

**Negotiating Two Cultures: Hmong American College Women's
Experiences of Being a Daughter**

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Abstract

Phenomenological analysis was used to explore 14 Hmong American college women's perceptions of their relationships with their parents. Participants perceived they had become more psychologically close to their parents as well as becoming more independent from them. Participants also identified an important developmental task for them at this stage of their lives which was to balance two cultures, their culture of origin and U.S. culture. Implications for counselors are discussed.

Keywords: Hmong college women, independence, closeness, identity, role

Introduction

After the Vietnam War ended in 1975, the Hmong immigrated to the U. S. as refugees. They are considered newer Asian immigrants whose experience of migration is quite different from groups who voluntarily immigrate (Rumbaut, 2006; C. Y. Vang, 2004). Prior to being displaced by the war, the Hmong in Laos were agrarian people who were geographically and culturally isolated from the outside world (Donnelly, 1994; Faderman, 1998; Hamilton-Merritt, 1993; Lamborn & Moua, 2008).

The largest Hmong population resides in the state of California, followed by Minnesota and Wisconsin (Moua & Lamborn, 2010; Pfeifer & Lee, 2004). With a relatively high fertility rate compared to other ethnic groups, the Hmong American population is quickly increasing (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The U.S. Hmong American population growth rate was 175% between 1990 and 2010 (Pfeifer, Sullivan, Yang, & Yang, 2012). Hmong Americans are relatively young. Their median age is 20.4 compared to 37.2 in the total American population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Many Hmong American families do not speak English at home. It has been estimated that 88.7% of the Hmong American population older than 5 years speak Hmong at home compared to 22.6% of the total U.S. population who speak a language other than English at home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The Hmong rank as one of the poorest U.S. immigrant groups; about 27.3% live under the poverty line compared to 11.2% of the total U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Although the percentage of Asian Americans who earn a bachelor's degree is about 50%, only 14.4% of Hmong Americans have reached that level of education. This compares to 28.2% of the total U.S. population who has a bachelor's degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

The Hmong exhibit unique cultural norms that have been influenced by their historic, geographic, economic, and political contexts. Culture is defined by both explicit and implicit patterns of living which are transferred over time via symbols and interactions (Kluckhohn & Kelly, 1945; Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952). It must be noted that discussions of culture are typically described in generalizations at specific points in time. They do not reflect the heterogeneity within cultural groups nor the changes that occur over time and space.

We begin by describing traditional Hmong culture to illuminate a general sense of the culture-informed family relationship context in which participants in our study have been socialized into roles. A general understanding of these traditional cultural norms is necessary to understand the tensions that the young college women in our study experience as they mature and adapt to dominant U.S. culture.

Generally, Hmong social relationships are built on the patrilineal family. Gender hierarchy is emphasized; men are the main decision-makers and women are in charge of domestic chores (Donnelly, 1994; Faderman, 1998). Historically, the Hmong practiced early marriage; the typical age of marriage was around 15 for girls (Donnelly, 1994; Lee, Xiong & Yuen, 2006; McNall, Dunnigan, & Mortimer, 1994). Until the most recent decade, early marriage for Hmong women was still being practiced by many families in the United States (Lee et al., 2006; Ngo, 2002; C. T. Vang, 2004).

Hmong American parents consider education an effective tool to achieve success in the host culture so they encourage their children to complete high school and go to college (Moua & Lamborn, 2010). However, most Hmong families also underscore the importance of ethnic community and family ties and expect their children to carry family responsibilities (Moua & Lamborn, 2010; Tatman, 2004). Oftentimes it means that the wellbeing of the family and community is given more weight than individual wants or needs (Tatman, 2004).

Scholars have found that parent-child conflict exists within contemporary U.S. Hmong immigrant families (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Vang, 1999; Xiong, Detzner, & Cleveland, 2004-2005; Xiong, Rettig, & Tuicomepee, 2008). One area in which conflict can occur is gender roles. Elders attempt to retain traditional Hmong gender hierarchies (Donnelly, 1994; Faderman, 1998), which creates conflict for Hmong American girls who are caught between traditional Hmong culture and mainstream U.S. culture gender ideologies. The intergenerational clash is especially noteworthy when female adolescents desire more autonomy in their social life during their transition to adulthood (Rumbaut, 2000; Vang, 1999). This conflict is further exacerbated by the increase in Hmong women pursuing higher education and careers outside the home rather than following a traditional path of homemaking and motherhood (C. T. Vang, 2004; Pfeifer, 2008; Xiong & Lee, 2011). As a result, contemporary Hmong families are required to negotiate and integrate traditional beliefs with mainstream U.S. cultural values.

