

The self-rated social well-being of Hmong college students in Northern California

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Abstract

This paper discusses the self-rated social well-being of a small sample of Hmong college students in Northern California. Social well-being is defined as the state of social and cultural adaptive functioning, and includes such concepts as feeling prosperous, being healthy, and being happy. Fifty Hmong college students between the ages of 18 to 30 who either left Southeast Asia as children or were born in the United States participated in the study. Overall, 41% said that the future looks bright for them and 72% said that their living standard would be better off five years from now.

Introduction

The purpose of gathering these data was to collect relevant information from Hmong college students in Northern California so that a baseline could be established to assess their future state of social well-being. In the long run, increasing the social well-being of Hmong young adults would likely lead to greater levels of college attainment among this population.

The paper begins with a brief introduction to the Hmong and then a review of the existing literature related to acculturation issues among Hmong Americans. In the Methods section, the setting for the study is described and information about how the data were collected and analyzed is provided. In the Results section, the findings are reported.

Literature Review

Thirty-two years after their arrival in the United States, studies of the Hmong and other Southeast Asians have focused on their problems of mental illness and acculturation

and adjustment difficulties. This research project seeks to validate some of those findings by targeting a subgroup of the population - Hmong university students. For this paper, the state of social well-being is broadly defined to refer to young Hmong American adults' state of social and cultural adaptive functioning at the present time. The state of social well-being involves concepts such as feeling prosperous, being healthy, being happy, and the students' predictions of their living conditions five years from now.

In 2000, the U.S Census Bureau reported the Hmong population to be 186,310 (Hmong Cultural Center and Hmong National Development, 2004); in 2005, the Census Bureau's American Community Survey puts the Hmong figure at 188,900 (Pfeifer at http://hmongstudies.org/hmong_profile.pdf). However, Hmong community activists as well as scholars disagree with the census figures. They believe that since most Hmong Americans came from Laos, some may retain their Laotian identity while others may have adopted new identities. In addition, some Hmong families are continuing the tradition of having a moderate to large family size; therefore, it has been estimated that the Hmong American population has actually doubled in the last 32 years. One community-derived estimate put the total Hmong American population at 283,239 in 2000 (Hmong Cultural Center and Hmong National Development, Inc., 2004).

As soon as they arrived, Hmong refugees took advantage of the social, economic, and educational opportunities that America makes available to refugees and immigrants quite seriously. A common phraseology at the time was "txiv faj khaum tab tom txi-a fruitful season". To the Hmong, these kinds of fruitful opportunities were rare. For example, during the Cold War era, in Laos as well as elsewhere in Asia, Hmong were deprived of most of the social, political, economic, and educational opportunities that

were available to the majority ethnic groups. With the wide range of opportunities made available to them in America, most Hmong have strived to improve their circumstances with little or no help at all from resettlement agencies and social services programs. For example, during the course of this author's significant educational attainments (for the entire 12 years from when he began to learn the English alphabet to his doctorate degree), never once did a resettlement agency or a social service program advise him about social and economic opportunity in America. Therefore, he had to learn almost everything on his own.

In judging that only thirty-two years ago, like this author, the Hmong were a preliterate group, they have made tremendous progress in their relatively short period in the United States. This level of socioeconomic advancement has occurred most noticeably in the past decade. In the shortest amount of time and in a breath-stopping manner, many Hmong Americans now have become doctors, professors, lawyers, politicians, civic leaders, nurses, teachers, and micro economic entrepreneurs. It is also important to note that just like other immigrants and refugees to the United States, the Hmong have continued to experience their share of challenges, including school dropouts, gang involvement, marital conflict, and continued poverty in some segments of the community.

The fact of the matter is that Hmong Americans have experienced the reality of a multicultural American society. In the complex American socio-cultural structure, some Hmong have occupied a recognized niche, while others have become caught up in a psychological and cultural debate on what being a Hmong in the United States means. Therefore, the road to personal self-discovery has not been easy for some Hmong

Americans (Ly, 2001). For these individuals, before reaching their final goal, they have encountered barriers which have included a lack of financial security, family problems, the language barrier, cultural conflicts (Westermeyer, Bouafuely-Kersey & Her, 1997; Noh & Beiser, 1999), and racial discrimination (Lee, 2001). Tran, Lee, and Khoi (1996) in a study of Southeast Asian adolescents' stress and coping skills found that simple tasks that were taken for granted by most Americans, for example, where to live and what to do after graduating from school, presented difficult decisions for many Southeast Asian youths.

