

## **Constructing a Social Problem: Suicide, Acculturation, and the Hmong**

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### **Abstract**

Between September 1998 and May 2001, eight Hmong teenagers took their own lives in one urban community. Newspaper accounts attempted to establish the suicides as an outgrowth of problems brought about by the Hmong immigration to the United States. In particular, the clash between the Hmong and American cultures was fingered as the cause of the suicides. Other explanations were ignored. The teenage Hmong suicides were depicted as a problem that needed addressing and identified the school district and mental health facilities as the appropriate institutions to deal with the problem. In-depth interviews were conducted with individuals either directly familiar with the events or positioned to provide the best information and overview on the issue. We conclude that the emphasis for the suicides was strongly associated with the Hmong's status as immigrants in order to convince the Hmong that they needed to acculturate, in particular to accept and utilize mental health facilities. We illustrate that suicide can be a point of opportunity for those seeking to increase a group's level of attachment to society.

Tragic times may be moments that present opportunities for social change. Norms and values may be questioned by effected individuals. They may experience a sense of normlessness or anomie and be open to change. During such moments of opportunity, individuals and social groups will attempt to shape the social change to suit their perceived interests. Whether they are successful depends on the ability of the architects to convince the impacted groups that the proposed measures will be effective in alleviating the situation. The power of those making the claims is important in this regard.

In this paper we illustrate the above matters by discussing efforts to socially construct a spate of suicides by Hmong teenagers in one urban community as an outgrowth of problems brought about by the Hmong immigration to the United States. The clash between the Hmong and American cultures was fingered by those favoring change as the cause of the suicides. Other explanations were ignored. The teenage Hmong suicides were depicted in newspaper accounts and elsewhere as a problem that needed addressing and identified the school district and mental

health facilities as the appropriate institutions to deal with the problem.

We question the portrayal of the situation in this article. In-depth interviews we conducted with individuals either directly familiar with the events or positioned to provide the best information and overview on the issue caused us to conclude that the emphasis for the suicides was strongly associated with the Hmong's status as immigrants in order to convince the Hmong that they needed to acculturate, in particular to accept and utilize mental health facilities. We illustrate that suicide among an ethnic minority can be a point of opportunity for those seeking to increase the group's level of attachment to society. We discuss all these matters in light of what we know about social problems. We begin by discussing media coverage of the suicides.

### **Construction of a Social Problem**

There is agreement that social problems (or more accurately, some might argue, the construction of social problems) involve a step or stage process (Blumer 1971; Schneider 1985; Spector and Kitsuse 1973). Private issues must first be turned into public matters. The "condition" must then be recognized by the government or other influential institutions. A response (or competing responses) can then be established (Blumer 1971; Spector and Kitsuse 1973). Members of the U.S. temperance movement during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, for example, had to convince the public that ills associated with the consumption of alcohol, such as domestic violence, were public matters. Once having succeeded in this task they could then press the government to prohibit alcohol as a means to alleviate the social problem.

In constructing a social problem, groups define how it should be handled. A number of issues have been identified as important in the process, including the manner in which "claims and grievances are formed and presented, the varieties and nature of the claims and grievances,

strategies to press these claims and gain wider attention and support, the power of the group(s) making claims, and the creation of a public controversy (Schneider 1985: 209).” Joel Best, for example, developed a model designed to explain the construction of social problems as a function of the workings of a “Iron Quadrangle” consisting of the mass media, activists, government, and experts. Each sector, he argues, “has something to offer—and something to gain from—each of the others.” Moreover, their combination “can produce powerful consensus regarding the importance of a new problem, its causes, and needed solutions (Best 1999:63).” The status and importance (or power, some might say) of competing groups are integral to the construction of social problems.

The defining or construction of social problems is likely to occur with respect to immigrant groups because of their status (Jesilow et al. 1992; Sellin 1938) and because they are an unknown quantity to the resident population. The new arrivals are relatively powerless compared to the majority population, who lack an understanding of the immigrants’ behavior. A relationship between the immigrants’ behaviors and their beliefs is yet to be established or “framed” by the existing population. Frames are mechanisms “through which individuals may understand what happens around them, identify sources of their problems, and devise methods for addressing their grievances (Noonan 1995: 85).” Erving Goffman first described frames as a means by which individuals “locate, perceive, identify, and label occurrences within their life space and the world at large (1974: 21).” The concept of frames has helped us to understand the actions of individuals, who become involved in social movements, and to comprehend why some movements succeed, while others fail (Snow et al. 1986; Snow and Benford 1988). An immigrant characteristic can be framed as a positive attribution (for example, the current belief among the U.S. majority population that “Asian” students do well in school because their

immigrant parents push them to achieve). It can also be portrayed negatively (for example, over-emphasis on doing well in school by immigrant Asian parents means many children will inevitably fail) (Edelman 1964, 1988; Schneider and Ingram 1993). The following methodology explains the steps we took to examine the construction of the Hmong suicides as a social problem.

### **Methodology**

Two sources of data were used for this case study. We reviewed print matter from mainstream media sources, as well as articles that appeared in Hmong newspapers. We also conducted twenty in-depth interviews with individuals from the California counties of San Diego, Orange, and Fresno. Research participants included mental health professionals, students, parents, school officials, and various media sources, who were interviewed during 2003, 2004 and 2005. All of the subjects were selected because they were either *directly familiar* with the events or were positioned to provide the best information and overview on the issue.

A semi-structured interview was used with most of the subjects. Questions varied from personal experiences with acculturation to personal accounts of the activities that followed in the wake of the suicides. Each interview lasted about one hour. Subjects were allowed to answer questions as they saw fit; follow-up questions were asked when the subjects provided unclear answers. In general, the participants were receptive, honest, open-minded, and enthusiastic about the research study.

There is a dilemma with the reporting of the interview data that highlights a problem that faces all who would undertake case study research. The institutional review board at our university rightly requires that we protect our human subjects by not revealing their identities.

Yet, readers may have difficulties determining the relevance of our interviews without such information. In particular, the reader may want to know who said what. Readers may believe that we are using speculation or putting words in others' mouths. We cannot directly address these items. To reveal who said what, particularly if it is the words of key actors who are mentioned in media accounts, is to violate human subjects. Rather, we use attributions, such as "someone who knows" or "was quoted as saying." Such attributions, however, may not satisfy all readers. It is possible that researchers will need to develop an acceptable attribution vocabulary to deal with such circumstances. Otherwise, we may see a significant decrease in case studies.

