

**The Importance of Family for a Gay Hmong American Man:
Complicating Discourses of “Coming Out”**

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Abstract

This article draws on research with a gay Hmong young man to illustrate the ways in which coming out discourses fail to take into account the central importance of family and kinship for gay Hmong Americans. It draws on the narratives of a gay Hmong man that emphasizes the importance of family reputation and family bonds to offer an alternative discourse to coming out narratives. It advances understandings of gay identity and experiences by explicating the ways in which family and community are important for a gay Hmong American man. This research significantly contributes to the dearth of research on Asian American LGBT experiences in general and those of LGBT Hmong Americans in particular.

Keywords: Hmong, gay, coming out, family

The Importance of Family for a Gay Hmong American Man: Complicating Discourses of “Coming Out”

In the early morning of June 28, 1969 police raided Stonewall Inn and arrested patrons at the Greenwich Village bar who were dancing with same-sex partners (Carter, 2010; Duberman, 1994). Although raids on gay bars were routine at the time, this particular one sparked a spontaneous rebellion by the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) patrons. As word spread about the raid and riot, the bar patrons were joined by a large crowd from the local LGBT community. Spanning across six days, the demonstrations protested discrimination against the gay community and launched the gay rights movement (Carter, 2010). Since these riots, dominant discourses of the gay civil rights movement construct “coming out” as central to gay identity and liberation (Clendinen, 1999; Duberman, 1994; Humphreys, 1972; Seidman et al., 1999). The rallying cry of this pride-based identity politics was “Out of the closet, into the streets!” (Humphreys, 1972, p. xii).

Today, the emphasis on coming out within gay rights discourses is epitomized by annual events such as National Coming Out Day and pride marches that occur in cities throughout the world (Alsenas, 2006; Clendinen, 1999). For Asian American communities, annual events such as Pride and Heritage celebrate LGBT community members during Asian Pacific American Heritage Month each May (Bugg & O’Bryan, 2006). The rights and visibility of LGBT Asian Americans are increasingly supported by organizations such as the National Queer Asian Pacific Islander Alliance (NQAPIA).

Despite the importance of coming out discourses for the gay rights movement, dominant gay rights discourses cannot adequately explain the complexity of the experiences of LGBT Asian Americans. In particular, this article draws on research with a gay Hmong young man to

illustrate the ways in which coming out discourses fail to take into account the central importance of family and kinship for gay Hmong Americans. It advances understandings of gay identity and experiences by explicating the ways in which family and community are important for a gay Hmong American man. This research significantly contributes to the dearth of research on Asian American LGBT experiences in general and those of LGBT Hmong Americans in particular.

Background

Researchers of Asian and Asian American sexuality suggest that discourses of coming out and “being out and proud” encourage and propagate Western individualism and aggressiveness. Chou (2000) asserts that the “coming out” discourses of the gay rights movement are imbued with Western values and experiences that cannot be imposed on other cultural traditions. In a similar vein, Wang and colleagues (2009) state that the construction of coming out as a “normal” stage of gay identity development disregards the diversity of gay men that is reflective of diverse cultures and traditions. They particularly point out the ways in which “a discourse of coming out reflects Western individualistic conceptions of selfhood but fails to recognize the importance of relational selfhood, which is important in Chinese culture” (p. 287).

Other scholars point out that for Asian American immigrants, homosexuality is a “Western” behavior (Matteson, 1997; Varney, 2001) that even lacks explanatory vocabulary and traditions within some Asian groups (Author, 2011; Boulden, 2009; Varney, 2001).

Consequently, coming out to family may be exceptionally difficult, infused with the dangers of family rejection. As Augilar-San Juan (1998) cogently put it: “queer Asian Americans come out and go home only at the risk of great loss, sometimes terror, even death. Gestures toward home

and family seem both necessary and impossible: necessary for a sense of completion, impossible because family requires heteronormativity” (p. 38).