The Dilemma of being Hmong and being Hmong American

The Hmong people brought with them complex familial and sociocultural behavioral patterns which included Hmong ancestral teachings, aspects of the Chinese culture, and Lao and Thai cultural traditions. Linguistically, most of those Hmong who were born or grew up in the U.S. can easily fit in with mainstream English speaking individuals, groups, and communities. Culturally though, it has been difficult for young Hmong who must weigh and choose their paths with caution. For example, they must weigh and choose the best possible way to show respect to clan leaders and Hmong leaders, while at the same time living within the hierarchical Hmong family structure in an American society which emphasizes greater personal freedom for youth. While trying to adapt to these changes, they find themselves torn between the Hmong community and America's more individualistic system. Nowadays, young Hmong are more than ever expected by their parents, elders, and leaders not only to be extremely intelligent and emotionally strong but to also be model representatives for their parents and the Hmong community as a whole. Therefore, Hmong Americans who are between the ages of 15-40

now are being referred to as “you young people” (*nej cov hluas*) and the “intellectual group” (*yog cov txawj ntse*) who must “lead the Hmong to the future” (*yuav tsum koj haiv neeg Hmoob lawm yav tom ntej*). *Haiv neeg Hmoob* (the Hmong people) is an important notation which signifies the valuing of the Hmong family throughout the globe. This phraseology is not only commonly used and implied in community discourse, it is also sort of demanded by parents, elders, and Hmong leaders as an exhortation to the younger Hmong generations. Individuals who are unable to fulfill these expectations can be typecast as weak. Thus, each individual, regardless of gender and family status, must learn to behave and fulfill these expectations accordingly with little or no help from the community. Due to the lack of clear structural roadmaps for the younger Hmong generations to follow, their behaviors could very well fall into the types of patterns about which Mead (1978) writes. While describing the lack of role models for newcomers to the United States, Mead states:

“They [individuals in prefigurative conditions] are like the immigrants of yesterday who came as pioneers to a new land, lacking all knowledge of what demands the new conditions of life would make upon them. Those who came later could take their peer groups as models. But among the first comers, the young adults had as a model only their own tentative adaptations and innovations. Their past, the culture that had shaped their understanding-their thoughts, feelings, and their conceptions of the world- a not sure guide to the present. And the elders among them, bound to the past, could provide no models for the future (p. 70).”

Over the years, the author has observed that young Hmong adults have faced even more complications than what Mead describes. Besides learning English, getting an education, obtaining stable jobs, starting a family, and perhaps serving as role models, they have to vigorously attempt to find proper niches within themselves, their own families, and the Hmong community as well as in the larger society by balancing between being Hmong and being Hmong American (Lor, 2001). To do so requires the reconstruction of a new and imbalanced cultural system, which contains consciously selected and perpetuated images of a new “enhanced tradition” and the integrating of previously powerful kinship and clan-based social and cultural systems and traditional beliefs in spirits (Tapp, 1989) along with healing practices in conjunction with the new and mostly Christian affluent society. A “Hmong family” may be defined in relation to the traditional Hmong family structures, where a family may constitute the parents, their children, grandparents, and all extended relatives (Tapp, 1989).

Acculturation Characteristics

Criminal behaviors committed by a small proportion of Hmong and gruesome cases of domestic violence as well as family tragedies involving children often dominate the front page of newspapers or TV news programs in communities where Hmong reside. These media portrayals often overtly mask the social, political, educational and economic progress made by the Hmong in the United States over the past three decades. At the same time, the issues of gang involvement, domestic violence, and productive citizenship are important issues that are often associated with the problems of cultural adjustment of minority immigrant groups in American society.

In spite of all the headlines, relatively little attention has been paid to the adaptation of Hmong in America. Lee (2001) asserts that the model minority stereotype of Asian Americans also places the Hmong in an awkward position in terms of how their progress is assessed within the mainstream society. Lee points out that even though the level of Hmong advancement over a relatively short period of time is impressive, one must recognize the areas where Hmong-Americans continue to lag behind. Lee's statement can be supported by using data enumerated from the 2000 census. According to the census figures, in 2000, more than half (54%) of Hmong Americans under 18 were living under the poverty line, in comparison to only 14% of all Asian Americans, 34.8% of Hmong were still "linguistically isolated", and 35.3% were enumerated in the "no-schooling completed" category compared to only 1.4% of the total U.S population (Pfeifer & Lee, 2004).