### **Media Coverage of the Suicides**

Between September 1998 and May 2001, eight Hmong teenagers living in Fresno, California took their own lives. All were the children of immigrant parents; although some of the dead youngsters had been born in other countries, they were all raised in the United States. All attended schools within the Fresno Unified School District. The teens used various methods to kill themselves, including guns, hanging, drowning, and poisoning.

The deaths had, for the most part, been invisible in the media, while they were occurring, and there appears to have been little concern about their occurrence outside of the immediately affected people. There was print coverage of one of the suicides during the string, but this was due to the fact that at first the incident appeared to be a homicide (Baker 2000; Krikorian 2000). The suicides, however, were known in the Hmong community. Students and parents discussed them (Ellis 2002b) and they were mentioned by the community's Hmong radio station (Ellis 2002b; McAllister 1997; Xiong 2001; personal interviews).

There was one mention of the string of Hmong teen suicides in a short newspaper article in the local *Fresno Bee* newspaper during the summer of 2001. The piece, titled "*Suicide -- get it out in the open*," was the result, in part, of a task force that resulted from a suicide prevention forum. The reporter noted that 59 county residents had committed suicide in 2000, which was down from a high of 83 in 1998. Most of the dead were men between 20 and 40 years of age. Local suicide was the topic of the article, but the piece did note that the Fresno Unified School District had just applied for a federal grant "to deal with the aftermath of suicides and to figure out why so many Hmong teens -- eight since spring 1998 -- are killing themselves." The reporter wrote that most of the Hmong teens were successful students, a statement that was not accurate as things turned out. The article concluded that the important first step with respect to suicide is "to start talking about it -- for the sake of those who are thinking about suicide as well as those left behind when it happens (Kennedy 2001: B1)." Another year passed before the newspaper revisited the topic of Hmong teenage suicide.

### **The "Lost in America" articles: the suicides**

The Sunday, August 11, 2002 edition of the *Fresno Bee* included a special section, entitled "Lost in America," that focused on the Hmong teen suicides. The stories, all by one author, highlighted the clash between the Hmong and American cultures as the cause of the suicides. The parents of the teenagers were depicted as strong holders of the Hmong identity. They practiced the "old ways," including arranged marriages for children as young as 12 (Ellis 2002h), the sacrifice of animals (Ellis 2002h), the use of spiritual medicine (Ellis 2002a, 2002h), and family duties ascribed at birth by gender and birth order (Ellis 2002d, 2002e, 2002g, 2002h). The Hmong children, according to the stories, wanted to practice the American ways of their peers and struggled between the identities of Hmong and Hmong-American. The suicides were

used as examples of the negative consequences of the conflict between the Hmong and American cultures.

One teenager's suicide was portrayed as the result of expectations by Hmong parents, who, the author of the stories reported, "can be obsessed with wanting their children to do well in school." The reporter used the words of a parent of the dead youngster as evidence. "Some kids may isolate themselves because of trouble with school," the father was quoted as saying. The Hmong culture was to blame, according to the reporter's story. "If a child fails in school, the parents are looked on as failures as well," the author wrote. The reporter used the words of a friend of the dead teenager to make her point. Hmong teens "want to live up to their parents' expectations and make them proud, but they might not. There's a lot of expectations (Ellis 2002b: 6)."

Another of the "Lost in America" articles focused on tolerant attitudes within the United States as a factor in the teenage suicides. A lesbian couple was among those who committed suicide. The brother of one of the dead girls posited that homosexuality was accepted in the United States, "but not in our culture." The mother of the same girl was reported to have told her on more than one occasion that the situation was not normal to the Hmong. The reporter concluded that the "lesbian couple committed suicide together, knowing their love would never be accepted by their families or the Hmong community, which strictly forbids homosexual relationships (Ellis 2002d: 7)."

The story of a third suicide fingered the liberal culture of the United States and the reputation of the Hmong family as the cause of an unmarried, pregnant teenage girl's suicide. "The shame would have been unbearable," wrote the reporter. She added, "In the Hmong culture, the reputation of a family can be tarnished if a daughter becomes pregnant outside

marriage. Boys and girls suspected of having sex are often forced to marry by their parents." The dead girl's stepfather is quoted as blaming the American culture for the suicide. "In this country, there's a lot of freedom, and it's hard to control our kids. . . they are confused. The Hmong culture is very different. In Laos, [if you] need to discipline, [you] tie them up." The inability of Hmong children to communicate with their parents was added to the list of factors contributing to the teenage suicides. A friend of the dead girl is quoted to make the point. "She was scared her mom would get mad . . . Hmong kids aren't really close to their parents. They're scared to talk to their parents, or they don't want to. Parents don't understand we're Hmong-American. They don't understand what we're going through (Ellis 2002e: 8)."

The inability of Hmong children to communicate with their parents was painted in the "Lost in America" articles as the result of the conflict between the parents' immersion in the Hmong culture compared to their children's understanding of the world, which had been greatly affected by their lives in America. The reporter again used the words of a dead teen's best friend to make the point. "Most parents don't understand. Now we're in the U.S., and we need to do things the American way. It makes it hard for teen-agers (Ellis 2002h)."

The reporter was able to break her reliance on the testimony of friends of the dead teenagers by turning to a story of a Hmong girl, who was having trouble with her parents and in school, but who had not taken her own life. The method allowed the reporter to explore the issues of communication between child and parent in the first person. The girl, who was the subject of the story, was said to have "contemplated suicide." The troubled teenager, according to the story, "cut her arms with a razor blade and tried to jump out of a moving car. One day at school, she took an overdose of pain pills (Ellis 2002g: 9)." The reporter wrote that the girl "wants to be a regular American teen-ager, but she is Hmong, set apart by ancient traditions, and

the responsibilities and high expectations Hmong parents place on their children.” The girl’s parents were reported to have difficulty dealing with the girl’s problems, “because they grew up in rural Laos.” The author concludes that Hmong teenagers “struggle on a daily basis to balance their life in America with their culture (Ellis 2002g: 9).”

### **The “Lost in America” articles: the solution**

The August 11, 2002 newspaper articles echoed a theme that had appeared in an earlier grant proposal by the Fresno Unified School district to the United States Department of Education. The district had obtained \$300,000 and was at the time of the "Lost in America" articles in the process of implementing a suicide-prevention program for Hmong students. According to the *Fresno Bee*, the grant was "intended to address a variety of issues affecting Hmong students and their families, including academics and dropout rates (Ellis 2002a: 12)."

