

## **Parental Influences on Hmong University Students' Success**

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### **Abstract**

This study reports findings from a series of focus groups conducted on Hmong American university students. The purpose of the focus groups was to understand how, from the perspective of Hmong American students themselves, acculturative stress and parents influenced academic success. Findings of a thematic analysis centered on general themes across focus group respondents that related to parental socialization, gendered socialization, and ethnic identification. Each identified theme is discussed in reference to gendered patterns of experiences in Hmong American families and in reference to academic success.

**Keywords:** Hmong, parental socialization, academic achievement, gender, parenting, culture

As the racial and ethnic composition of the U.S. population continues to change, there is a pressing need for research on youth (individuals in mid to late adolescence and moving into adulthood) from culturally diverse family backgrounds. Particularly needed are studies that point to normative experiences related to parenting and family life that promote positive outcomes for young people in immigrant and ethnic minority families. To date few studies go beyond considering studies of adolescents in large panethnic regional groups (i.e. Latinos or Asians) and frequently focus on problematic adjustment for youth and adolescents in immigrant families. Studies of youth in Southeast Asian families are especially prone to highlighting negative outcomes (delinquency, gang activity, mental health problems, school dropout) and

pointing to dysfunctional cultural or family processes as the putative cause of poor outcomes (Hsu, Davies, & Hansen, 2004; Lee, 1997; Lor & Chu, 2002; Xiong, Rettig, & Tuicomepee, 2008; Zhou, 2001). The focus on problem outcomes is particularly applicable to our understanding of the adjustment of Hmong youth as recent portrayals of Hmong culture (*The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*; *Gran Torino*) paint a portrait of overwhelming cultural barriers and a high degree of delinquency and crime for Hmong youth and families. Given this heavy emphasis on adverse developmental outcomes for youth in Southeast Asian families generally, and for Hmong youth specifically, studies are needed that focus on normative experiences in Hmong families that promote positive outcomes for youth. To address this issue, the current study sought to identify factors that promote academic achievement from the perspective of highly successful Hmong American university students.

### **The Need for Research on Hmong American Youth**

As a result of increased immigration and relatively high fertility rates by individuals from Latin America and Asia, the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population is comprised of children and adolescents in immigrant families from these regions (Hernandez, 2004). Rapid growth in immigrant and refugee populations has been especially dramatic in the southeast region of the U.S. The state of North Carolina, for example, experienced a 274% increase in its foreign-born population during the 1990s and a 49% increase from 2000-2008 (ranking the state 1<sup>st</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>, respectively, among U.S. states for highest growth during these time periods; Migration Policy Institute, 2008). These changes to local populations pose a challenge to communities, educators, and health care workers who must address and understand the developmental needs of immigrant youth. Little research is available, however, to provide evidence regarding how normative socialization experiences influence psychological or

academic outcomes for this growing population. North Carolina also experienced rapid growth in its Hmong population (going from 544 to over 7,000 during the 1990s) that largely resulted from secondary migration of Hmong families within the U.S. Despite this growing population of young people in North Carolina, currently there is little information to help parents, teachers, researchers, or service professionals understand why some Hmong youth are successful in terms of educational and occupational success while others fail (Hmong National Development and Hmong Cultural Center, 2004).

In addition to the challenges associated with adjustment to life in a new culture, adolescents in Hmong families may be at risk for negative academic outcomes because their families typically emigrated as refugees. These families are not likely to return to the country of origin, often live in poverty, and parents frequently have little formal education, English ability, or familiarity with American culture (Hsu et al., 2004). For Hmong youth who have grown up in the U.S., consequently, there are challenges to adapting to mainstream culture while simultaneously remaining attached to and respectful of parental cultural beliefs. Many young Hmong must simultaneously attempt to assimilate to the norms and values of their non-Hmong peers at school while also feeling pressure to learn and preserve cultural traditions in the home (Xiong, Eliason, Detzner and Cleveland, 2005). In reference to successful school achievement, Hmong youth may feel a sense of cultural distance from school due to their family's cultural background, their relatively lower socioeconomic standing, and due to parental restrictions on their behaviors that are perceived as overly controlling. Moreover, the Hmong as a group are often either portrayed as a part of a larger "model minority" of Asian youth (resulting from relatively high academic achievement) or as "delinquents" due to highly publicized involvement in gang activity. Consequently, many Hmong youth receive stereotyping by school peers,

teachers, and personnel (Lee, 2001). All of these factors likely lead to relatively low feelings of connection or support from school and, as a result, school failure and high dropout rates (Yang, 2003).