Another key acculturation issue for Hmong Americans and their children has to do with the environments in which they have lived or the schools they have attended. For example, Siu (1996) in a review of literature observed that 63% of Vietnamese, Hmong, and Korean American elementary and secondary students had reported that non-Asian American students were not very friendly or "mean" to them. In addition, Hein (2000) in a study that investigated micro level racial inequality found that only 14.6% of Hmong individuals in the sampled group reported that they never had experienced any type of interpersonal discrimination. Hein argued that the likely reason this subgroup of Hmong did not face interpersonal discrimination was because they were new immigrants who were linguistically and socially isolated.

Another acculturation characteristic that has influenced the slow adaptation of some Hmong into the mainstream American culture has to do with the personal and familial artifacts that represent the Hmong values and belief system and are orally passed on from the older generation (Lee & Yuen, 2003). Contemporary younger Hmong who want to carry on these traditional customs must somehow modify their patterns of behavior (Westermey, Neider & Vang, 1984; Molica, 1990). For example, it is difficult for some Hmong men to accept the harsh reality that they can no longer be perceived as the sole or primary head of household or decision-maker in the family.

Kinzie, Leung and Fleck (1988) and McInnis (1991) reported the prevalence of depression and posttraumatic stress disorder among Hmong of all backgrounds. They stated that when these Hmong are looking to their parents and elders including Hmong leaders as role models and for guidance, these resources are often unavailable or inappropriate. For example, elders, parents, and leaders now often say *peb cov laus tsis paub dab lawm* (we older folks no longer know anything).

The Research Focus

This exploratory study presents five specific areas that may enhance our understanding of the self-rated social well-being of Hmong college students: (1) demographic characteristics of well being; (2) self-rated well being; (3) family relationships and value placed on Hmong culture; (4) experiences of prejudice/discrimination; (5) health and mental health issues.

Methods

In order to better understand the social well-being of Hmong college students, the author conducted an exploratory study with a snowball sample of 50 participants in the

greater Sacramento County, California. The author developed the data collection questionnaire, partially based on Hudson's (1982) Family Relationship Scale (FRS). The FRS scale was used, mainly because its contents are quite similar to the way Hmong family members traditionally interact with one another. Overall, the survey instrument consisted of 61 closed-ended items and four open-ended questions. The first 42 items related to socio-demographic characteristics, acculturation experiences, and the participant's opinions regarding the Hmong culture. The remaining items were modified from Hudson's FRS scales. The instrument was first pilot-tested for face validity (does the questionnaire makes sense to a Hmong audience) and clarity with several (n= 8) young Hmong adults. Changes were made based on suggestions from the pretest subjects. The research project as well as the consent form then was submitted for review by the Sacramento State University Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects. Subsequently, the research project was approved by Sacramento State's human subjects protection committee. The questionnaire was administered by handing a packet of the research instruments with the consent form, and an introduction about the research project to Hmong students who were either taking the researcher's classes or had come into contact with the researcher. Overall, 56 packets were handed to Hmong students. After two weeks, 50 completed and usable surveys were returned.

Results

Demographic Characteristics

Of the 50 participants (see Table 1), 74% were males and 26% were females, ranging in age from 18 to 30, with an average age of 21 (SD= 3.09). Ten participants (20%) were born in Asia, 80% were born in the U.S with 84% being single and 16%

being married. The average family household size was 10.48 persons per family (SD= 2.5), ranging from 2 to 15 members. Seventeen (34%) participants had been in the U.S between 11 to 20 years, 52% had been in the U.S for 21 to 30 years, and 14% did not disclose their years of residency (overall mean= 20.47 years; mode= 22 years).

Self Perceptions

Social well-being refers to the projections the respondents made of themselves five years from now. Overall, 78% of the participants rated their living standard from about average to extremely well. Among these participants, 72% predicted that their living standard would be better off and 28% predicted that their living standard would absolutely be better off five years from now.

Four items were sorted from Hudson's FRS scale to describe closeness among family members. The four items were: family members ask each other for help, family members feel close to each other, family members feel closer to each other than to people outside the family, and family togetherness is important. Proportionally, of the 50 respondents, 66% frequently ask each other for help, 54% almost always feel close to each other, 44% almost always feel closer to family members than to people outside the family, and 74% almost always view family togetherness as important.