The school district’s prevention program’s stated focus was on bridging the gap between Hmong parents and their children. "No matter where we go, the bottom-line concern is the parents don't know how to help the kids and the kids don't know how to ask their parents for help because of the huge difference in culture," an individual intricately involved with the program was quoted as saying in one of the “Lost in America” articles. The childhood experiences of the parents, who “were raised in Laos, where there was no dating, only marriage at an early age,” and where “life was consumed with farming and surviving,” did not prepare them, the expert noted, to help their children with the problems they daily encounter. This, according to the expert, who was an advisor to the district’s program, had left the Hmong teenagers in a particularly vulnerable position. “It's a really tough time of trying to figure out who they are, how to become an adult. For Hmong kids in particular, what makes it harder is they're in homes

where their parents don't have similar growing-up experiences, so they don't have anybody to talk to (Ellis 2002a: 12).”

Hmong leaders and agencies, in the “Lost in America” articles, were painted as unable to deal with the suicides because suicide in the Hmong culture “should only be dealt with among family members, many Hmong believe suicide is the result of a curse on the family, or ancestors, and is best left alone. Hmong are more likely to seek shamans . . .for psychological problems than mental health professionals. They believe seeing a psychiatrist is an indication of mental illness (Ellis 2002a: 12 ).” The reporter quoted the director of Fresno Unified's Parent Engagement Center as noting that the Hmong community did not take any action concerning the suicides. She also quoted the director of a community organization that assisted refugees as choosing "to let Fresno Unified tackle the issue (Ellis 2002a: 12)." Supposedly, the director "didn't want to duplicate what they were doing." The reporter, however, portrayed the Hmong-associated agency as ineffective. The director, she wrote, "is now unhappy with Fresno Unified's approach, although he has not asked to meet with program coordinators to learn about the program (Ellis 2002a: 12)." The implication was that the director was unwilling to act on the matter, but was willing to complain.

The “Lost in America” articles portrayed the Hmong as an "underserved population (Ellis 2002a:12 )." The Fresno County's Department of Social Services, according to the reporter, was "aware of the teen suicide problem," but that there was "no money to address the issue (Ellis 2002a: 12)." A lack of Hmong personnel was highlighted in the special newspaper section as a hindrance to the successful implementation of programs for the immigrant community. The school district, for example, was said to have "acted as swiftly as it could, given the lack of money and Hmong applicants to run the program (Ellis 2002a: 12 )." Mental health agencies, in

particular, were singled out for having "few Hmong speakers on staff," and for having "done little to convince the Hmong that their services are not just for people who are mentally ill (Ellis 2002a: 12)." Hmong staff were said to be necessary "because many parents do not speak English and would be more likely to cooperate with Hmong clinicians. Also, Hmong clinicians better understand the culture, beliefs and issues teen-agers face (Ellis 2002a: 12)."

All in all, the newspaper articles in the "Lost in America" section of the *Fresno Bee* were an attempt to establish the teenage Hmong suicides as a problem that needed addressing and to identify the school district and mental health facilities as the appropriate institutions to deal with the problem. The articles attempted to establish the suicides as an outgrowth of problems brought about by the Hmong immigration to the U.S.. The Hmong were unsung victims of the Vietnam War<sup>1</sup> and the dead teenagers were innocent casualties of a government that ignored the plight of the community.

### **Teenage Suicide**

The question arises as to why the emphasis for their suicides was so strongly associated with their Hmong status, while other explanations were ignored. There is, based upon research on suicide, nothing that unusual about teenagers taking their own lives. More than 15 percent of young adults in one study were willing to admit that they had pondered suicide and 5.5 percent acknowledged that they had attempted to end their lives (Druss and Pincus 2000).<sup>2</sup> Suicide is the third leading cause of death among U.S. teenagers (about 13 percent of the nearly 42,000 deaths for the years 2000-2002), after accidents (about 55 percent) and homicides (about 14.5 percent) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2005). It is reasonable to assume that some

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<sup>1</sup> Readers of this journal are well aware that the Hmong immigrated to the United States after the Vietnam War, during which ten to twenty percent of their population may have been killed fighting on the same side as the U.S. (Ellis 2002a; Minick 1989). Thousands fled to refugee camps in Thailand after the war, fearing retaliation for fighting with the U.S. (Pyle 1987).

portion of the accidental deaths (such things as single-person auto fatalities or deaths from falls or “accidental” poisonings or other reckless behavior) were suicides that were categorized as accidents for one reason or another (Bhardwaj et al. 2004; Grunbaum et al 2004; Kumazawa et al. 2000; Miller, Arazel and Hemenway 2002; Patel et al. 2000; Pescosolido and Mendelsohn 1986; Turk and Tsokos 2004). Motor vehicle traffic accidents, for example, are credited with causing 41 percent of the teenage deaths. But not one of the 17,185 vehicular fatalities is listed as a suicide (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2005). It seems likely that some portion of these deaths were suicides.

The lack of communication between Hmong parent and child as a result of the clash between Hmong and American cultures may have contributed to the suicides, but other factors certainly played a comparable role in the teenagers’ decisions to take their own lives. Much was made in a “Lost in America” article, for example, about the Hmong community not accepting a lesbian relationship and that American culture was more tolerant of homosexuality. This situation, the article suggested, resulted in the successful suicide pact between the lesbian lovers. But, suicide thoughts, attempts, and completions are many times more common among all gay teenagers than their heterosexual counterparts (Bagley and Tremblay 2000; D’Augelli et al. 2001; Garofalo et al. 1999; McBee-Strayer and Rogers 2002; Remafedi 1999; Remafedi et al. 1998; Russel and Joiner 2001; Savin and Ream 2003; Zametkin et al. 2001). Yet, this information was absent from the article which supported the culture clash theme. The suicide of a pregnant Hmong teenager was similarly portrayed in the *Fresno Bee* article as the result of the inability of Hmong-American teenagers to talk about problems with their Hmong parents. In general, however, unmarried pregnant teenagers have more than a little difficulty telling their

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<sup>2</sup> These numbers, of course, underestimate the situation; they do not include teenagers who think about suicide and then successfully end their own lives.

parents of their situation (Bonnet 1993; Meyer 2000; Reece 1991; Resnick 1970), and unwanted pregnancy is a risk factor for teenage suicide (Bibring et al. 1959; Caplan 1960; Connolly 2002; Cunningham and Zayas 2002; Frautschi and Maine 1994; Loesch and Greenberg 1962; Newton 1955).