While the limited available evidence suggests that academic motivation for Hmong youth suffers due to cultural distance, stereotyping by peers and teachers, and ineffective parenting, studies of Asian immigrant youth in general have found that strong feelings of obligation to parents and a high degree of cultural connection may foster academic achievement. Fuligni, Tseng, and Lam (1999) reported, for example, that immigrant youth reporting a greater sense of obligation to their parents also report greater effort put forth in school. Moreover, high expectations that parents have for the transmission of cultural traditions to children may also be seen as promoting academic success by encouraging a strong sense of ethnic identity (Supple, Ghazarian, Frabutt, Plunkett, & Sands, 2006). Taken together, these recent studies suggest that feeling obligated to parents and parental cultural socialization may promote school success for Hmong youth.

### **Parent-Youth Relations in Hmong American Families**

Existing scholarship on Hmong parent-youth relationships typically portrays Hmong parents as low in warmth and outward expressions of love, high in behavioral control, and as experiencing a high degree of conflict with their adolescent-aged children (Supple & Small, 2006; Xiong et al., 2008; Yang, 2003). Hmong parents also are characterized as highly valuing children who respect elders, promoting interdependence among family members, and as communicating with children via a “one-way communication process” from parents to children (Chan, 1994; Lee, 1997, Xiong, 2000). This emphasis on more traditional cultural practices is often implicated as the cause of relational difficulties among Hmong parents and their U.S.-born

children. Recent studies have suggested frustration by Hmong parents that their children are relatively unaware of Hmong cultural traditions and by teens who feel that they do not receive much direct training in Hmong culture (Xiong et al., 2005). A cultural gap between Hmong parents and their Hmong American children may result as the developing values and expectations in youth often contradict these value orientations held by Hmong parents. This is especially likely when parents who expect a high degree of filial piety and acceptance of and respect for parental authority have children who compare their family socialization practices to their American born peers. As young people acculturate towards the belief that during adolescence young people should be allowed more autonomy in decision-making and peer associations, parents from more traditional Asian cultures will view this value orientation as running counter to their own values (Xiong et al., 2004; Xiong et al., 2005).

To date, a common theme in research on Hmong parent adolescent relationships has been a focus on intergenerational conflict as common between 2<sup>nd</sup> generation adolescents and their 1<sup>st</sup> generation parents (Lee, 2001; McNall, Dunnigan, & Mortimer, 1994; Xiong et al., 2005; Xiong et al., 2008). A high degree of conflict between parental and youth generations results in the perception that a cultural generation gap is a common part of the Hmong American experience (Rick & Forward, 1992). Yang (2003) reported in a qualitative study of Hmong in five different states that the most common issue raised (in terms of community needs) is how to address the cultural gap that is perceived to exist between Hmong youth and their older family members. Studies also suggest that Hmong youth experiencing greater levels of conflict with their parents report greater depressive symptoms, problem behaviors, alcohol use, and problems in school (Lee et al., 2009; Xiong et al., 2008). The generational dissonance between parent and child often lead to Hmong parents exerting considerable effort to control their children's behavior (i.e.,

dating, style of dress, career goals) through disciplinary actions. Consequently, Hmong parents may enact a restrictive parenting stance to protect their children from perceived dangers associated with American peer culture and to attempt to retain Hmong cultural traditions in their children. While parents are motivated to engage in restrictive parenting as a means to protect their children, some adolescents may perceive such parenting as overly intrusive and as conveying a lack of trust (Xiong et al., 2004). Restrictive parenting may be particularly representative of the experience of Hmong females as there is a heavy emphasis on strictly controlling dating and sexual behavior in girls as a means to protect girls' (and families') reputations and to increase the odds that girls will be seen as potentially desirable marriage partners (Lee et al., 2009; Yang, 2003). For example, recent studies of Hmong youth point to a cultural orientation among the Hmong that severely restricts the activities of female youth while granting relatively high freedom to males (Xiong et al., 2004). While such gendered socialization practices are likely to occur in Hmong families, a recent quantitative study of Hmong college students in Minnesota did not find gender differences in reports of conflict with parents (Lee et al., 2009).

