation Hmong. The desire for their children and grandchildren to succeed in the United States was viewed as being more important than an understanding of Hmong life and traditions. Despite this process of letting go and allowing their children to become more American, basic values of respect and hard work were emphasized by all the Hmong interviewed. It was believed by all of the older subjects that if their children at minimum held these values as important, the parent would be a success in passing on Hmong culture. This 76-year-old male believed it was important for his children and grandchildren to adjust to a new life in the United States and become more American. He emphasized the importance of hard work and respect.

“Our children and our grandchildren are speaking more

in English. They know more about this country than we do. I am happy that my children know English and that they are Christian. These are good things and important things to live in the United States. They need to find jobs and work and to pay the bills. They need to live like American people do. I only wish that they are respectful and hard working. I am more concerned with this than do my children speak Hmong or know Hmong things.”

All the parents interviewed reported that their children were well behaved or good children. This was expressed despite the communication problems faced in most of the families between parents and children.

Many of the younger children who were raised in the United States bore the responsibility of serving as the family’s cultural broker. A 15-year-old girl in this family carried such a responsibility as the translator and cultural broker. She felt a great responsibility on her shoulders as she handled a number of family transactions within the American community. On one occasion, when I was visiting in the family home, this daughter was filling out a home loan application for her older brother and his wife. She had handled problems with neighbors and discussions with police for the family. She described the difficulties she experienced from trying to live in and negotiate in two different cultures.

“Well, I think everyone is counting on me. I take them places and go places with them because I speak the best English. I feel like I am supposed to be the little Angel here. Because I speak and understand English the best. I try to live in both American and Hmong you know? Sometimes my parents acting really weird like when I am in American dress. Like bell bottoms and stuff are popular in school, but my mom wants me to wear regular pants and my mom she keeps saying stuff like that’s not how we want you to dress and stuff. When I am home, I try to dress like my mom want me to and when I am in school I try to dress like my friends so I fit in and stuff.”

Family members discussed the role changes faced when moving to the United

States. Hmong women working outside the home and functioning as the head of the household due to their husband's inability to work or absence from the home were more common occurrences in the United States. These women saw working outside the home as a necessity.

The younger adult Hmong were more likely to embrace the changes in family relationships that had occurred as a result of living in the United States. The younger married adults perceived that the success of a family resulted in the achievements of both the husband and the wife. A 21-year-old male expressed his relationship with his wife is an equal partnership, distinctly different from what their relationship would be like in Laos. He viewed these differences as an opportunity for both partners to succeed.

“Well I don't know if conflict is the right word to use, but our relationship is different than when we was in Laos. Husband and wife are equal people in this country and now my wife is equal to me. We help each other in this country. If we were in Laos or Thailand, my wife would listen to what I say. She would not have her own free mind. This is not conflict, really. It is just different here. I want my wife to do well. I want her to go to school and help the family to have a better life. I think this is a good thing in the U.S. that we are equal to each other and help each other.”

A number of the younger adult Hmong with children made a conscious decision to give their children American names. This decision was based on the logic that their children would spend the remainder of their lives in the United States and would need to embrace an American way of life. This 21-year-old male went on to discuss how his relationship with his daughter would be different. His views were similar to many of the other Hmong interviewed, in that he accepted that his children would become even more American than their parents.

“My children are more American now. They need

to do this so they can have better life here. The old ways will not help them when they go to look for jobs and try to make a family life here. I think many Hmong families will have more problems because sometimes the parents don't understand their children. But I think this is needed because the children must become more American. My daughter will be more American than she will Hmong. I have even named her an American name. This will help her to make life easier in this country."

Prejudice

The Hmong interviewed shared a number of specific experiences when their differences had been perceived by others negatively. Prejudice is a learned behavior. Differences between groups of people cause them to look at members of another group as strangers or outsiders. People are generally attracted to those who are similar and share certain life experiences.

Most of the families did not define these negative experiences as mistreatment by Americans, but instead reported feeling unwelcome by neighbors and the community on the whole. This was frequently a perception, as opposed to a personal response to an actual encounter. It is not my intention to diminish actual experiences of racism or prejudice. On the contrary, several of the Hmong interviewed expressed actual hate crimes that they had experienced. Rather, I am pointing out that the majority of the Hmong interviewed discussed prejudice more in terms of feelings and perceptions than actual negative encounters with people. This may result from the actual low incidence of hate crimes against the Hmong in Rochester, or it may be because the Hmong interviewed were reluctant to share these experiences with me as a Euro-American. This 60-year-old male shared the frustration he felt from not understanding why someone who didn't even know him may not like him.