Homosexuality, an unwanted pregnancy, or being the child of immigrant parents do not alone cause suicide. Academic publications on teenage suicide specifically warn against single explanations for any individual taking his or her life (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 1994; Gould et al 2003). Those who kill themselves are usually affected by a number of factors (Beautrais et al 1996; Dube et al 2001; Gaines 1991; Gallant 2000; Hirshfield and Russell 1997; Mann 2002; Moskos et al 2004). Their deviant behavior was more likely the result of “multiple marginality,” which has been noted as an explanation for other delinquency (Vigil 1988 and 2002).

Multiple marginality is the result of forces that “lead to economic insecurity and lack of opportunity, fragmented institutions of social control, poverty, and psychological and emotional barriers among large segments of the ethnic minority communities . . . whose members face inadequate living conditions, stressful personal and family changes, and racism and cultural repression in schools (Vigil 2002: 7).” Maddy Cunningham and Luis H. Zayas (2002), for example, note that “[p]renatal depression is associated with single parenthood; lack of a confiding relationship; marital, financial, or housing difficulties; having several children at home; and unplanned pregnancy (p. 115).” Such matters, in combination, leave individuals vulnerable to taking their own lives. The “Lost in America” articles, however, emphasized the clash between Hmong and American cultures as the primary factor contributing to the teenage suicides.

Of particular interest in the “Lost in America” articles is that which was left unsaid. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (1994) and others (Cantor and Baume 1998; Gunnell and Frankel 1994) have noted that one of the best ways to reduce the number of suicides is to remove lethal means from the home. The silver cleaner that is commonly applied in Hmong households,<sup>3</sup> for example, was used by three of the eight teenagers to kill themselves (Ellis, 2002e). Yet, there was no mention in the articles of other, less dangerous, methods that the Hmong might substitute for the cyanide-based cleanser.

The articles also ignored the process of contagion, which probably influenced the string of Hmong suicides. Contagion is a social process that is likely strongest among teenagers (Gould et al. 1990; Phillips and Carstensen 1988; Velting and Gould 1997). Exposure to suicides (contagion), the logic holds, predisposes some individuals to attempt to take their own lives (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 1994; Davidson et al. 1989). Cluster suicides are a result of contagion (sometimes referred to as copycat), and approximately 1 percent to 5 percent of teenage suicides occur in clusters (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 1988; Hazell 1993; see Gaines 1991 for an account of precipitating suicides to a cluster of teenage suicides). Strings of ethnic-specific suicides, such as the ones discussed in this article, may be due to “contagion in isolated groups rather than cultural differences (Shaffer and Pfeffer 2001: 24).”

Cluster suicides can be exacerbated by the way the media reports the deaths (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 1994; Moskos et al. 2004; Schmidtke and Hafner 1988). As a result, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has issued guidelines for how suicides should be reported in newspapers, television, and other media outlets. The *Fresno Bee*'s “Lost in

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<sup>3</sup> Silver is important in traditional Hmong culture that holds that one is born without a soul. Silver attracts a soul to inhabit a body and keeps it living there (Minick 1989).

America” stories, when viewed in their entirety, violated most of the guidelines. The violations, however, were likely not an indication of laxness on the part of the paper, but rather are a reflection of the difficulty of reporting suicides, while containing the risk of contagion. It is to the paper’s credit that it paid little attention in print to the suicides while they were occurring. The avoidance of immediate stories about the suicides may have saved some lives.

The suicides appeared unusual and the fact that the youngsters were between two cultures likely did play some role in their multiple marginalization and eventual suicides. But there were other factors that contributed to the teenagers’ decisions to take their own lives, matters such as homosexuality and unwanted pregnancy. And the social process of contagion likely increased the extent of suicide ideation and attempts among Hmong teens. The use of the cyanide-based silver cleaner and hangings as the instruments of death seem likely to be the result of contagion and guaranteed the success of those who utilized them. Given these matters, the question remains as to why the emphasis for the deaths was so strongly associated, in the media and elsewhere, with the Hmong status as immigrants.

### **Immigration and Suicide**

The emphasis on problems directly associated with the clash between Hmong and American cultures in the “Lost in America” articles as the cause of the suicides has some academic support. Migration has often been studied as a contributing factor to suicide (Beiser 1990; Bhugra 2003, 2004; Compton 1985; Eitinger and Grunfeld 1966; Ferrada-Noli and Sundbom 1996; Hovey 2000; Lester 2000; Murphy 1965; Shaw and McKay 1942; Westermeyer et. al 1983a, 1983b, 1984). Immigration, from early sociologist Emile Durkheim’s perspective, can lead to suicide in a number of different ways. Immigrants possess values that are often different from those of the dominant society. The new arrivals are often unable to easily

acculturate into the societies of their new countries. They may enter a state of normlessness, or anomie, and take their own lives. Other immigrants may be overly constrained by the collective conscience (shared values) of the immigrant group. The culture of their new home has presented opportunities that are outside the boundaries of acceptable behavior within their home culture. The constraints of the immigrant group's collective conscience are so severe that individuals, who have tasted of the forbidden apple, may perceive that there are no alternatives, other than suicide (Durkheim 1951). Other immigrants may commit suicide as a means to protect their families from ridicule from the dominant culture. In general, suicides among members of an immigrant group, using Durkheim's perspective, can be portrayed (and understood) as the result of a lack of acculturation. Family conflict between parent and child, for example, can be one result of different levels of acculturation and such conflict has been associated with a higher risk of depression (Go 1998; Hovey 2000).

### **Hmong immigration**

Readers of this journal are well aware that the Hmong immigrated to the United States after the Vietnam War, during which ten to twenty percent of their population may have been killed fighting on the same side as the U.S. (Ellis 2002a; Minick 1989). Thousands fled to refugee camps in Thailand after the war, fearing retaliation for fighting with the U.S. (Pyle 1987).

Some of the earliest Hmong arrivals to the U.S. created for themselves an identity that encompassed some of their Hmong heritage, but also accepted sizable portions of U.S. mainstream culture (Bruner 1997). The earliest refugees were individuals, who did not delay when the opportunity to come to the U.S. was initially presented to them (Pyle 1987). They were mentally and physically prepared to emigrate. Later arrivals, who form the majority of the

immigrants, were less prepared to leave behind family members and a familiar lifestyle. They find life in the U.S. to be difficult and have been unwilling to shed their Hmong identity for one that might fully accept U.S. practices (Go 1998; see Westermeyer et al 1983a, 1983b, 1984 for research on immigration and mental health among early Hmong refugees).