Hmong American college women face unique developmental tasks which are embedded in their unique historical, cultural, and socioeconomic contexts. Because teen marriage remains common in the Hmong community and remains a significant challenge to educational achievement (Lee, 1997; McNall, et al., 1994; Ngo, 2002; Vang, 1999; C. T. Vang, 2004), redefining gender roles including opting out of early marriage and pursuing higher education and careers is something that Hmong American young women must negotiate and resolve (Julian, 2004; Lee, 1997; McNall et al., 1994; Ngo, 2002). Traditional gender role expectations are still prevalent in many Hmong families, meaning that daughters are often expected to carry more domestic responsibilities than sons (Lamborn & Moua, 2008; Moua & Lamborn, 2010; C. T. Vang, 2004). Although the literature documents the aforementioned challenges in the lives of young Hmong American women, little is known about their relationships with their parents as they transition into adulthood. Moreover, studies that focus on parent-child relationships during the transition to adulthood rarely explore the cultural underpinnings of this important transition.

Significance of the Study

Most college-going students are in a developmental stage characterized by life markers including leaving their childhood home, pursuing higher education, and preparing for a career and marriage (Galambos & Kotylak, 2012). For American young adults in college, the achievement of balance between autonomy or independence from, and closeness or connectedness to parents is a vital part in the college student's life adjustment (e.g., Campbell, Adams, & Dobson, 1984; Frank, Pirsch, & Wright, 1990). However, the meanings of independence and closeness are experienced differently for people from different cultures (Chung, 2001; Lee & Liu, 2001; Ong, Phinney, & Dennis, 2006). For instance, first-generation college students and ethnic minority students from societies described as being more collectivist can have different experiences of independence from/connectedness to parents than students who have been socialized in a society that has been described as more individualistic (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005; Ishitani, 2003 & 2006; Ong et al., 2006).

The college-going stage is conceptualized as “emerging adulthood” (Arnett, 1998 & 2000) which is characterized by three primary developmental milestones including considering future occupation, seeking the right love partner, and developing one’s own values (Arnett, 2000). Emerging adults are forming their own identities as they achieve these milestones.

Identity work in immigrant young adults is complex as they negotiate multiple identities including American identity, ethnic identity (Ong et al., 2006; Phinney, 1992), and first-generation college student identity (Ishitani, 2003 & 2006; Orbe, 2000 & 2004; Yeh, 2004). Further, there is evidence that female college students’ identity work is even more complex and dynamic for children from patriarchal cultures of origin (Maramba, 2008). Although it has been suggested that immigrant adolescent girls desire more autonomy in their social life (Rumbaut, 2000), ethnic minority or immigrant college women’s experiences of their relationships with their parents are rarely explored.

At the intersection of gender and ethnicity, Hmong women college students’ experiences are rarely examined, even though the rate of Hmong women who enroll in college and above has reached 28.7% (U.S. Census, 2010). Perhaps it is because going to college is still a very recent trend for Hmong women whose family cultures support more traditional gender roles (Lee, 1997; Yeh, 2004). Although a few studies have explored the factors impeding Hmong women’s pursuit of higher education (Lee, 1997; Ngo, 2002), the literature is scarce. No studies have focused on parent-child relationships of Hmong college women. To address this gap in the literature, this qualitative study aimed to understand 14 Hmong American college women’s perception of their relationships with parents. It specifically focused on exploring how these participants navigated the balance between independence and closeness as well as their perceptions of how their roles and identity were developed through interactions with their parents.

Method

Participants

Recruitment procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the university associated with the authors. The sample included 14 participants, 3 Hmong American women in their junior year and 11 in their senior year, enrolled at 6 four-year postsecondary educational institutions in a large Midwestern metropolitan area. All of the participants were born in the United States. Their parents had all been born in Laos, and most (about $\frac{3}{4}$) had not pursued a college education. All participants in this study came from two-parent families; the number of children in their families ranged from 3 to 9 (Mean = 6.21). Six participants lived at home and commuted to college. The remaining eight participants lived away from home.

Procedure

Face-to-face interviews were conducted in English. Interviews- lasted between 75 and 120 minutes. Consent was obtained prior to the beginning of the interview. Demographic information was collected (e.g., age, birth country, birth order, living arrangement, religion, parents’ information including birth country, education level, English proficiency and religion). Interview questions were open and expansive for the participants to recount in depth (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Sample questions included: How close do you feel to your parents? How were your decisions made in some life areas (e.g., major/future career, living status,

dating/courtship)? What family responsibilities do you have while you're in college? What does it mean for you to be a daughter who has both Hmong and American cultural influences? Follow-up questions and additional prompts were used to seek clarity or to obtain further information. All interviews were audio recorded. Participants were compensated \$20 for participating.