Despite what might be considered suboptimal parent-adolescent relations in Hmong families (conflict, lack of warmth, authoritarian parenting style) and mostly negative descriptions of their parents, Hmong youth clearly perceive that their parents love them and that Hmong parents show love by working hard to give their children "the good life" in the U.S. (Lamborn & Moua, 2008). Moreover, many Hmong youth have indicated that parents are a primary source of motivation to achieve academically and that parents instill a strong value of education as a means to have a better life than the parents (Xiong et al., 2004). This recent evidence is unexpected, as most previous descriptions of Hmong family interactions suggested that Hmong American youth

would suffer negative consequences and not feel loved or supported by parents. Such contradictory evidence creates a need for qualitative studies that elucidate, from the perspective of Hmong youth themselves, the role of parents in the development of academic motivation and achievement.

### **Development of Hmong American Youth**

Although researchers' interest in the U.S. Hmong population has increased over the past decade, little is known about the effects of acculturation and other cultural factors on Hmong youths' mental health and academic outcomes. In fact, researchers are divided on the state of Hmong adjustment in the United States. On one hand, some researchers have concluded that Hmong students are well adjusted and academically successful despite the economic, social, and cultural challenges they face (McNall, Dunnigan, & Mortimer, 1994). On the other hand, some scholars have argued that Hmong youth are at greater risk of engaging in problem behaviors such as delinquency, truancy, school failure, and gang activity (Faderman, 1998; Xiong et al., 2008). In reference to developmental outcomes, Supple and Small (2006) did find that Hmong youth reported lower grades and self-esteem than European American teens, but these differences were not significant once parenting behaviors (support and monitoring) were taken into account.

The paradoxical depiction of Hmong youth in the U.S. was described in an ethnographic study of Hmong adolescents in Wisconsin by Lee (2001). In that study, Lee found that generational status provided one partial explanation for perceived differences in the adjustment of Hmong youth as 2<sup>nd</sup> generation students (i.e. those born in the U.S. to immigrant parents) were more likely to engage in problem behaviors than were 1.5 generation students (i.e. those born in their native lands whose families emigrated to the United States as children). Second generation students may also exhibit more pride in being Hmong as issues related to ethnic identity are more

salient because the greater acculturation to mainstream American peer culture (relative to 1<sup>st</sup> or 1.5 generation youth) creates conflict with parents. This argument also suggests that acculturative stress may be more applicable to 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Hmong youth as issues related to ethnic identity and “feeling different” become more common among young people who identify as more “American” due to having been born in the U.S. On the other hand, parental perceptions that second generation Hmong youth are abandoning traditional Hmong culture combined with a desire to fit in with peers from other racial and ethnic groups may result in a different source of acculturative stress and intergenerational conflict. It is not clear how these processes may relate to academic outcomes, however.

### **Goals of the Current Study**

To date, few studies have considered how normative interactions in Hmong families may promote academic achievement as the preponderance of research has focused instead on deviance and intergenerational conflict. To characterize the experience of Hmong American youth as predominantly troubled fails to represent the strengths of Hmong American families and to take advantage of the knowledge that highly successful Hmong American youth have in reference to their success. The present study sought to assess, from the perspective of highly successful Hmong American college students, how acculturative stress and family factors influenced their academic outcomes. We were specifically interested in the following research questions derived from previous research and theory on experiences of youth in immigrant and refugee families:

1. What factors were primarily responsible for promoting academic success for the respondents?



2. To what extent did these youth experience acculturative stress while they were growing up (and what impact did that have on their schooling)?
3. What role did parents play in motivating these respondents to achieve academically?
4. To what extent did these respondents experience gendered socialization in their families?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The sample for this study was comprised of Hmong American students attending a medium-sized state university in North Carolina. Students were recruited via a Hmong student association on campus and ranged in age from 18 to 25 years of age (most were 18 to 20 years of age). North Carolina had the 4<sup>th</sup> largest Hmong population in the U.S. according to the 2000 Census and almost all respondents were from a three-county area in western North Carolina that includes the 9<sup>th</sup> largest Hmong population (for any metro area) in the U.S. All respondents were born in the U.S. except for two who were born in refugee camps in Thailand but moved to the U.S. as infants and did not distinguish themselves as different from their U.S.-born peers. As such, these respondents can be classified as 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Hmong Americans. All of the respondents' parents were born in Laos and all of these respondents were fluent in English and their language proficiency in Hmong varied. All respondents indicated that they can understand their parents when speaking Hmong, but that they were not all completely comfortable in their ability to speak Hmong themselves.