There are numerous examples of the culture clash between the Hmong immigrants and U.S. society. The disagreement on the issue of treatment of illness is demonstrated in more than one case (Fadiman 1997; Marcum 2001). One hallmark of Hmong culture is the belief that all living things possess a spirit. When the spirit wanders or is lured from the body, illness or death may result if the soul fails to return. Such matters are dealt with by a shaman from the community (Livo and Cha 1991). The shaman is a combination of various specialists, including medical doctor, psychologist, and spiritual healer. The shaman can communicate with the other side in order to retrieve lost spirits. Most rituals concerning a lost soul require the sacrifice of a pig and/or chickens. The spirit of the animal crosses over and takes the place of the human spirit, so that it may return and cure the illness. Police have seized gardens that were being used to grow opium poppies and other medicines and responded to neighborhood complaints that animals were being slaughtered in apartments, but the practices continued (Bruner 1997; *A Girl Flees After Clash of Cultures On Illness* 1994; *Young Hmong Ends Her Life of Desperation* 1987; personal interviews).<sup>4</sup>

## **Previous Problems**

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<sup>4</sup> The culture conflict between the Hmong and U.S. values are illustrated by the matter of welfare assistance. The Hmong, for the most part, were farmers, who came to the U.S. with few other skills, little education, and great difficulty speaking any English. The majority had spent extended time in refugee camps (Pyle 1987). Public assistance was the only way most of these people could survive. Aid workers, however, started to disenroll some of the Hmong refugees when they learned that the immigrants owned silver of at least some monetary value. The Hmong culture holds that one is born without a soul. Silver attracts a soul to inhabit a body and keeps it living there (Minick 1989). For someone with a strong Hmong identity to sell his or her silver would be in Western terms, to sell one's soul. But such beliefs were lost on welfare agency staff, who sometimes cut off assistance.

The teenage suicides, between September 1998 and May 2001, were not the first time suicide in the Hmong community had become news in the Fresno area. Nor was it the first time that delinquency by members of the ethnic minority had made the papers. A trio of suicides a decade earlier had proved newsworthy. Each story had highlighted some of the difficulties the Hmong immigrants faced. In late 1987, a 29-year-old man shot himself. He, according to the news article, erroneously feared that he had AIDS (Speizer 1987). Five months later, a 13-year-old Hmong immigrant boy hung himself in his backyard on the day he was to appear in court for stealing a stereo from a car. He had previously been in trouble with the law for theft. The article in the *Fresno Bee* highlighted the family's wishes that the boy's death should not be in vain.

"They want his death to provide a lesson the community can use to break through language and cultural barriers the next time something like this seems about to happen (Steinberg 1988: A1)."

A month later, a Hmong man entered his family's church during worship services, shot his wife and one of his children and then killed himself. The article reported that the man was unemployed, apparently because he did not speak English well, and that his wife and children were receiving public aid. The wife had thrown him out of the house. A neighborhood service representative for the Fresno Police Department is quoted as saying that the husband was left with few resources and faced disgrace from within his culture. The representative concluded that, "[a]pparently they just didn't have the help they needed (Clemings and Chavez, 1988: B1)."

At the time of these earlier suicides, there appears to have been some efforts to portray immigrant mental health problems as a crisis. The California State Department of Mental Health sponsored a conference at Fresno State University on Southeast Asian refugee mental health. A department official, speaking to a reporter, is said to have "warned that Southeast Asian refugees will become a huge population dependent on government assistance if their mental health needs

are not better addressed (Dudley 1988: B5).” The news story highlighted the results of a survey that indicated that 18 percent of Hmong immigrants had acute mental problems. The conference, according to the reporter, focused on providing educators, social workers, mental health workers and law enforcement officials with an understanding of methods "to combat refugees' mental problems (Dudley 1988: B 5)." Interestingly, 13 years later the same reporter authored the “Lost in America” articles.

During 1997, the year before the “string” of teenage suicides commenced, there was concern about Hmong suicides in the press. But, the concern was with the elderly, who were losing welfare due to a change in the law. People, according to the news reports, feared that the older adults might carry out suicide threats (Hendrix 1997). Indeed, a 54-year-old Hmong immigrant woman did commit suicide after she failed her citizenship test ("Citizenship scams: a climate of fear led some to cheat and thereby cheapen the prize" 1998). The possibility of teenage suicide was not a concern in the press. Fresno's deputy city manager in charge of Southeast Asian affairs is paraphrased as having said that "the younger generation will be able to fend for itself. . .[having had] the opportunity to learn modern business skills (Hendrix 1997: A12)."

During the time when the Hmong teenagers were committing suicide, there were some stories about the problems facing Hmong youth. But, the newspaper accounts were primarily oriented towards juvenile delinquency. Several groups of Hmong teenagers, in different areas of the country, were charged with the gang rape of young girls. The males were reported to have formed gangs to rape and then prostitute their victims. The girls were said to have not spoken out because they feared that they would "be ostracized by their family and community (Yoshino 1999: A1)." The president of Fresno's Hmong American Political Association is quoted as

saying, "In our society, when you become victimized by rape, you seem to lose value within your own community...They call you a bad girl (Yoshino 1999: A1)."

In general, the Hmong community was portrayed as an immigrant group that preferred "to handle problems internally, to absorb and digest without drawing attention to negative incidence (Yoshino 1999: A1)." A major focus of this paper is to explain the process by which the treatment of suicide as a private matter, as was preferred by traditional Hmong, was transformed into government-sponsored, public efforts that focused on the perceived needs of the Hmong as immigrants. This process illustrates the construction of a social problem.

### **The Father**

The initial step towards the construction of the Hmong suicides as a social problem was taken by the father of one of the teenage suicides in the string. The father was unlike the portrait of Hmong parents painted in the "Lost in America" articles. He was fluent in English and integrated into U.S. culture. Rather than seeing the suicides as private matters, he saw the teenagers' deaths as a problem requiring government intervention. There are some disagreements between the interviewees' accounts of some facts, and as to the exact sequence of events. But, there is general agreement that the father played a pivotal role. "Had it not been for him, no one would have been interested (personal interview)."

The father first met with school district officials shortly after his 17-year-old son shot himself. The father was aware that there had been other Hmong teen suicides. His intention, according to the interviewees, was to prevent additional suicides. It was during the father's meeting with the district superintendent that he began to vocally "frame" the suicides as the result of the gap between the Hmong teenagers, who were raised in this country, and their traditional parents. The father's meeting with school officials eventually resulted in the district's

grant application to the Department of Education, which mirrored the father's framework for explaining the suicides, as well as his solutions to the problem.