To validate the closeness among family members, Pearson's correlation was used to examine the relationships among them (see Table 2). The strongest relationship was found between family members asking each other for help and family members feeling very close to each other ($r = .604, p < .01$), followed by family togetherness is very important and family members feel closer to each other than to people outside the family ($r = .418, p < .01$).

Health and Mental Health Concerns

In terms of health concerns, 80% of the 50 participants rated their health from good to excellent. In fact, only 4% of the participants rated themselves as having poor health. Mental health issues were somewhat more prevalent among this group of students. Five variables that are often associated with mental health problems were included in statistical analyses and they all appeared to present a risk for mental health concerns (see Table 1). The questions asked the participants to indicate whether they experienced those issues and their replies were as follows. Three participants (7%) said they have a frequent crying spell, 10% said they often do not sleep well at night, 17% said the future rarely looks bright for them, 25% said they felt downtrodden some or most of the time, and 37% said their situation was hopeless some or most of the time.

Prejudicial Experience

One of the multifaceted factors the author believes strongly correlate with being happy or not happy is the respondents' perceived acceptance by the American public. To support this belief, the author examined four variables that are closely related to growing up in the United States (see Table 1). Overall, 44% of the 50 respondents strongly agreed that their parents' experience as refugees influenced them to strive harder for future self-sufficiency, another 44% agreed, and only 2% said this did not influence them. In terms of prejudice/stereotypes used against them by neighbors, 30% said they had at times experienced it, while 6% stated they had experienced a lot of prejudice and stereotypes. Only 34% reported not experiencing it at all. There are various reasons to support these findings. For example, 20% of the respondents said they were somewhat unfairly treated by their teachers/professors while 32% said they had been labeled by teachers/professors

as gang members. Not surprisingly, discrimination and prejudice is also cited in the social science literature as a partial factor in the slow acculturation of some new immigrants and refugees to the United States (see Furuto, Biswas, Chung, Murase & Ross-Sheriff, 1992).

Cultural Maintenance

In addition to discussing the participants' self-rated social well-being and resettlement experience, the author examined whether or not the Hmong culture still plays a role in the students' personal efforts to do well in America and conquer acculturation difficulties. Overall, 54% of the 50 participants reported that they continued to value the Hmong culture very highly, 78% described the Hmong culture as either important or very important to them, and 92% replied that they respected or very highly respected Hmong cultural traditions including shamanism.

Discussion

Preliminary findings from this exploratory study highlighted several crucial social, acculturation, and psychological issues experienced by young Hmong adults. More Hmong college students are delaying traditional patterns of early marriage (getting married before age 18) in exchange for college completion. Only 16% of the students in the sample were married. Most of the students were very happy with the way their families were faring in the United States and predicted that their families would be better off five years from now. Statistical tests also supported Hmong traditional family values as 2/3 of the surveyed students reported that they remained very close with family members and most often sought help from each other. Though it may be observed that the measures of family closeness among the respondents were probably lower than one would find among members of "traditional Hmong families" residing in Laos or new to

the United States, possibly reflecting the effects of acculturation among this Hmong-American sample. Even though the rate of perceived prejudice and discrimination in this sample was much less than what was found by Lee (2001) and Hein (2000), many of the Hmong students thought they were viewed in a prejudiced manner by their teachers and professors. Hmong fathers appear to be losing their traditional roles. The findings from this study indicate that Hmong mothers and siblings are becoming the primary sources for information sharing, particularly when it comes to major problems and personal matters (with 53% and 48% respectively). Even as it has been quite difficult for some Hmong Americans to successfully acculturate into mainstream American society, there is a sense of optimism that it will only be a matter of time until Hmong Americans will be able to actualize their intellectual potential and bring about an improved social status.

Study Limitations

There were several notable limitations to this exploratory study. First, all of the participants in this study were Hmong students at a single university campus and thus did not constitute a random sample of Hmong Americans. Second, this study focused exclusively on Hmong students that were known to the researcher without attempting to recruit other Hmong students at the same university as prospective participants. There were about 350 Hmong students attending California State University, Sacramento while the study was being conducted; however, the sample only represents about 14% of the Hmong student body on the campus.