Data Analysis

Giorgi's phenomenological method (1985) was employed to analyze verbatim interview transcripts. First, the entire transcript was read to get a general sense of the whole. Second, the text was broken into manageable meaning units. Third, participants' expressions were transformed into thematic meaning units with an emphasis on their experiences of being independent from as well as being connected/close to parents and their perceptions of role and identity. Last, insights from the transformed meaning units across participants were synthesized into a coherent description of the phenomenon, as suggested in the method (Giorgi, 1985). The themes generated and a statement of the phenomenon are presented in the results section.

To assure the trustworthiness of the findings, special attention was paid to data verification. If there was confusion about a participant's response, she was contacted to clarify or to gain additional information. The first draft of the results was then sent to each participant with a request to verify the analysis and quotes for accuracy. Twelve participants responded that the analysis and quotes were accurate. Pseudonyms are used to protect the participants' confidentiality.

Results

Descriptions of the lives of Hmong college women revealed three primary themes: 1) I am more independent, 2) I am closer to my parents, and 3) I am struggling to find a balance. Each primary theme was associated with specific domains in which they experienced more independence or autonomy, experienced more closeness or connection to their parents, and were struggling to find a balance. Lastly, the statement of the phenomenon describes how they are achieving integration of Hmong-ness and American-ness in their role as daughters in most areas of their life.

Theme 1: I Am More Independent

This theme revealed that participants had gained more independence from their parents since they entered college. The domains associated with their perception of independence included: decision making about education related or career choices, living on her own, financial independence, ideology differentiation, social independence, assuming parenting roles, reduction of familial role expectations and responsibility, and remaining single. When it came to achieving educational goals, most participants expressed their awareness of their parents' expectation of them (e.g., be a role model to younger siblings, get a decent career). However, they were able to make their own decision about school choice or major options eventually. Nou recounted:

When it comes to education then they're always like, "Ok, if this benefits your education then go." But then my dad really wanted me to become a doctor, but I'm a sociology

major so it took a lot of like, I guess, forcing them to understand what sociology is and what I'm gonna do with that.

The majority of participants in the present study attended college in their home towns. In most cases, their parents did not rely on them so much to do household chores, either because the family adjusted to their absence or their parents wanted them to focus more on school work than housework. Nou reflected that during high school, she helped her younger siblings with school needs, but leaving for college allowed her to be herself. The tendency of being reduced in familial role expectations and responsibilities happened to a few participants and made them psychologically separate from their family. Several women compared themselves with other female Hmong peers who entered the marriage at a young age. They felt good about their choices to remain single. For example, Xia said that being single allowed her to figure out who she was and focus on pursuing what she wanted. Nou expressed her confidence in making the right choice for education instead of marriage:

And I just kind of feel like: most Hmong daughters they tend to just escape things by turning to marriage; you know, escape their life by getting married at a young age, even some in the United States. And I always feel like that's not an option, that I have to overcome this in order to be who I am today so.

Theme 2: I Am Closer to My Parents

There are several interrelated domains that represent participants' experiences of becoming psychologically closer to their parents: developing psychological bonds, building more understanding, becoming more open in communication, relying on parents' financial or emotional support, valuing what their parents' value, and accepting some familial role expectations. Participants also remarked how they had become more connected with their mother culture than in previous years. Many identified both academic and personal experiences in college that had provided opportunities for them to reconsider and reevaluate their mother culture or reconnect with their Hmong identity. Participants often described that shared values of family and education, or identities grounded in Hmong culture had drawn them closer to their parents. For many participants, they associated being Hmong with the love of family and they credited their parents for instilling this value in them. Lias, for example, described:

I think for Hmong people to come back home and be with their family is so nice and so refreshing and it's not something that the American culture has now, it's family like a union of families and like being centralized in your family.

Closeness to parents also increased when college-aged daughters in this study developed more empathy for their parents' backgrounds, struggles, and sacrifices prior to and after the immigration. Acknowledging the impact of refugee experiences on their parents' worldviews allowed them to be more tolerant and respectful of their parents' opinions and needs. Yi noted: "I think about how they were raised so differently from me and I wanna respect their choices and, and their decisions."

Theme 3: I Am Struggling to Balance

The lives of the 14 Hmong college-age women in this study revealed areas that challenged or confused them. They questioned their value or fit in their families and communities, noting three specific identity challenges: parents' excessive emphasis on the "good daughter-in-law" image, parents' son-favoritism, and participants' own ambivalence about role expectations.