### **Procedures**

Each focus group took place in a meeting room on campus. Focus groups lasted approximately two hours and students were provided with a \$15 gift card to a department store for participating. Each student signed a form providing their consent to participate in the study

and was made aware of the intent of the study and any risks associated with the focus groups. Focus groups were moderated by the PI for this project who is a male of European American descent. He is a faculty member at the university where data collection took place. Two graduate students also attended focus groups. One African American doctoral student co-moderated by asking follow-up questions (to probe vague answers or resolve discrepancy between participants) and also took field notes regarding observations about group dynamics. The second student operated an audiotape cassette and took detailed notes regarding who was speaking and regarding what was said (this student is a doctoral student from China).

In all, there were four focus groups. The initial focus group consisted of six Hmong students, three male and three female. The students ranged in age from 18 to 25 years of age with a median age of 20 (one student was significantly older than the others). The original intent of this study was to assess the factors that predicted academic success (expected to focus on acculturative stress) for Hmong students. However, after the first focus group, the focus of the study shifted more towards parental socialization of Hmong youth that included an emphasis on cultural gaps, parental encouragement regarding academic outcomes, and gendered socialization of boys versus girls. Towards the end of this first focus group, the students discussed how there is a significant gendered experience to growing up Hmong and suggested that future focus groups center on parent-child relationships and gendered socialization within Hmong American culture. Consequently, two subsequent focus groups were scheduled that separated the students by gender and explored topics students felt were more relevant to their experience; namely, family influences on academic motivation. The fourth and final focus group was conducted with a mixed-sex sample of Hmong students and participants were asked to evaluate, critique, and respond to the major themes identified by the research team from the first three focus groups

(i.e., as a means to assess the validity of the findings). Finally, the senior researcher on this project presented preliminary results to the larger student association on campus to assess the validity of the themes identified in this study.

The second focus group consisted of seven Hmong girls ranging from ages 18 to 24 with a mean age of 19. Five of the female students were born in the United States and two were born in Thailand (in refugee camps). The third group included five Hmong boys ranging from 18 to 25 with a mean age of 20. All male students reported being born in the United States. During these two focus group students were asked specific questions regarding experiences in their family of origin. Students were also asked about gender differences that they felt were important factors that shaped the development of Hmong youth, particularly in reference to motivation to succeed academically. Both gender groups were asked open ended questions regarding topics surfacing during the initial focus group such as student motivation, gender roles, and family obligation.

## **Results**

The data analysis strategy for this study included a thematic analysis using inductive techniques to identify themes across focus group participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Three members of the research team identified and analyzed patterns within these data that emerged across all four focus groups. An explicit focus centered on identifying themes related to parent-adolescent relationships, experiences of acculturative stress, gendered socialization, and parental efforts to promote achievement. As such, the analysis could be described as employing theoretical thematic analysis (as opposed to completely inductive) and as using more selective coding of responses than open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The identified topics were most frequently discussed and represented the a priori research questions heading into the study. Other topics that arose during discussions (e.g., socioeconomic status and clothing and its affect

on peer relations, relations with children of different races) were coded and observed, but not analyzed or reported in this study. Audiotaped focus groups were transcribed and were combined with memos and notes taken by the research team during each focus group. Responses by participants were coded and analyzed to observe themes, or patterned sets of responses that were consistently discussed by the participants. During data analysis the ethnic and experiential lens of the researcher and graduate students became increasingly salient to the data interpretation. The European American researcher specializing in ethnic identity development and adolescents in immigrant families, the African American first year doctoral student, with a social work background having experience working with diverse adolescents in a Midwestern city, and the Chinese second year doctoral student, with experience teaching in China soon realized the significance of their positionality in data interpretation. Thus, the thematic analysis was appropriate (Shank, 2002). The data analytic process would be best described as theoretical thematic analysis (focusing on themes that were likely to emerge based on previous research and also that immediately emerged in the initial focus group) that resulted in semantic themes that are reported based on "explicit or surface" meaning and do not attempt to discuss latent themes or to interpret beyond what the individual participants reported (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Emerging themes included: intergenerational differences as a source of acculturative stress, gendered socialization in Hmong American culture, parental influence generally and specifically related to promoting academic success, and ethnic identification and academic motivation.