“Some people are very good and some people are not liking us. The people who are good to us, I really want to talk to them but I cannot speak English. The people not liking me, I cannot talk to them either and for this I am glad because they are people I don’t want to talk to. I don’t know if they have anything good to say to me and I don’t understand them.”

The children interviewed for this research project frequently held a different view from their parents. Although many of the younger Hmong related stories of negative comments made by their peers in school, these were often perceived not so much as racist remarks, but as a form of teasing. A 15-year-old girl shared a perception quite different than that expressed by her father on this subject. She believed that the students who would make racist comments about her were actually teasing and perceived this as an opportunity to make new friends.

“Oh sometimes kids say something, but I think that they are teasing me. I don’t like it, but I think if they will be my friends, they are just teasing. Like when I first come to school here, they call me stupid and say things like why don’t you learn English, are you stupid. Things like that. But I think they are just joking around and don’t really mean what they are saying.”

Several of the Hmong families that were interviewed had experienced frequent negative encounters with a neighbor. The three families (20 percent) who experienced hostile encounters had all retained the traditional Hmong religion. They related the bad experiences with neighbors were associated with these people’s perceptions that they had too many children and made too much noise. All of the families who had retained their traditional religion noted that their religious practices were sometimes noisy. This was acceptable in Laos, where neighbors were not so close together, or practiced the same religion, whereas these same practices were considered unacceptable in the United States.

A 61-year-old woman discusses her thoughts on prejudice and dealing with a neighbor who was obviously displeased that he shared his community with the Hmong:

“Our neighbor has taken eggs to our house and car. He don’t like us and wish we move away. Americans have a easy face, you can read their thoughts. They look at you with such hate and you know they are against you, not as a person, but because you are different, you are not white.”

Hmong children noted their experiences at school with classmates who were hostile. These experiences usually involved the Hmong child first arriving in a new school, where other children would ridicule them because of their limited English speaking ability. Most of the Hmong children reported these types of encounters diminishing over time, as they acclimated to their new school. This 14-year-old boy shares his experiences of mistreatment from fellow classmates in school and his response to the treatment.

“Some kids in school will say things like ‘Why don’t you go back where you came from.’ They will tell you that you don’t belong here or call you a FOB [fresh off the boat]. I don’t care what they say. I don’t want to get in trouble at school, so I just walk away from them.”

THEME 4 – RELIGION

Traditional and Christian Practices

The Hmong interviewed went from a country where their religion was acceptable and customary, to living in the United States, where such practices as Animism are in the minority. Religious practices, holidays, and traditions now take on a new and different importance. For many of the Hmong interviewed, it was easier to abandon their Hmong religion and adopt the beliefs and practices of Christianity. I hesitate to suggest that

these persons have abandoned their religious or spiritual beliefs, and in fact, suspect that for many of those persons interviewed, these beliefs were in fact retained, but suppressed.

An example of this is in the handling of matters related to deceased loved ones. Funeral rituals and practices generally stem from one's religious background. This is no exception with the Hmong interviewed for this research. A 55-year-old male, indicated his family was for all practical purposes, Christian. They are members at a local Baptist Church. However, the father was clear on the importance of Hmong burials for deceased family members, and shared the views of a person who continued to practice the traditional Hmong religion.

“The burial place is most important. It must be on a hill, or in a high position, be in a good environment, with good soil and good trees. Around the hill should be beautiful. We believe that if a person is buried in a good place, on a hill and beautiful with trees and good soil, that person will come back to help the younger people, so they can get a good education, they can have good job and be even a king! This is why it is so important to find the right place to bury.”

He may have recognized that this belief was in contradiction to Christian practices, because he went on to state he believes that this is a common practice by many Americans in the United States.

“Ummm, I believe that the American people do the same as the Hmong people do. I know the American people do the same thing because I go to Washington, DC and I see the White House is in a good location, a good and powerful place. Some very important people found this place, because I can tell they know what they are doing when they build the White House here.”

The challenge of practicing traditional Hmong religion intensified for the small numbers of Hmong who retained these values and beliefs, as many of their fellow Hmong had abandoned and disapproved of these practices.

Religion and its practices, played a prominent theme with all of the Hmong families interviewed. Sixty percent of the families or nine out of the fifteen interviewed stated their religion as Baptist. All of these families converted to Christianity upon moving to the United States. Six of the nine families (67%) received United States sponsorship from the same local area Baptist Church. Of the remaining six families interviewed, three families (20%) were Catholic. These three families reported converting to Catholicism several generations prior while the family still remained in Laos. The final three (20 percent) that were interviewed maintained their traditional Hmong religion, which was based on Animism.