More specifically, Varney (2001) suggests that the dominant narrative of coming out that exists in mainstream LGBT communities is a “Western norm” that is defined as “a process where you have to automatically be proud, and be out to everyone” (p. 94). Problematically, coming out does not reflect the familial commitments and experiences of Asian and Asian American youth. In much the same way, Manalansan (2003) finds that for many Filipino gay men, coming out is viewed as a “particularly American idea and behavior” (p. 27) that is less meaningful in their everyday lives. Likewise, Tan (2001) shows that coming out is not a significant factor in the daily lives of Singaporean gay men as it is within White American gay rights discourses (p. 866).

By and large, researchers of Asian and Asian American LGBT experiences find that the focus of coming out discourses on individual identity and development fails to take into account the central importance of family social relations and expectations. For LGBT Asian and Asian Americans, duty to parents and family networks cannot be adequately addressed by discourses of coming out (Akerlund & Cheung 2000; Kimmel & Yi, 2004; Operario, 2008). For example, significant obligations of filial piety require children to marry and have children (Boulden, 2009; Operario, 2008; Shan, 2004; Wang et al., 2009; Yang, 2008; Zhou, 2006). Failure to fulfill these family obligations has serious consequences not only for the individual, but also for the whole family. As Aoki, Ngin, Mo, and Ja (1989) explain:

A person is not viewed as an individual but as a representative of his or her family.

Maintaining ‘face,’ the public persona, dignity, or self-esteem, is all-important. Loss of face has serious repercussions because it reflects negatively on the individual’s entire

family and community and not just on the individual. One maintains face by fulfilling culturally appropriate responsibilities and acting in accordance with norms with respect to one’s social role (p. 295).

From this perspective, each member of a family is not considered an individual who stands alone, but is a representative of the entire family. The actions and behaviors of the individual have consequences for the reputation or “face” of his or her family.

Yang’s (2008) research with LGBT Hmong Americans finds that participants felt that coming out or “being honest” about their sexual orientation amounted to disobeying parents and disregarding the family responsibilities they had as good children. She suggests that family reputation is critically important in this way: “while parents seemed to be reacting out of their own homophobia, there was also the realistic fear that the entire family could be rejected, creating a rippling effect within family structures and the community” (p. 101). Consequently, she finds that the parents of LGBT Hmong Americans hide or “closet” the sexual orientation of their children in order to protect the family reputation. In a similar vein, Boulden’s (2009) Hmong American participants believed that “they were going to have to give up being Hmong, or fearing that they would be rejected by the Hmong community if it was discovered that they were gay” (p. 18).

In order to protect the reputation of the family, Asian and Asian American LGBT tend to hide their same-sex attraction (Han, 2001) or make compromises for the sake of the family (Boulden, 2009; Shan, 2004; Zhou, 2006). Boulden (2009) reveals the pressures faced by gay Hmong American men to marry, have children, and protect the reputation of family and clan. Shan (2004) shows that a Taiwanese gay man fulfilled his family obligation by marrying a Vietnamese woman. Zhou (2006) notes that Chinese gay men marry but then divorce after their

first child as a way to navigate between family duties and individual desires. Wang and colleagues (2009) suggest that in Taiwan, “[i]n order to fulfill the obligation of filial piety, some parents insist that their gay son gets married” (p. 293). Other studies observe that many Asian and Asian American LGBT individuals are heterosexually married with children (Kimmel & Yi, 2004; Chou, 2000).

Further, because coming out may threaten family relationships (Chou, 2000; Tan, 2001; Varney, 2001; Yang, 2008), LGBT Asian ethnics negotiate sexual identity disclosures in different ways. Ground-breaking research by Chou (2000) finds that “going home” with partners may be more salient. In particular, gay men initially introduce their partners to families as “just a friend” and gradually reveal the significance of their relationship and earn family acceptance. This research suggests that given the importance of family social relations, the identity negotiations of LGBT Asian ethnics is less about an outward journey of self-realization and more about an inward journey that nurtures and maintains kinship ties.

In this article I seek to extend this research on LGBT Asian ethnics by spotlighting the narratives of a gay Hmong man that emphasizes the importance of family relationships. I ultimately suggest that the gay identity negotiations of a Hmong American man are more complex than binary discourses of individualism and collectivism.