The father drew from his gestalt as a county human services worker to frame his construction of mechanisms to prevent Hmong teenage suicide. Foremost, he believed that the problem required greater resources, in particular the addition of Hmong staff, to deal with the problem. At the time, according to the interviewees, there were no programs meant specifically for the Hmong; neither were there Hmong-speaking counselors or clinical psychologists (the Hmong-speaking father was an analyst for Fresno County's Human Services System; he was not a psychologist). Social service agencies had relied on interpreters when faced with Hmong speakers. The school district's grant application reflected this position and sought funds to establish a school-based program that included hiring people who were knowledgeable about the Hmong language and culture.

The father used his dual position as the parent of a teenager who had committed suicide and a member of the county's social service system to lobby local media, businesses, and politicians. The roles gave him some credibility. He was able to present his explanation for the suicides to school board members, the superintendent, and to the general public (first through a local television network affiliate, followed by community meetings, and later through the "Lost in America" pieces, and eventually at national meetings). He argued that the situation in the Hmong community was at a crisis point (as evidenced by the number of suicides) and that a program, staffed with Hmong, was needed to improve the situation.

The father's actions were likely, in part, a coping mechanism to help him deal with the death of his son. Such a situation would not be unusual. There are examples in the United States in which social movements were the outgrowth of people dealing with a loss. The efforts of the

father of a Fresno teenager, who was murdered by a released inmate, led to the enactment of California's Three Strikes Law (Gross 1993; Morain 1994). Those individuals, who founded Mothers Against Drunk Driving, were likely using their efforts to cope with the deaths of their children at the hands of inebriated motorists (Lord 1987).

For the father of the dead youngster it was "important not only to let the loss go, but to help other people (personal interview)." The "Lost in America" article about the suicide included a similar note; the district superintendent is reported to have told the father, family, friends and news media, at a memorial for the dead son, that the teenager's "memory will not be in vain." The death had been "a catalyst for the district to provide help for troubled Hmong teens (Ellis 2002b: 6)." The superintendent's reported words may have helped the father deal with the loss of his son.

The chronic ambiguity of the son's suicide likely played some role in driving the father to action. Our interest here is in the mechanisms that lead people to participate in the construction of social problems, the link between individual motivation and eventual social action. Writers have noted how culturally facilitated psychological conditions can lead to social action (Afflitto and Jesilow 2007; Shibutani 1978). Part of our explanation for the suicide survivor's efforts began with the psychological mechanisms he employed to deal with his loss. It is, in many ways, the ambiguous nature of suicide that started the father on his journey to activism. He was unsure as to the reasons his loved one had taken his own life and this created a psychological quandary for him. He sought to alleviate the chronic anxiety, in part, through social action. He did not know why his son took his own life; there was no letter left to fill in the missing information. He could only make guesses. Such chronic ambiguity can drive individuals to seek

answers to unanswerable questions (Shibutani 1978). But, their actions fall short of relieving them of their anxiety; they remain unable to “know” the true answer.

The father relied on his understanding of the world to create explanations for his son’s death. He surmised that his son may have taken his own life because he felt he had disappointed his family by not doing well in school. The father denied that he was disappointed in his son, but attributed the potential for such feelings in his son because of their membership in the group, Hmong immigrants. He posited that Hmong parents have a strong interest in the academic success of their children. Current achievement in school is translated into a belief that a child will do well in the future. Immigrant parents, however, have difficulty helping their children achieve. Acculturated parents, who see themselves as Hmong-Americans, are generally more involved in their children’s lives than those who identify as traditional Hmong. Acculturated parents are at schools “the most to check on attendance and to talk to counselors...they are more likely to attend school functions (personal interview).” The suicide by the son was explained as the result of general Hmong parental expectations that their children will excel in school. Lacking concrete explanations, this one sufficed for the father.

The social construction of the suicides as the result of culture clash allowed the father to deflect any personal responsibility for his son’s death onto more traditional Hmong immigrants. Moreover, by framing the suicides as the result of a lack of acculturation, he revealed his internalization of the dominant culture’s norms. The behavior and customs of traditional Hmong were the problem from his perspective. His view was likely affected by the “racial beliefs, meanings, and stereotypes of the mainstream society,” which shaped how he thought about the traditional Hmong (Pyke and Dang 2003: 147). The father was an early immigrant to the USA and he had integrated himself into the modern world. He held a Hmong-American identity and

separated himself from the more traditional Hmong. He saw traditional practices in a negative light and felt that they had little place in USA society.

The father was intent on not letting "the Hmong community slide down (personal interview)." He did not want the community to be associated with negative or deviant behavior. The suicides, for him, were merely the visual evidence of problems that were just below the surface. The difficulties he perceived were associated with the practices and beliefs of traditional Hmong. Creating change in the community, however, was not easy for the father; he was not universally respected or trusted in the Hmong community. The father used the suicides to facilitate change. Designating the situation as one of crisis allowed him to make suggestions, which would have been intolerable to the community under "normal" circumstances. He was able, for example, to approach Hmong parents with requests that they change their behaviors for their children. "I respect your culture and traditions," he is quoted as saying, "but we cannot let another Hmong child die (personal interview)."

Hmong parents, our interviewees reported, go along with the way life is until they have to deal with negative ramifications. They are willing, according to one informant, "to change to keep their children out of trouble (personal interview)." This, of course, may be true of many communities. Change is resisted until a crisis situation is reached. Then change may be seen as acceptable. In this case, the father and others were able to gain some leverage towards change in the Hmong community by portraying the teenage suicides as indicative of a crisis.

The explanations offered by the father (and echoed in the newspaper articles as a factor in the teenagers' suicides) do not fit his own situation. The father speaks English and he is an analyst for Fresno County's Human Services System. The father shares few characteristics with the traditional Hmong, who the father feels need acculturation. According to the interviews, the

father was attentive to his son's problems in school. Yet, this information was not used in the "Lost in America" articles to discredit the position that the suicides were the result of a culture clash. Rather, the father's general musings and guesses were used by the reporter to support the culture conflict explanation for the suicides.

### **The Media**

The father's perspective would not have gained credence without support. The school district, county social service agencies, and the reporter, who wrote the "Lost in America" stories, were his most powerful allies.

We were told that the reporter, who wrote all the "Lost in America" articles, had come upon the story by chance. The reporter was responsible for covering education for the newspaper. She was reportedly interviewing the school district's superintendent about another matter. At the end of the interview, the superintendent mentioned that he was traveling to Washington, D.C. to secure the district's grant for help with the Hmong suicides. The reporter, who reportedly had been raised with Hmong neighbors, became interested and asked the superintendent for details. She followed this initial information with a trip to the coroner's office to obtain information on suicides by ethnicity. She left, according to our informant, with an idea for a story; she would interview the families of the dead youngsters to learn why so many Hmong teenagers killed themselves. Her editor later "okayed" the expansion of the story into the special section, which won praise for the reporter, photographer, and the paper ("The Bee captures nine newspaper accolades" 2003).