### **Intergenerational Differences as a Source of Acculturative Stress**

During the first focus group, participants were asked to provide feedback on a measure of acculturative stress. The items from this measure were designed to tap into feelings of not belonging, experiences with discrimination, difficulties with English, and feeling alienated due to

cultural barriers. Respondents all overwhelmingly reported that issues related to acculturation or acculturative stress were not an issue for Hmong youth of their generation but were, rather, a significant element of the experience of their parents. When discussing what could be conceived of as “culture stress,” participants discussed how a primary source of such stress derives from a struggle to balance the “home culture” emphasized by their parents with the “new culture” that the young person experienced at school and in the larger (non Hmong) peer group. As it pertained to young people, acculturative stress might result when parental values regarding appropriate behaviors are discrepant with values that adolescents develop via social interaction with teachers and peers in school and the larger community. The group sentiment was largely summed up by the following quotations regarding a culture gap between parental expectations for these young people and their own views of the new culture:

*Our parents came from another country into the U.S. and we were raised in a new culture, in the U.S., and there is a big gap in between where, like, our parents expect so much from us to be better than they were and yet, since we were raised in a different culture based on, its like, at times it feels like we're expected to be, don't want to say burden, but something on our shoulders to look up to and think, "oh, our parents want us to do this" but we have a big culture gap in between. (19 year old male)*

*I think that the real acculturative stress is that you have to understand your parents and their culture, you have to keep that culture, and you have to adapt to the mainstream so that you can actually fit in at school. So I think the stress for students like us would be, like, trying to understand both cultures, plus get your parents to support you while you're actually in the American culture. So I think that's the stress that we're probably dealing with. (25 year old male)*

*I think it is more important (culture stress) relates more to our parents. I think, um, they kind of understand that since most of us were born here, they basically call us “American Kids,” but they are really worried that, um, the way we try to adapt to the “new culture” or American culture, I think what they are most afraid of is we will lose our cultural background. (20 year old female)*

As students described the stressors associated with straddling two cultural systems (those of the parents and those of American culture) gender differences became apparent as male and

female students discussed how traditional Hmong culture (as manifested in their parents' rules and expectations) favored male offspring. Girls consistently emphasized across the focus groups, that they experienced greater expectations to conform to culturally prescribed values and were pressured more than were boys, to maintain a connection to Hmong home culture. Girls frequently mentioned that Hmong males were allowed greater freedom to become "Americanized" and to socialize outside of the home. Such responses are consistent with Hmong cultural patterns in general (Lee et al., 2009; Yang, 2003) and suggested that Hmong American girls are expected to spend more time engaged in family labor, have stricter prohibitions against dating, and have their social behaviors more closely scrutinized. Overall, both male and female respondents agreed that boys are favored by Hmong parents, regardless of what males do because parents tend to feel pride in having a son.

Overall, the findings suggested that Hmong youth may feel acculturative stress as resulting from cultural distance from parents. Moreover, any pressure to retain cultural values may be applied more assertively to Hmong girls who are more strongly socialized to conform to more traditional Hmong standards. These issues were brought out consistently across focus groups and are discussed in subsequent themes.

### **Gendered socialization in Hmong American culture**

The majority of female and male respondents suggested that a cultural preference for boys exists in the Hmong community. In Hmong culture boys are valued because they "carry on the family name" and regardless of what paths boys may take, as long as they are relatively well-behaved, boys will be discussed with pride. One manifestation of that preference relates to motivation to achieve as boys do not have to work as hard to be valued and appreciated, as their academic success is less tied to their overall value to parents. All of the male respondents across

the focus groups agreed that Hmong females had to work harder to make parents proud and, as a result, male academic success was an indication of internal motivation that superseded the privilege of being male. Participants in the male focus group described their cultural responsibility to carry the Hmong legacy (e.g. name and caring for elder parents) and also reported being motivated by a sense of obligation to strengthen the family name. One student reported “we’re the next generation” as a way to convey the responsibility he felt for demonstrating that Hmong youth could be successful. Although participants clearly described having a choice whether or not to become educationally successful, they reported that their role in excelling academically was influenced by their goal to be the pride of their parents. One student commented “we want to make our parents proud.”