"Good daughter-in-law" image. These American-raised Hmong women clashed with their parents when they were required to act, speak, and look like an ideal traditional Hmong woman. Some participants perceived that a "good daughter-in-law" image was emphasized to such an extreme that they felt their well-being was not taken into consideration. For example, Mai Tong remembered her mom reminding her that performing home responsibilities well would please her future in-laws. She described this pressure:

She's (Mom) like: "If you don't do it, you know you'll never know how to be a daughter-in-law...you'll never be a good daughter-in-law and your mother-in-law will just send you back to us." ...But it's so different in America. I feel that I don't wanna fit that box anymore...

Participants also addressed their struggle to find balance between parents' expectations and personal goals in the regard of social life. For example, Nou recounted an episode when she just wanted to go out to help her friend take photographs and her parents misunderstood her. She said:

They automatically assume that "Oh, you're gonna like drink and party." And so my mom is like: "No, you can't go cuz it's gonna reflect on your parents. You know, your reputation." And it's just like reputation, reputation. And then there's just a clear misunderstanding because I told my parents like: "how come you guys are not allowing me to go because you think that whatever I do is gonna affect you guys? But it's nothing bad. How's it gonna affect you guys?"

Maiv's father's strict rules about dating constrained her relationship with him. Frustration or tension with parents was especially evident when some participants perceived that parents' restrictions on social life or dating were imposed on them but not on their brothers. Houa's parents allowed her brothers to go out with their girlfriends but did not let her to do so with her male friends.

Son-favoritism. A few felt marginalized in their family and community just because they were women. They felt they were not valued as much as their brothers. Shoua linked the tense relationship with her dad to his son-preference. She described an episode when her elderly father was hospitalized: "So then when he was sick I would go visit him and he'd be like 'I don't wanna see you, I only wanna see my sons.'" Mai Tong described how her parents ignored her:

When we go to family gatherings I'm not introduced. And so I'm like: "Wait, mom how come I'm not introduced to this uncle, this auntie?" ...And my mom's like: "Oh well, he knows your brother." But I'm like: "What I mean like he doesn't know me, but I want to

know him you know.” ...My dad too,... my dad will be like: “Oh yeah, this is my son, this is this and that...” And so I feel like we don't share the value of introducing your children equally to their relatives (laughs). And so sometimes I feel like I don't even exist in my family, in my larger Hmong clan.

Ambivalence about role expectations. The challenge of negotiating role expectations was apparent when they talked about dating and future marriage. Several participants mentioned that their parents discouraged them from dating in order to focus on education. Besides, a few of them described how their parents associated their dating someone out of their ethnic group with the reputation concern. Most participants were aware of their parents' expectations that they marry a Hmong man to perpetuate Hmong identity. Yet, some participants mentioned they had been or were dating non-Hmong men. Following parents' expectations or her own desire posed a tension for them. Nou described this dilemma:

If I go with what they want, what if in the long run things don't work out and I'm not happy? And if I go with what I want then what if things don't work out, then they're gonna be like: “Oh I told you so,” you know. So in a way it's kind of like: I don't know. It's just really hard to find a distinct medium.

Statement of the Phenomenon

A good daughter for these Hmong-American college women was to be successful in achieving a post-secondary education that would lead to a decent career while simultaneously preserving their Hmong-cultural legacy. All participants in this study all felt privileged to have the opportunity to develop into educated women. However, they were trying to negotiate their identities and roles while balancing two cultures – Hmong and American. They were pushing the boundaries of traditional Hmong culture by expanding notions of what it meant to be a good daughter to include being an honorable successful, educated woman. In doing so, they honored their parents' expectations while incorporating their own goals and dreams of being a successfully professional woman.

Discussion

Hmong women's narratives confirmed that they were making similar academic major and career decisions as do many young adults (Arnett, 2000; Marcia, 1966; Toder & Marcia, 1973). However, their descriptions revealed the complexity of those decisions in light of familial, cultural, and socio-economic contexts. For example, first-generation Hmong immigrant parents did not have experience in or knowledge about either the U.S. educational system or career options open to these young women. Therefore, these students had substantial autonomy in choosing their major, but they also considered their parents' expectations.

The development of romantic relationships has been identified as a vital task in a typical young adult's identity-forming process (Arnett, 2000). However, the literature suggests that the emerging adult phase of development allows young adults to delay taking on adult roles when they postpone marriage and parenthood (Arnett, 1998 & 2000; Cohen, Kasen, Chen, Hartmark, & Gordon, 2003). The assumption is that taking on adult roles is intricately connected to marriage and parenthood. This does not neatly apply to many of the Hmong college women in

this study who have been prepared for adult roles, specifically the responsibilities of wife and mother, since a young age.