Early on, the reporter met with the father, who framed the story for her. The reporter had originally considered that the suicides were the result of gang pressures and violence, which, at the time were common themes in articles about Hmong teenagers. But, she quickly adopted the

father's account for explaining the suicides. That framework went unchanged by the occurrences she experienced while researching the story, even though they did not match the model the father established. For one, the father did not fit the picture he portrayed of Hmong parents. In addition, the families of the dead youngsters did not fit the preconceived story. The father's tale stated that the Hmong were unwilling to discuss suicide. Yet, members of all the families, except one, spoke with the reporter about the teenagers. The "Lost in America" articles, however, ignored these facts and portrayed the suicides as the result of a lack of communication between the Hmong parents and their children that was, according to the stories, a direct result of the clash between the traditional Hmong identity of the parents and the more Americanized identity of their children.

Perhaps the reporter's seemingly unquestioning acceptance of the father's logic was rooted in her early years, when she lived near newly arrived Hmong immigrants, and "stopped being shocked" by what she saw when she visited their homes (personal interview). These memories may have led her to believe that the traditional Hmong did need to change, as the father had argued. There is evidence that she held these opinions prior to meeting the father. She was the author of an article that had appeared in the *Sacramento Bee* during the earlier set of Hmong suicides. Her story, at that time, had labeled the mental health of Southeast Asians as a crisis and mental health resources needed to be established so that youthful Hmong would know where to go for help (Dudley 1988). The "Lost in America" pieces had a similar goal.

The newspaper stories were intended to affect policy decisions by portraying the Hmong as an underserved, deserving community. Similar efforts had begun earlier by the father and others. The goal was to attract government funds to the Hmong community. The suicides were

used to present an image of a crisis in the Hmong community that required government programs and money.

### **The Government's Response**

The efforts of those pushing for a school-based, government response to the suicides were successful at obtaining federal funds prior to the "Lost in America" articles; the newspaper entered the endeavor relatively late. Fresno Unified School District applied for federal aid in July of 2001. In October, the district was presented with a United States Department of Education grant of approximately \$350,000, to begin addressing various issues, which the school district and its community allies had defined as affecting the Hmong community. A suicide-prevention task force and the Restoring the Learning Environment Program were formally established in November 2001 for Hmong students at junior high and high schools throughout the county. The task force's stated objective was to facilitate communication between teens, their parents, and school officials in an effort to teach Hmong parents to identify at-risk behavior by their children, including depression, withdrawal, and anti-social behavior. An understanding of these signs, the logic held, would help Hmong parents to assess their children's behaviors more accurately. It would also allow the parents to get involved with their child's lives before problems arose.

The school district's program was the first government reaction to the suicides and it was lauded in the "Lost in America" article (Ellis 2002a), confirming the strategy as the appropriate action. In general, the newspaper article constructed the situation as a crisis which required government intervention into the lives of hundreds of Hmong families. The program's two coordinators were involved in a number of activities, according to the "Lost in America" article (Ellis 2002a), including group discussions with more than 200 Hmong teenagers, and "alerting

educators to the special problems Hmong students may have (Ellis 2002a: 12).” The latter was accomplished by “[h]olding more than a dozen workshops for school counselors, psychologists, teachers and principals on recognizing distress among Hmong students and how to intervene and work with their families (Ellis 2002a: 12).” The coordinators, both Hmong immigrant women, were reported to have visited “the homes of nearly all the students referred to the program, talking with students and their parents and arranging ongoing counseling (Ellis 2002a: 12).” They also were reported to have met with Hmong parents at meetings and to have appeared on a Hmong-language television program to tell parents “how to recognize if their children are troubled and what to do (Ellis 2002a: 12).” The school program was fixed, according to the article, to expand into “elementary campuses in the fall because some of the students referred to the program were fifth- and sixth-graders (Ellis 2002a: 12).” The school also hired a psychologist, who conducted interviews with the families of the teens who had committed suicide. The newspaper article reported that “the district's insistence on Hmong coordinators has paid off.” The parents were willing “to discuss teen suicide and troubles with their children (Ellis 2002a: 12).”

The district program used the suicides as a tool to facilitate acculturation by the Hmong parents as it urged them to communicate openly about problems with their children. Despite their uneasiness, Hmong parents, according to interviewees, had to learn to accept that they were “not in their country anymore...they’re in a new world, a new society...and this is what they have to do to support their kids (personal interview).” Using the issue of the suicides as a focus, the program was allowed to address other concerns that for most people in the Hmong community had nothing to do with suicide. These included such matters as academic achievement, parental involvement, personal relationships, and communication in the Hmong

community. Any resistance by the Hmong community to such intrusions were lessened by speaking directly to them in their native language. To have spoken to the community about a foreign culture or issues in a language other than Hmong would have exacerbated the preexisting gap between them and mainstream U.S. society. By speaking in the Hmong language, it made the unfamiliar more familiar.

The district was able to obtain additional federal funding for its program, when the initial two-year program ended. The new school district effort continued many of the activities set in motion during the first grant, but the staff sought to involve the Hmong students more by giving them a larger role (personal interview).

In 2003, California Governor Gray Davis signed into law Assembly Bill 78, which encouraged teachers of middle and high school students to include in their lessons the role Southeast Asians played in the CIA organized secret war in Laos. The legislation was a continuation of earlier efforts to teach Hmong youngsters about their heritage and was another governmental outcome of the successful effort to construct the suicides as a crisis situation. In this instance, the law also politically benefited its sponsors, who were able to promote a social intervention by tying it to a politically conservative event, the Vietnam War. An employee of the school district, who helped draft the legislation, identified the teen suicides as an impetus for the law; she was looking for something that would instill pride in the community. She wanted Hmong children to be aware of their heritage and to see their parents as heroes (personal interviews). Her goal, stated in personal interviews and at the bill's signing, was "to improve the lives of Hmong children (Rodriguez 2003: B1). She and others, according to what we were told, thought the law would improve communication between traditional Hmong parents and their more Americanized children and help prevent further suicides.

In 2004, an additional mental-health service for Hmong teens and their parents was opened in Fresno. The counseling center's endeavors were, according to a news story, designed for "teens grappling with cultural and adolescent problems (Colon 2004: B1)." Parents were asked to participate, and translators were made available to facilitate discussions with a clinician. The stated goal of the staff was to prevent additional teen-Hmong suicides (Colon 2004).