Methods

In this article, I draw on a study with ten LGBT Hmong American young adults conducted during June 2006 to October 2008. This research was possible through years of work and engagement in the Hmong American community. This engagement helped me to identify the need for research on LGBT Hmong Americans. A small Hmong LGBT organization especially inspired this study, and helped me connect with participants through word of mouth. Data

collection for the case studies (Stake, 1995) included in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the participants.

The interviews took place in an agreed-upon location, such as an office or public location (e.g., library). The interviews focused on participants’ experiences as LGBT Hmong Americans, including the ways in which they navigated their sexual orientation growing up and coming out to friends and family. All of the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The interview transcripts were then coded, using NVIVO qualitative software designed for organizing qualitative data. Drawing on grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000), I coded the data using open and axial coding. The codes illuminated topics that were salient in the lives of the LGBT Hmong research participants. These topics became the themes for deeper content analysis and qualitative interpretation.

Following the tradition of qualitative research, this study does not seek to generalize from a large, random sample common in quantitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In designing the case study research, I viewed “the opportunity to learn is of primary importance” (Stake, 1995, p. 6). Illuminating the qualitative details and experiences of Hmong LGBT individuals is critically important, given the lack of research about the nuances and contexts on the experiences of LGBT Asian Americans in general and Hmong Americans in particular. By explicating the particular experiences of one gay Hmong American, this research offers a lens for understanding the experiences of LGBT Hmong Americans more generally (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

This article highlights research with one gay Hmong man whom I call Fong. I use pseudonyms for all names of people and places, and purposely withhold details as a way to protect privacy and confidentiality. Similar to other participants, Fong voluntarily wanted to share his experiences as a gay Hmong American because he wished to educate the Hmong

community and the larger public. In part, this stemmed from the lack of knowledge and loneliness he felt as a gay Hmong man without connections to other LGBT Hmong Americans. He shared his experiences with me in the hopes that his story would make a difference in the lives of other LGBT Hmong Americans.

As a researcher, I understand that my experiences, commitments, and worldviews are a part of my research design, data collection, analysis, and writing (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Fine, 1994). My research is especially influenced by my commitments to alleviate inequalities and advance social justice. As a Southeast Asian refugee who has worked extensively with Hmong American, Lao American and other refugee communities, I am particularly committed to illuminating the qualitative experiences of refugee children and families as a way to foster better knowledge, policies and practices to improve their lives. This article is informed by these commitments. Other researchers, working from different perspectives and commitments, would collect, analyze and interpret research findings in different ways (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

The Importance of Family

Research on Asian and Asian American LGBT experiences suggest that coming out discourses are grounded in an ethos of individualism that is central to American cultural beliefs and values. Discourses about American culture by Bellah and his colleagues (as cited in Conquerwood & Thao, 1989, p. 44) explicate the significance of individualism in this way:

Individualism lies at the very core of American culture We believe in the dignity, indeed the sacredness, of the individual. Anything that would violate our right to think for ourselves, judge for ourselves, make our own decisions, live our lives as we see fit, is not only morally wrong, it is sacrilegious.

According to this view of American values, the rights of the individual are paramount in conceptualizations of rights, morality, and the goodness of life.

This is reflected and celebrated in the American imagination through discourses of “pull yourself up by your bootstraps,” stories of self-made success (e.g., Abraham Lincoln, Horatio Alger), and folk heroes such as Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone. In this model of morality and achievement, the individual needs to stand alone and rely on the self. Berry (2008) suggests that in the same vein, discourses of coming out emphasize the self within the frame of an outward path of identity development and selfhood. Coming out requires the individual to symbolically and physically leave family conformity and the safety of the closet on a journey toward self-realization and fulfillment.

In contrast to the values embedded in discourses of American individualism, scholars of Hmong cosmology uphold social bonds and interconnections as essential to a good, complete life. Conquerwood and Thao (1989) cogently explain this perspective in this way:

For the Hmong, standing alone, outside the village, cut off from the clan, is unthinkable as a moral alternative. Movement away from a communal center represents the loss of everything that makes one a viable person. It is a fate associated with death. Ntsuag the orphan is a compelling figure in Hmong folktales because being alone without family is considered the greatest tragedy (p. 45).