Findings from the present study suggest a slight deviation from assertions made by Portes and Rumbaut (2001) who suggested that "acculturation weakens these family values and leads toward more individual-centered orientations" (p.202). It is suggested that due to perceptions that their parents are restrictive, most likely perceived as such due to exposure to observing fewer restrictions on girls from the dominant culture, daughters of immigrant parents are more likely than sons to experience conflictive relationships with their parents resulting in daughters' growing desire for independence in their transition to adulthood (Rumbaut, 2000). Like many studies on immigrant families with children born or raised in the U.S. (Chung, 2001; Lee & Liu, 2001; Lee, Jung, Su, Tran, & Bahrassa, 2009; Su, Lee, & Vang, 2005), the majority of participants in this study noted the acculturation gap between their parents and themselves. Nonetheless, they expressed more understanding of the perceived restrictive parenting practice than when they were younger. The parents' seemingly excessive emphasis on reputation or images of good-daughter/daughter-in-law rather than on their daughters' well-being was still constraining optimal parent-child relationships.

Limitations and Implications

The qualitative design of the present study allowed for rich data that described Hmong college women's experiences of parent-child relationships. However as expected, generalizability is not possible. The sample was unique: single Hmong college women who attended four-year postsecondary educational institutions. They are not representative of Hmong young adults in general and may not even represent college students who are married or who attend two-year colleges. Additionally, all but one participant went to college in the same state as their parental home, which was within three hours' driving distance; more than half attended a school in the same metropolitan area. Their experiences may not represent those who leave home for an out-of-state college experience.

Another unique sample feature is that all of their parents were alive and still married. Most participants did not have extended family members living in their parental home at the time of the interviews. Moreover, most of the participants' parents had not gone to college. Therefore, their experiences may not reflect a different group of women whose parents are highly educated, deceased or divorced/separated, or who live in a three-generation home.

In spite of these limitations, the present study revealed a beginning glimpse into Hmong American college women's lived experiences of negotiating cultures and identities as they interacted with their parents, a phenomenon currently not addressed in existing research literature. Overall, emerging adults' experiences of acculturation and the impact on family and community roles are under-studied. As increasing numbers of young adults residing in immigrant families choose to pursue higher education and advanced degrees, future research is needed to better understand the strengths they bring to this process as well as the challenges they may face along the way.

This study begins to illuminate the phenomenon of identity development and role integration across cultures. Although it would go beyond the scope of this study to make specific

practice recommendations, the findings highlight important areas for consideration by educators and human service professionals who interact with women at this stage of their lives. The current study suggests that awareness of the tensions between independence from and connectedness to their parents is important. Because this tension between immigrant parents and their American-raised young adult children can be subtle, counselors and educators must consider how they can take the time needed to develop trust and create a safe space for these young adults to disclose these issues, particularly in situations related to dating and marriage.

Our participants' experiences suggest that even in the midst of tension, respect for elders' perspectives is valued. Additionally, pride in their root culture continues as they embrace their host culture. Truly it is not an either/or choice, but a negotiating process to integrate both cultural perspectives. Developing the ability to cognitively, emotionally, behaviorally shift between cultures and communities is an important task at this emerging adulthood phase of life.

Young adult college women might greatly benefit by the opportunity to be mentored by older women in their communities who have found ways to effectively integrate both cultures. Additionally, it might be helpful to explore ways to honor cultural traditions and values, adjust for the present, and shape the future for these emerging adults. For example, the community might explore how parenting practices and gender roles expectations differ and are changing in Hmong families and how they affect young Hmong women growing up in America.

Given the vital role that family relationships play in Hmong American college women's daily lives, it is important that postsecondary educational institutions recognize that these students are negotiating two worlds. In order to facilitate the development of these young women from under-studied populations, culture should not be treated as a static frame of reference (Lee, 1997; Ngo, 2002).

Conclusion

The current study expanded ideas about emerging adult women's developmental process by exploring how culture impacts the processes of identity formation and role negotiation. It was evident in participants' narratives that they were actively negotiating two sets of cultural role expectations and identities in their interactions with parents.

These Hmong American college women's narratives of their lived experiences revealed that their relationships with parents were quite dynamic, intertwining varying cultural perceptions of independence and closeness. It was clear that the women in this study were actively negotiating their roles and identities in the context of two cultures. They revealed both agency in those processes as well as the tension that is imbedded within them. Although this was not an easy task for them, they demonstrated remarkable resilience; their struggles will undoubtedly provide important examples for the next cohort of Hmong women college students.

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