During the war, economic upheaval and military invasion broadened the possibilities for some Hmong families, who began to identify with Laos in dress and politics. Lao was the language of education for a small percentage, and small numbers converted to Christianity, in particular Catholicism.

Those families that converted to Christianity upon moving to the United States frequently cited their conversion as helping their children to adapt to a new country. This 25-year-old male believed that his children would fair better in the United States if they were Christians.

“My children will be Christian. I think they need to know about it so they can talk to different people and understand the American culture, otherwise, the people they talk to won’t understand them.”

This particular family was sponsored by a local Baptist Church to come to the United States while still residing in a Thai refugee camp. The church offered assistance to a number of Hmong families in the Rochester community and even provided mass in the Hmong language to many of the local area Hmong. A 55 year old male, he reported a

sense of indebtedness and gratitude to this church and converted as a result.

“The Church helped me and my family when we needed help. They help us with money when we needed it. I think that they expect that we are Christian and that we will go to their Church. Without it, they won’t speak to us anymore. We are not in our homeland anymore, they want us to change everything.”

This sense of obligation to convert to Christianity was expressed by many of the Hmong families interviewed. A majority of the families likened their conversion to an informal pressure, most frequently by other Hmong members.

A number of the families interviewed had difficulty expressing their reasons for conversion to Christianity. This interviewer believed that most experienced some type of pressure or a sense of obligation to convert, because of the assistance their families received by local churches.

The families that chose to retain their traditional Hmong religious beliefs were in the minority. This created a sense of further alienation from not only the majority culture, but also from those Hmong who made the conscious decision to convert to Christianity. This 60-year-old male shared his observations of the division between the Hmong of Rochester who were Christian and those who retained the old religion.

“I never go to a Church in my life. Some Hmong are now Christian and they don’t talk to us anymore. They get angry to us that we are not Christian too. They don’t talk to us or invite us in their homes. Lot of people want us to be Christians but we don’t want to do this.

Many of the Hmong who retained their traditional religion expressed how difficult it is to practice their religion within their own homes. This 49-year-old female believed that there was a distinct pressure by the majority community to abandon old Hmong religious beliefs and convert to Christianity. She shared how difficult it was for her family to practice the act of animal sacrifice in the United States.

“You Americans, you want us to become Christian. Then the Hmong who become Christians, their lives become easier. It is so important to keep our religion, but many Hmong will convert because their lives become easier when they are Christians. We have problems with our religion here because in this country you cannot sacrifice in your home, but this is our belief. We don’t want to convert because we are not Christian.”

The families who wished to continue with traditional Hmong religious practices recognized that conversion to Christianity would certainly make their lives in the United States much easier. However, these families felt a deep commitment to their traditions and heritage.

CONCLUSION

As noted throughout the findings, the acculturation levels of the Hmong interviewed varied within and between family members. Cultural Awareness was measured by the subject’s ability to communicate in English, opportunities for and levels of education, opportunities in and integration with the labor market, understanding and use of health care, roles and responsibilities of family members, and the ability to understand and negotiate within one’s community.

Ethnic Loyalty was measured by the subject’s understanding and ability to communicate in the Hmong language, perceptions and practices within Hmong traditions and rituals, and the roles and responsibilities of family members.

Non-voluntary migration experience was examined by the subject’s coping ability and stress resulting from experiences related to the Asian wars, multi-migration experiences as a refugee in Thailand and the United States, and perceptions and experiences with prejudice as a refugee in the United States.

A final component that was examined after completion of the interviews was the

affect religion and conversion to Christianity had on Hmong refugees. This involved perceptions of pressures to convert and problems experienced by families who continue to practice Hmong traditional religion.

The findings indicate differences in cultural awareness and ethnic loyalty between the older Hmong, young adult Hmong and teenage Hmong that were interviewed for this study. Older Hmong tended to view their migration to the United States as an involuntary decision based on their experiences of living in a war torn country. The older adult Hmong overwhelmingly reported a desire to return to live in Laos. Not Laos as it currently stands, but the Laos of the past. Their desire was to return to the lives they had lived in the past.

Young adult and teenage Hmong expressed less interest in returning to Laos. Those younger adult Hmong who had memories of Laos expressed some regret at having to leave their homeland, but clearly expressed an interest of remaining in the United States because of the availability of education and job opportunities. The teenagers interviewed had no memories of Laos. Some of the teenagers had memories of their lives in Thailand and actually expressed a stronger identification with Thailand. The teenagers interviewed for this study did not consider their migration to the United States as non-voluntary. Rather, they viewed their move to the U.S. as an opportunity for their families' success and survival.