Significantly, according to Conquerwood and Thao (1989), for a Hmong person, standing alone without family is intolerable, “a fate associated with death”. Put another way, family and kinship networks play an essential role in Hmong social, political and economic support systems that provide individuals with spiritual, emotional and physical sustenance (Chan, 1994; Dunnigan, 1982; Keown-Bomar, 2004; Koltyk, 1998; Xiong, 2000).

For example, Dunnigan (1982) notes that Hmong individuals “faced with problems that could result in serious conflict and/or the incurring of heavy expenses, the most dependable help comes from within the lineage” (p. 128). Likewise, Koltyk (1998) points out that the Hmong “lineage and clan system are involved in helping kin find employment, training, and housing, and assist in accumulating capital to buy cars, houses, and to pay for education. The wider network of clan affiliations is mobilized in times of crisis, or when moving, visiting, and traveling” (p. 42). Within the Hmong ideal of society, interdependence and cooperation are valued while individualism and competitive entrepreneurial actions are indicative of “[a] sick society” (Conquerwood & Thao, 1989, p. 44).

Against this backdrop of individualism versus collectivism, I illuminate the ways in which Fong negotiated his sexual orientation as a Hmong American enveloped within the interconnections of a Hmong family and community. I first explicate the importance of family reputation in Fong’s experiences. I then illustrate the complexity of Fong’s gay identity, as he accommodated the interests of his family while simultaneously maintaining a gay identity.

Family Reputation

In Fong’s experiences, coming out to his parents was not an intentional act. They found out by reading a newspaper article that he wrote about his experiences as a gay Hmong youth as a way to connect with other LGBT Hmong. As Fong put it, “When I wrote the article, I didn’t think about what’s coming my way. All I thought about was I felt like I’m the only one and I wanted to see who’s out there that feels the way I feel.” Similar to other research on LGBT Asian Americans (Boulden, 2009; Yang, 2008; Hom, 2000), Fong’s parents responded with disbelief and dismay. Their reactions especially stressed the ramifications of his sexual orientation for family and kinship networks.

According to Fong, his mother was concerned about the impact on his siblings and the general reputation of the family:

She said that it’s an embarrassment for me to write that. She said that by writing that no one’s gonna marry my brothers and my sisters. And they’re never gonna find a husband and a wife because everyone is gonna think that it’s a disease within the family. And if you marry their side of the family their kids are gonna have it, become like me.

Fong’s remarks about his mother’s response significantly points to fears that his sexuality may be perceived by the larger Hmong community as “a disease within the family” and thus negatively impact the marital outlook for his brothers and sister. This concern points to the ways in which a collectivist cultural ethos may encourage or require conformity to maintain harmony within the group (Aoki et al., 1989; Koltyk, 1998; Yang, 2008).

According to Xiong and his colleagues (2006), the close web of Hmong American interrelations and its implications for family problems may be contextualized in this way:

The Hmong immigrant community in the United States is close and cohesive. Although they reside in different neighborhoods and geographical locations, they share a similar ethnic space, a symbolic community that embodies Hmong from the rest of the other ethnic communities. In a shared ethnic space, news passes quickly from people to people via their frequent contacts through a wide range of social gatherings (i.e., from newborn ceremonies to New Year celebrations). Because they share the same ethnic space, concealing secret family problems inside the family is essential (Xiong et al., 2006, p. 237).

This perspective suggests that within the tight-knit Hmong community, actions of family members reverberate quickly throughout the community. As a result, concealing family secrets and problems becomes vital for maintaining the family’s public persona and esteem.

Hmong scholars often stress the vital importance of saving “face” as a way to maintain good standing and family reputation within the Hmong community. Loss of face has dire consequences, because it not only negatively affects the individual, but also his/her immediate family as well as the extended family (Yang, 2008; Xiong, 2000). Yang (2008) states: “The concept of ‘saving face’ is a common phenomenon in many collectivist cultures like Hmong. In traditional Hmong culture, this concept was used as a form of ensuring social conformity and control. This means that although people’s personal freedoms may be suppressed, the integrity of the group was preserved” (p. 101). In a similar vein, Xiong (2008) and his colleagues suggest that in the interconnected Hmong community, preserving the good reputation of the family by requiring children’s good behavior is imperative, because “a family that has a problem child (e.g., a child who has problems in school and/or engages in delinquent activities) tends to become a ‘headline’ during social gatherings” (pp. 11-12).