Third, the sample was very small. Any statistical test generated from this sample could not be generalized to Hmong students in general. Because of this limitation, the

researcher did not attempt to test for significant differences between gender, class standing, marital status, country of birth, and perceived health and mental health issues. As an example of study results that may have been influenced by the small sample size, the findings contradicted popular beliefs that all Hmong, especially educated Hmong, should value their cultural heritage very highly. Indeed, only 54% of the participants in this sample indicated that they continue to value the Hmong culture very highly. This outcome may reflect the small sample size rather than the actual feelings of Hmong college/university students in general.

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Table 1. *Demographic Characteristics of Hmong College Students*

	Frequency	Percent		Frequency	Percent
Age (n= 50)			Gender (n= 50)		
Mean Age = 21.68 (SD= 3.09)			Male	37	74%
Min = 18; Max = 30			Female	13	26%
18-21	21	62%			
22-26	14	28%			
27-30	5	10%			
Country of birth (49 out of 50)			Marital Status (49 out of 50)		
Laos	7	14%	Single	41	84%
Thailand	2	4%	Married	8	16%
Vietnam	1	2%			
USA	39	79%			
Household Size (n= 50)			Years been in U.S (43 out of 50)		
Mean = 10.48 (SD= 2.5)			Mean = 20.47 (SD= 22)		
Min = 2; Max = 15			11-20 years	17	34%
			21 years and over	26	52%
			Missing	7	14%
I have crying spells 47 out of 50)			I do not sleep well at night (48 out of 50)		
Rarely or none of the time	31	62%	Rarely or none of the time	24	50%
A little of the time	5	10%	A little of the time	12	25%
Some of the time	8	16%	Some of the time	7	15%
A good part of the time	1	2%	A good part of the time	3	6%
Most or all part of the time	2	5%	Most or all part of the time	2	4%
The future looks bright for me (48 out of 50)			I feel downtrodden (45 out of 50)		
Rarely or none of the time	2	4%	Rarely or none of the time	21	47%
A little of the time	6	13%	A little of the time	12	27%
Some of the time	10	21%	Some of the time	10	22%
A good part of the time	10	21%	A good part of the time	1	2%
Most or all part of the time	20	41%	Most or all part of the time	1	2%
My situation is hopeless (46 out 50)			Would you say your parents experience influenced you to strive harder		
Rarely or none of the time	20	43%	Strongly agree	3	6%
A little of the time	9	20%	Disagree	3	6%
Some of the time	16	35%	Agree	22	44%
A good part of the time	1	2%	Strongly agree	22	44%
How would you rate your overall living standard five years from now?			As growing up, how would you say about experience with prejudice/discrimination		
Worse off	0	0	Not at all	1	2%
Better off	36	72%	Very little	17	34%
Absolutely better off	14	28%	Somewhat	22	44%
			A great deal	8	16%

Table 1 continued. Demographic Characteristics

	Frequency	Percent		Frequency	Percent
While in school, have you ever been unfairly treated by teacher/professor			Have you ever been prejudged or stereotyped against by neighbors?		
Not at all	17	34%	Not at all	17	34%
Very little	23	46%	Very little	15	30%
Somewhat	10	20%	Somewhat	15	30%
			A great deal	3	6%
Have you ever been label by teacher/professor as a gang?			How much do you still valuing the Hmong cultures?		
No	31	62%	Value it very little	4	8%
Yes	16	32%	Somewhat value it	19	38%
Cannot remember	3	6%	Value it very highly	27	54%
How would you rate your overall living standard?			I feel that the future looks bright for me		
Poor	0	0%	Rarely or none of the time	2	4%
Not so poor	11	22%	A little of the time	6	13%
About average	32	64%	Some of the time	10	21%
Very well	5	10%	A good part of the time	10	21%
Extremely well	2	4%	Most part of the time	20	42%

Table 2. *Correlation on the closeness of family members*

		1	2	3	4
Family members ask each other for help	Pearson Correlation	1	.410(**)	.604(**)	.346(*)
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.004	.000	.016
	N	49	48	49	48
Family members feel close to other family members than to people outside	Pearson Correlation	.410(**)	1	.541(**)	.234
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.004		.000	.110
	N	48	49	49	48
Family members feel very close to each other	Pearson Correlation	.604(**)	.541(**)	1	.418(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.003
	N	49	49	50	49
Family togetherness is very important	Pearson Correlation	.346(*)	.234	.418(**)	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.016	.110	.003	
	N	48	48	49	49

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).