Perceptions of the host Anglo culture varied based on based on prior experiences. Those who were old enough to remember the Asian Wars and their forced journey into Thailand and subsequently long stays within refugee camps had different perceptions of Anglo culture than the younger Hmong.

The older Hmong who were interviewed for this study relied almost exclusively on younger family members to serve as translators and culture negotiators within their community. These older Hmong had limited understanding of the American culture. Their restricted English speaking abilities created a constant barrier to the community and the environment around them.

The older Hmong were more apt to view their host culture as a hostile environment where they were forced to adapt and change their cultural beliefs and values. An example of this is the older Hmong view of their legal rights in this country. Overwhelmingly, older Hmong viewed the American legal system as being in opposition to the traditional patriarchal family structure. Older parents reported feeling they had no right to discipline and ultimately control their children. They believed that in the United States, their children had more rights than they did. The fear of being turned in by their own children for imposing disciplinary measures was quite prevalent. Older parents believed their children could have them arrested for child abuse if they required the children to follow traditional family roles.

The Hmong interviewed for this study, particularly the older adult Hmong, had experienced socio-cultural dissonance (Chau, 1989), from the stress of belonging to two distinctly different cultures, American and Hmong. The need to draw on family and culture for support became increasingly important for the Rochester Hmong community as differences in status and culture, unfamiliarity with the American culture, experiences with prejudice and restricted access to services such as medical care had created isolation for many of the older Hmong in the community.

Younger adult Hmong showed a greater understanding of the host culture, but expressed a desire to find a healthy balance between traditional Hmong and

American culture. Conflicts between the two cultures were often considered a burden for the younger adult Hmong who sought a sense of continuity within the family. The younger adults expressed the importance of keeping key elements of the Hmong culture, such as language and the Hmong New Year as a means of passing on the Hmong identity to children.

Teenage Hmong showed a greater understanding of the American culture and a desire to adopt American values and beliefs. They expressed little need to continue with Hmong culture and the practices they did maintain were out of a sense of obligation to their family and older adult members.

The Hmong New Year, held each year in December at the Olmsted County Fairgrounds was cited as the greatest opportunity for Rochester area Hmong to retain their traditions. This was noted by all older and adult Hmong as one of the most important things they could do to retain their culture. The teenage Hmong, however, were less enthusiastic about the Hmong New Year. Those that would attend the events reported doing so out of a sense of obligation to their family. Some of the younger Hmong blatantly refused to attend the Hmong New Year. The majority of teenage Hmong did not find the Hmong New Year to be an important or necessary event in their lives.

A high degree of discrepancy existed between the acculturation levels of older and younger Hmong. This discrepancy created an acculturation gap, which was related to the younger Hmong's increased identification with the American culture and their decreased identification with their family's culture of origin. This shift resulted in family difficulties and communication gaps between family members.

Summary

The preceding findings were meant to create a picture of the lives of Hmong in Rochester, Minnesota through the process of adaptation to acculturation. Their stories illuminate the reality of individual and family experiences and the impact of being survivors of war, life in refugee camps, and eventual migration to the United States.

The findings clearly demonstrated that the Hmong subjects interviewed for this study showed a high degree of discrepancy between the acculturation levels based on age and country of origin at time of migration. This discrepancy has created an acculturation gap which is related to the older Hmong's continued ties to Hmong culture, traditions and way of life, whereas, younger Hmong show increased identification with the American culture and a decreased identification with their family's culture of origin. This shift has created changes in the family power structure, increased family difficulties, and communication gaps between intergenerational family members. This was noted by Edmonston and Passel (1994), who found that the process of integration takes several generations, and varies across families and dimensions of families. An example of this is how quickly second generation family members acquired English speaking skills compared to the first generation. Structural and broader social integration was noted in the third generation of families as these members struggled to become more accepted in the mainstream American culture than in the Hmong culture.

Hynie (1997), also presented the issue of acculturation in family based terms. As noted in his work, the family is the central unit for most immigrants and family dynamics demonstrate an interplay of individual, interpersonal and inter-group relationships. The Hmong families have been trying to negotiate life in two opposing cultures. The

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younger, second and third generation members are acculturating at a much more rapid rate than their older, first generation members.

As Zamichow (1992), noted, the uprooting of established values and exposure to a new culture creates various types of psychological stress, including cultural shock, social alienation, psychological conflict, psychosomatic symptoms and post-traumatic stress. This was clearly noted in the older Hmong who were interviewed for this study. The American culture is quite different from what many of these older Hmong were used to when living in a agricultural society with limited educational and job opportunities. Health problems experienced by those older Hmong interviewed most commonly took the form of headaches, stomachaches, insomnia, excessive worries and stress.

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