For Fong, family knowledge of his gay identity resulted in alienation at family gatherings. His male relatives especially distanced themselves from him:

They stopped calling me. One time I remember when I first came out I went to a family gathering, a big ceremony for one of my distant cousins, and my parents were there first. When I got there all the males sat and my dad actually got up and walked away. And I was like – ‘cause he saw me walk in the door and I walked upstairs and he was at the edge of it. He got up and walked away.

In addition to rebuff from his father, Fong was excluded from dinner with male members of the extended family. In the Hmong patrilineal social structure, men must eat meals first at family gatherings because the animals used in the meals are sacrificed to their ancestors (Lee, 1986; Symonds, 2005). Yet, Fong notes that his male relatives excluded him from this gender-specific custom: “Before I used to sit at the dinner table and talk to them ‘cause the males eat first and the females eat second. After that they don’t acknowledge me as a male anymore. They don’t call me to go eat with them.” Eventually, Fong stopped attending large family gatherings due to his estrangement.

Further, research suggests that maintaining “face” involves fulfilling certain gender role expectations such as marrying and bearing children to extend the patriline (Lee, 1986; Moua, 2003). Unmarried Hmong American men and women are considered burdens on their families and not full members of the community (Donnelly, 1994; Lee, 1986; Moua, 2003; Yang, 2008). Yang (2008) finds in her research with LGBT Hmong Americans that “parents were often worried about not only propagating their own familial lines, but more importantly, their children’s long-term well-being” (p. 103). Similarly, for Hmong American men such as Fong, his family was concerned about his ability to fulfill the family obligation to marry a woman and produce children and heirs to the patriline. According to Fong, before his family found out about his sexual orientation, they would ask, “Do you want to get married? Are you ready for marriage?”

This emphasis on marriage did not cease after they learned of his gay identity (cf., Operario, 2008; Wang et al., 2009). His parents and grandmother reminded him that if he does not marry and have children, he risked community disapproval and ridicule:

They’d say, “If you’re not married and you don’t have family and kids then you’re not a grownup. You’ll still be a kid. Once you have a wife and kids that’s when you’re fully matured. That’s when people look up at you and say, ‘Hey, you’re a grownup.’ But now you’re still a kid to us.”

Notably, as a gay man, Fong will fail to achieve the expectation that he marries a woman. In the Hmong community, this has consequences for perceptions about his “maturity” and personhood as an “adult” or a “child” (cf., Wang et al., 2009) that also reflects on the reputation of his parents and family.

While the importance of family reputation was salient in Fong’s experiences, he also suggests that maintaining “face” neglected his feelings and needs as an individual. As he talked about the focus on the family, he notes: “I think that they care so much about their family’s name and reputation that sometimes they would not – how should I put this – they’d rather care about that part more than their own kids.” This remark forcefully illustrates the tension between the interests of the family and interests of the individual. Fong’s gay identity poses a threat to the Hmong worldview of his parents that reveres community and group identity.

And yet, Fong eventually incorporated the group ethos espoused by his family into his gay identity. As the next section reveals, Fong did not choose to reject his family to venture off on a journey of self-fulfillment and self-reliance. Instead, he negotiated a gay identity that prioritized family and *simultaneously* fostered understanding and acceptance of his gay identity.

Choosing Family and Self

Within the context of the group ethos of the Hmong community, the individualistic nature of coming out discourses cannot adequately address the importance of maintaining relationships and sacrificing self-interest for the good of the group. As a gay Hmong man, Fong could not

simply walk away from his parents and family. Rather, given the relational nature of selfhood (Wang et al., 2009) embedded in the group ethos of the Hmong community, some LGBT Hmong Americans such as Fong accommodate the interests of family as a way to maintain family reputation and harmony. As Fong shared, staying close to his family was important because of his bond with his mother. Throughout his life, Fong was always close to his mother. From a young age his parents relied on him to take care of his siblings when they were away at work, since he was the oldest child. When he was older, he and his siblings played a significant role in helping their parents with their restaurant. As Fong made sense of his choice to repair and nurture family relations, he emphasized his love for his mother:

I love my mom very much and I think to myself that some Asian people think that when you die you're reincarnated to something else. And I think that maybe my mom can be my mom in this lifetime. What if there's no other lifetime? I don't want her to feel like I don't love her and all this stuff. I told my mom, "Mom, if you really want me to be straight I'll try to be straight to make you happy." And my mom said, "Can't you just please try to see if you can be straight?"