The efforts of the suicide-prevention programs included, as a major component, speaking directly to parents of children, who had been identified as "at-risk." The Hmong mental health professionals sought to introduce counseling services and initiate parent-child discussions as preventive measures. Traditional "Hmong families," according to our subjects, "don't know how and they're not accustomed to using mental health services." Part of the goal of the sponsors of the programs was "to help the Hmong learn how to use the services (personal interview)." The program staff conducted workshops, with school and other public officials, on how to intervene and work with Hmong families. They taught workshop attendees to take the beliefs and values of the Hmong culture into consideration, in part as a means to ingratiate themselves with the more traditional Hmong.

### **Conclusion and Discussion**

The story of the construction of the Hmong teen suicides as a social problem illustrates the power of Best's (1999) "Iron Quadrangle." A few individuals--the father and the reporter, with the aid of the school district's superintendent and political leaders--were able to intersect and shape the portrayal of the suicides as a crisis requiring a strong response. They were able to frame the data to fit the story, despite the fact that the data did not always suit the preordained tale. They were aided by timing. At the federal level, the school district's grant application benefited from a legacy of attempts to end school violence, as well as the younger President

Bush's education policy of "no student left behind (personal interview)." But, the most likely factor that influenced the success of the Quadrangle was the fact the objects of the efforts, immigrant Hmong, were socially weak. Similar efforts aimed at defining wealthy white parents as needing treatment, because they push their children towards academic achievement, fail to become involved in their children's activities, and have difficulty communicating with their teenaged children, would have much less chance of attainment.

The success of the father and reporter in framing the story particularly highlight the importance of a weak subject group with respect to the establishment and handling of a social problem, as opposed to the strength of those seeking to have their definitions adopted. The immigrant father of a teenager who committed suicide and the education reporter for a local paper hardly seem in the position to have their definitions of the suicides accepted. Yet, they were able to define the situation, despite objections from many in the Hmong community (personal interviews). In hindsight, the inability of the traditional Hmong to successfully fight the stigmatization of their community was the result of their marginal status.

We have noted that suicide, from Durkheim's perspective, may in some instances be associated with the characteristics of immigrants. In this article we have turned the relationship between immigration and suicide somewhat on its head. We illustrate that the issue of suicide can be a point of opportunity for those seeking to increase a group's level of attachment to society. The media attention to the suicides alerted mainstream U.S. society to the existence of the Hmong community. The suicides elevated the community's struggles with acculturation into the public arena. The suicides were used to advocate for programs that would aid the Hmong with their acculturation into mainstream U.S. society. The housing of many of the programs in schools was not unusual; schools in the United States are the institution responsible for preparing

immigrant youth for their lives as adult members of the majority culture (Gibson 1987; Goldstein 1988).

The suicides raised the concern that schools were not able to meet Hmong children's needs because non-Hmong mental health specialists did not understand the culture. The grant from the United States Department of Education allowed the district to recruit Hmong mental health professionals, including counselors and psychologists. These professionals served as liaisons between the school district and the Hmong community. They coordinated culturally-sensitive preventive measures for Hmong families. Other programs followed.

Using the issue of the suicides as a focus, the programs addressed other concerns relating to academic achievement, parental involvement, personal relationships, and communication in the Hmong community. Hmong-speaking mental health specialists addressed coping mechanisms, parenting techniques, and how Hmong parents could assist their children. Hmong parents obliged the professionals in order to help their families and community.

The focus on the suicides provided an impetus to: enhanced communication between parents and the school district, implementation of prevention programs, collaboration with other Southeast Asian community groups to address mutual concerns, and facilitate more money being used to address the problems of the Hmong community. The movement to prevent Hmong teenage suicide also encouraged the children to interact with their parents, while also attempting to provide the youngsters with lessons about their cultural heritage in order to help portray their parents in a positive light.

In the end, the social actions that drew their breath from the string of Hmong suicides were more about facilitating the acculturation of the Hmong and obtaining services than they were about preventing suicide. The traditional Hmong had reportedly not been involved in their

children's lives outside the home. But the reality of the suicides provided the leverage to compel Hmong parents to listen to the message that acculturation was needed. Hmong parents needed to be informed. They needed to take a more active role in their children's lives. The program exposed Hmong parents, via Hmong liaisons, to available resources outside their immediate community. This encouraged their acculturation into mainstream U.S. society while providing them with professional resources to help them deal with various issues. This is not to say that all outcomes were positive.

The governmental efforts to identify Hmong youth, who were at risk for suicide, probably had unintended consequences. Teachers and counselors likely incorrectly identified many students as needing treatment. The officials were instructed on the special problems that Hmong youngsters faced with their parents. They were advised to look for signs that Hmong students were depressed. They were told that the youngsters had an increased likelihood of suicide. It would not be surprising that under such circumstances they would identify large numbers of youngsters as needing treatment. For one matter, the officials likely chose to err on the side of caution; that is, they selected Hmong youngsters for treatment because they figured it was better to unnecessarily treat someone than to allow another suicide. But, they also likely misidentified youngsters as needing treatment because the Hmong teens, in general, had been labeled as at-risk. There is research that suggests such a possible outcome (Rosenhan 1973). Similar labeling of the Hmong youngsters likely took place.

Occasional, normal depressed moments that occur among a substantial portion of the general population (Kessler and Walters 1998) probably landed some Hmong youngsters in the suicide prevention programs. Certainly the program cast a wide net; more than 200 youngsters were counseled the first year--nearly 400 between November 2001 and March 2003 (Colon

2004). The sessions likely resulted in some stigmatizing of the youngsters, although any negative effects were likely short-lived (Crisp et al 2000; Givens and Tjia 2002; Jorm 2000; Link et al. 1999; Loewenthal and Rogers 2004; Van Voorhees et al. 2005). At least in this regard, the reported Hmong community preference "to handle problems internally, to absorb and digest without drawing attention to negative incidence (Yoshino 1999: A1)," may have been superior.

There are numerous issues raised in the social construction of the Hmong teenage suicides, which we do not address or do not discuss in any detail, but may be fruitful areas for future consideration. For example, "right-to-die" legislation has been enacted in some states and ruled as Constitutional by the United States Supreme Court. The framing of the Hmong suicides never included discussion of a right to die. And discussions of right-to-die legislation do not highlight a lack of communication between suicidal elderly and their adult children or grandchildren. Exploration of such issues may help us to more fully understand social-political actions.

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