Thus, the bond between Fong and his mother was more important to Fong than being “out and proud” as a gay Hmong man. He chose to “try to be straight” as a way to show his mother he loves her in case “there's no other lifetime” to do so.

Notably, as Fong negotiated his relationship with his mother, he also made clear to her that although he will try to be straight, her request is comparable to him asking her to love another woman:

Me and my mom had that conversation and I was like, “Yeah, I'll try to be straight but I'm not gonna guarantee that I'll be straight. Because you telling me to be straight is like

me telling you to fall in love with a girl, a woman. Put yourself in my shoes and listen to what I have to say. Because if you don't understand where I'm coming from or try listening to what I'm trying to say to you, then we're never gonna find a solution to this problem.”

When Fong's mother asked him to “try to be straight” for the sake of the family, he also asked her to understand him and his sexual orientation. He asked his mother to put herself in his shoes and listen to his perspective. At the end of their conversation, Fong shares, “My mom said that for me to just do what she wants me to do to see if it'll work. And I actually did that.”

Fong's decision to comply with his mother's wishes for the sake of their relationship and family includes agreeing to participate in spiritual ceremonies led by Hmong shamans (Cha, 2003; Conquerwood & Thao, 1989; Lemoine, 1986). As Fong reports, one Hmong shaman made sense of his gay identity in this way: “He said that when I came to earth to be born my bridge was broken and they wanted my parents to go find . . . my dad's sister, which is my aunt, one of her jackets for me to wear so that I can be cured. They actually did that but it didn't work.” Altogether, his parents brought in shamans to the house for three separate healing ceremonies.

Significantly, the attempt of Fong's parents to make him “straight” is more than a simple rejection of his gay identity. Their actions stem from a desire to avoid community rejection and preserve social bonds and kinship networks (Keown-Bomar, 2004; Yang, 2008, Xiong, 2000). Fong recalls his father's request for secrecy in this way: “I remember when my dad and those shamans were talking it seemed like my dad told me not to tell anyone. My dad is like, ‘This is between us. Don't tell anyone that you're here to do this for my son and just keep it between us.’” More than simply homophobia, the need for secrecy is important, given the emphasis on

interrelations of the Hmong group ethos, and the very real possibility of loss of “face” and negative social repercussions for the family (Yang, 2008).

Writing about the resistance of Hmong Americans to disclose family problems, Xiong and colleagues (2006) explain:

[K]eeping family secrets from persons outside the nuclear family is part of the traditional collectivist orientation of Asian cultures in general and the Hmong in particular. In collectivist cultures, preserving face to maintain social harmony in a close-knit community is vital, given that losing face is directly linked to isolation and abandonment from the community (p. 237).

In the above, the explication of the serious consequences of loss of face with words such as “isolation” and “abandonment” highlights the importance of family reputation and social bonds for Hmong Americans. In a similar vein, Yang (2008) suggests in her research with LGBT Hmong Americans that “because of the importance of reputation in Hmong culture . . . parents themselves enter[ed] the “closet” with their children” (pp. 101-102).

According to Fong, attempts to make him “straight” were directly connected to considerations of the impact of his gay identity on the family:

I remember my grandma saying, “If [the Hmong community believes Fong is gay] he will ruin our family’s name and our family’s reputation. What am I gonna say to outside people or a distant cousin or relative when they ask me, “I heard that your grandson is gay.’ What am I gonna tell them?” But after that they cared so much about their names and reputation that they actually want me to fix it. They say, “If you marry a girl it’ll fix it.”

As Fong suggests, the central problem with his gay identity is its potential social consequences on the family’s reputation. In order to “fix” the damage to the family name that resulted from the newspaper article Fong wrote, his parents and grandmother asked him to marry a Hmong girl.

As Fong worked to maintain bonds with his family, he complied with the request that he marry while he simultaneously maintained his gay identity. Consider what Fong says about his mother’s request, relationship with his gay partner, and attempt to gain his mother’s understanding:

So my mom said, “Why don’t you get married? When you get married and you have babies things will change.” So almost a year after that I met my partner, and my partner and I, we have a pretty good relationship. During that time my mom wanted me to marry my aunt’s daughter in Laos. So I had to go over there and talk to her. Actually before I did that me and her talked on the phone. I actually agreed to do this for my mom’s sake and try to make her happy. Because like I said earlier, I don’t know if there’s a next lifetime. And this lifetime just cherish my parents, and try to be happy and try to work things out. I’m trying to work things out with her and have her understand that I’m gay at the same time.

When Fong met his wife-to-be, he told her, “This is who I am. I’m gay and the reason why I married you is because my mom thinks that by marrying you it can cure my so-called disease . . . I want to be straight up honest with you and I don’t want my parents to use you as a medicine to cure me ‘cause that’s not how it works.” After Fong revealed he agreed to marry for the sake of his parents’ reputation and happiness, she agreed to the surface-level marital arrangement. At the time of the interview, they had been married for two years and according to Fong, were “like best friends, brother and sister.”

In the context of Fong’s Hmong family and community, his obligation to uphold the family name and the importance of relationships provide an important lens for understanding the complex negotiations of disclosures of same-sex attraction that moves beyond dominant coming out discourses. From this perspective, family reputation and relationships must be viewed as paramount. Fong concedes to his parents’ wishes to marry because he wants to “cherish” them and make them happy. Marrying a girl allowed him to maintain the good standing of his family as well as his close relationship with his parents (Operario, 2008; Shan, 2004; Wang et al., 2009; Zhou, 2006).

Yet, Fong’s accommodation of his family’s wishes did not mean he chose his family over his gay identity. Fong’s experiences complicate the emphasis on binary oppositions such as individual/family of gay identity. Specifically, he was able to keep the lines of communication with his parents open, which allowed him to provide them with a better understanding of the LGBT community. Consider Fong’s remarks:

I just care a lot about the LGBT community. What it’s like being gay, what it’s like being lesbian, bisexual, transgender. And I bring that up to my parents every single time I’m with them. I say, “Hey, I met this guy and he’s so nice” and what’s his name and all that stuff. I bring up the subject as much as possible so they’ll get used to or try to understand what gay is and what the rest of LGBT is I had to tell [my boyfriend] I’m doing this because of my parents and he has to understand that fact that my parents were never exposed to this issue and I have to ask them where they’re coming from too. I can’t just expect them to understand where I’m coming from. I have to listen to them and put myself in their shoes and have them put themselves in my shoes. If we don’t do enough

communication like that then I don’t know how things would be right now, the relationship between me and my parents, if I had just walked away that one night.

Fong’s explication of the ways in which he negotiated family obligation and gay identity is grounded in a desire to nurture mutual respect and understanding. He recognizes that his “parents were never exposed to this issue [of same-sex attraction]” (cf., Varney, 2001; Hom, 2000). Thus, Fong acknowledges, “I have to listen to them and put myself in their shoes and have them put themselves in my shoes.” Fong especially stresses the importance of communication as a way to maintain relationships and foster understanding. From his perspective, this is a better alternative to “walking away” from his parents.

This consideration of both individual and family interests is also reflected in Fong’s view on coming out. He shares that after he wrote the article about his life as a gay Hmong man, he received multiple e-mails from Hmong LGBT individuals from across the U.S. as well as France and Australia. When asked about approaches to coming out, Fong advises other Hmong LGBT individuals to consider the impact on family and relationships:

I actually had a lady from France saying that she’s married with five kids and all her life she’s attracted to the same sex. What should she do? I was like, “Don’t take my advice. I’ll let you know what I think. Do what’s best for you, your family and kids, your side of the family and his side of the family. Really think about that ‘cause if you break up with your husband, what’s gonna happen to the kids? Think about all the parts before you make a decision.”

In this comment Fong suggests that coming out cannot be an act to attain individual fulfillment and freedom. For Fong, revelations of LGBT identity must take into account the consequences of

the disclosure on relationships. Rather than an act that involves one person, coming out has implications for the individual in relation to “all the parts” of family and kinship.

Further and significantly, although Fong chose to protect the interests of his family by marrying to maintain “face”, he was also able to develop a strong relationship with a boyfriend (Chou, 2000). As he notes above, he was dating his partner for nearly a year before he married. Fong’s marriage helped him gain his parents acceptance of his gay identity as well as acceptance of his same-sex partner. He explained the harmony in this way: “So now they’re accepting me and they’re accepting [of my partner] and they’re learning a lot about the gay community and what gay is and what lesbian is and all that stuff.” At the time of our interview, Fong’s relationship with his partner was 5-years strong. Although it took communication, negotiation, and persistence, Fong was able to nurture his gay identity alongside his group identity as a Hmong American.

Conclusion

The contexts of Fong’s experiences as a gay Hmong American highlights the need to complicate “out and proud” discourses that privilege individualism do not adequately consider the importance of kinship and collective identity for the Hmong community. Coming out discourses assume that disclosures of same-sex attraction allows the individual to attain self-realization and selfhood. As a Hmong American, Fong’s identity is interconnected with the group identity of his family and clan (Keown-Bomar, 2004; Koltyk, 1998). Disclosure of his same-sex attraction has rippling implications not only for Fong, but members of his immediate as well as extended family (Yang, 2008). Coming out discourses need to consider the emphasis on family reputation and “saving face” in the Hmong community.

In addition, while coming out within the White American community often involves leaving the biological family and connecting with the gay family (Berry, 2008), for Hmong Americans such as Fong, walking away from the family is an unbearable option. Hmong family and kinship networks provide individuals with physical and emotional support (Keown-Bomar, 2004; Koltyk, 1998) that contribute to a sense of completeness. It is worth repeating that within Hmong cosmology, “being alone without family is considered the greatest tragedy” and “a fate associated with death” (Conquerwood & Thao, 1989, p. 45). For Fong, family survival strategies where he took care of his siblings and helped his parents with the family restaurant especially strengthened family bonds. His love for his parents and family was critical in his decision to repair the family name and his relationship with his parents by marrying a young woman.

Moreover, it is critical to emphasize that in Fong’s experiences, it was not a matter of choosing between binary discourses of the individual *or* group. Fong did not discard his identity as a gay man to fulfill his family obligations. By maintaining family relationships, Fong was able to foster understanding for his same-sex attraction and integrate his gay identity with responsibilities to his family (Berry, 2008). As we saw, Fong asserts that his family and wife “accept” his same-sex partner. Thus, while dominant coming out narratives underscore family rejection (especially in non-White communities), Fong’s experiences suggest that gay identity and family acceptance are not mutually exclusive. This was possible because Fong resisted walking away from his family and persistently communicated with parents and family members about his gay identity and commitments to the LGBT community.

Writing about her decision to conceal her identity as a lesbian from college peers, Akanke (1994) remarks on the importance of race in her decision:

Being “closeted” is not a choice I wish to make. Nevertheless, because of the pervasiveness of racism, it is one that I choose to make. Being Black, however, is not a choice. As a Black woman my color is my most obvious feature, not my sexual preferences. (p. 102)

As Akanke explains the significance of race, she further argues that coming out would compromise her relationships with her Black community. As a Black woman, Akanke asserts that the support of her community “far outweighs any desire to openly assert my sexuality” (p. 113).

In a similar vein, my research suggests that for Hmong Americans such as Fong, negotiating a gay identity that enables connections to family and community is vitally more important than being out of the closet. My illumination of Fong’s gay identity negotiations underscores the need to understand disclosures of same-sex attraction at the intersection of race, ethnicity and gender. Research on LGBT Hmong Americans particularly needs to explore questions such as: How do Hmong Americans navigate LGBT identity and the maintenance of close family ties? How do Hmong Americans integrate LGBT identity and family roles and expectations? How are Hmong American families accommodating and embracing LGBT family members? These ways forward are critical for advancing research beyond a singular focus on the value of individual attainment that dominates the current popular imagination and academic knowledge base.

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