While these data are consistent with previous studies pointing to greater restrictions on Hmong American females and greater parental investment and valuation of boys, we also observed that our respondents suggested that gender norms for girls may be changing in Hmong culture. Furthermore, while many Hmong females may complain and experience greater conflict with parents resulting from more restrictions on their extrafamilial activities, there are other possible advantages to being close to home. While the Hmong American female respondents in this study clearly understood that they may be undervalued by parents and have less freedom than their male peers, these respondents clearly felt loved, valued, and supported. Over the course of the focus groups and, in particular, during the all-female focus group, respondents indicated that the relatively higher academic success of Hmong American females may “level the playing field” with Hmong males. That is, a cultural shift seems to be occurring where Hmong American females are increasingly perceived as valuable (both by themselves and by parents) because of their academic accomplishments. For the second-generation respondents in this

study, graduation from college brings honor and prestige to the families and higher rates of participation in college, graduation, and acceptance in graduate schools among Hmong females (relative to males) is shifting valuation of children towards females. Rather than concluding that girls may develop feelings of inadequacy due to their relative undervaluation in Hmong culture, our findings suggest that Hmong American females may be rewarded by parents and be viewed as equally important to boys when they are highly successful in school.

While an overall emerging conclusion might have been that the cultural gap between the parental and youth generations is more stressful for girls, several comments from the all-male focus group pointed to feelings of inadequacy regarding cultural maintenance and pressures to learn Hmong traditions. Males also described issues related to difficulty in navigating the duality of having less of a responsibility to adhere to their home culture, but also trying to live up to parental expectations regarding “success”. Many respondents stated that parents expected boys to become highly successful and to return to serve as a leader in the Hmong community and to serve the needs of the overall group. Their success in achieving these goals, however, was understood to include a certain amount of acculturation towards majority culture norms. Perhaps this is why Hmong parents accepted greater involvement in mainstream American culture among their boys. What was difficult for the male respondents was that, while agreeing that they benefitted from having more freedom than girls, they felt relatively unprepared to take on leadership roles in the Hmong community. Traditional roles for young Hmong males included administering over cultural ceremonies, resolving family disputes, communicating with other clan leaders, and meting out justice according to Hmong customs and norms. While most male respondents were aware of their need to learn a variety of cultural traditions in order to enact the male role, they felt ill prepared for these future responsibilities. According to the male



respondents, it is girls who remain close to Hmong culture (due to their increased pressure to remain at home), yet boys who will be expected, as adults, to maintain cultural traditions.

Overall, respondents identified a key theme related to gendered socialization of Hmong American children within their families. On the surface, it would appear that males are frequently advantaged relative to females in Hmong families and that girls face greater parental restrictions and expectations to assist with family obligations. After hearing from sex-segregated focus group participants, however, there may be reason to believe that Hmong American females are – via their academic successes – garnering equal parental respect and valuation by parents and also may benefit in terms of taking on adult roles in the Hmong community by being more strongly socialized towards Hmong customs and gender roles. There are also benefits that are related to greater emotional support and warmth from parents that girls experience relative to boys that are discussed under subsequent themes.

### **Parenting of Hmong Youth**

A related theme regarding cultural distance between first-generation parents and their second-generation children centered on expressions of love from parents to children. All of the Hmong respondents had a particular view of the “American” way of parental demonstrations of love and warmth towards children. The respondents also were aware that their parents’ own style of conveying love was usually different and characterized by love being conveyed by what parents have done and continue to do and less by outward displays of verbal or physical affection. A description of normative affection in Hmong American culture was provided by a 20-year-old female who said:

*I was going to say, umm, in our culture, like, the girls aren't allowed to hug their dads, you know, it's kind of like taboo or something, but I think our parents, the way they were raised, it's like, no hugs and kisses, “just know that we love you” ...its not like physical affection, it's more of just like, umm, you just know they love you by the things*

*that they do for you. Like, they don't have an education or anything, but they go to work every day and work for you so you can go to school. So, I mean, in my relationship with my parents...its gotten a little better cause ...since they've been in America for a while now I think they kind've got the point that, I guess, it's okay to hug and kisses and stuff. I do hug my mom – not my dad so much – but my mom more, because I'm the girl. We still have that thing in my family that the girls go to my mom and you're not really supposed to tell your problem stuff to your dad.*

This quotation represented several related themes that were observed in comments made by participants. First, Hmong parents expect children to know they are loved because parents have made great sacrifices, work hard to provide for children, and emphasize life in America as an improvement over parents' own lives. Second, Hmong parents rarely provide outward displays of love such as hugging and kissing, although most respondents indicated that their parents were becoming more affectionate as the children went off to college. Third, there are gender differences in that hugging and kissing is more commonly accepted with mothers and for girls. Most respondents indicated that affection from fathers was rare and, in particular, male respondents indicated that they mostly shook hands with their fathers, but took that as affection and a demonstration that their fathers were communicating respect to their sons. One male respondent suggested that Hmong parents are receptive to greater physical affection with their children, but may wait for it to be initiated by the children:

*I think the fact is not that your parents don't want to initiate it. They don't understand how. For my parents, although I'm not the closest with them, I do try to initiate stuff and, like, my Mom, I think they are actually waiting for you to go hug them as much as you're waiting for them to hug you, but there's like a barrier. So if my Mom, I go hug her, she's fine with it, she's actually happy. And my dad, I'll just go shake his hand and he's fine with it. And he actually feels proud that I actually understand culture and you can actually go up to him and be a man and shake hands and talk to him.*

While the majority of respondents described their parents in a similar fashion, at least one respondent pointed out that his family was different. When the 19 year old male provided this

account of his family, the other respondents laughed and seemed to know about this particular student's family and their outward displays of affection:

*Well...in my family I guess things are, like a little bit different...my parents, they really love me, cause like, my mom, she would hug us and kiss us too. She'll kiss you. And my dad, he actually gives my sisters hugs too. And he actually hugs my girlfriends when they come over too [group laughs]. My mom does the same thing too...my friend, when he's about to leave, my mom will hug him too. I guess its cause, they've been here for a while so they see it. I think it's a bit unique because most Hmong parents don't want to initiate any kind of "touchy touchy" with their kids. But my parents, my mom's like, "oh, go hug your uncle."*

Respondents clearly felt loved and supported by their parents and almost all cited their parents as the primary source of support to do well in school. Hmong parents communicate their love to their children by working hard (often multiple jobs), celebrating their children's achievements, emphasizing academic success as a means to move ahead, and through their sacrifice to bring their children to the U.S. to live. One female student described her parents communicating love by telling her "you are in the land of opportunities, for them (back in Laos), especially girls, they don't have...same opportunities." While it was clear that respondents felt loved and supported by parents, they also described that acculturating to American culture made their parents' lack of physical affection more obvious to them. While respondents were quick to point out that love is understood and demonstrated by actions of provision instead of the primary use physical affection, some students were aware that while growing up, they had less warm relationships than other teens. On the whole, respondents felt a strong sense of obligation to their parents (due to the hardships faced by the parents to give the students a better life in the U.S.) and felt that parental love was conveyed by sacrifice; either by working long hours or through the difficult transition to life in the U.S.

## Parental Influence on Academic Success

When asked what factors led to these students being academically successful, the overwhelming response was that parents were the most important influence on their academic success. Discussion of parental influence on academic success tended to center on two themes: a sense of obligation to parents to succeed in school and specific parental strategies to promote success. For almost all (only one female respondent suggested that she succeeded only for her own good) of the respondents, felt obligation to achieve was a key issue. Students repeatedly discussed how they felt a responsibility to achieve as a means to “pay their parents back” for the parents’ struggle living as refugees. Many students pointed to the difficulty in their own parents’ lives and felt that by succeeding academically that they would bring pride to their parents as a means to acknowledge that they have been given an opportunity that their parents did not have. One female student commented, for example, that her parents suggested to her, “You are in the land of opportunities, people back home, especially girls, don’t have these opportunities”. And a 20 year old male responded that:

*I mean it's like most of every guy's influence is the parents because they want to make their parents proud because we're the guys of the family. And, um, our parents...never got the chance...and we're here in America, we're the next generation, we have that availability to go and have an education and make something better of us.*

Felt obligation also seemed to result from specific socialization practices in Hmong American families to promote a sense of collective socialization around achievement. That is, many students were influenced by cultural values regarding collective responsibility to enhance communal success and obligation to fulfill established gender roles. One female respondent commented that parents often reminded teens of the Hmong view that “your gain is our gain and our gain is your gain” to reinforce to the young that their efforts in school would benefit the entire group. Another female student described the entire family (siblings included) pooling

financial resources to help pay for supplies as the student left for college. These experiences all led most of the respondents to feel a strong sense of obligation to achieve as a means to reward parents and to fit with the cultural values of the family. In the all-male focus group, one discussion theme centered on “giving back” to the Hmong community and using one’s education as a means to promote well-being for the Hmong “back home” (in reference to their local communities in North Carolina). While it might be expected that all Hmong children might develop this sense of felt obligation, clearly not all Hmong students are succeeding academically. When asked why these respondents specifically did well while some of their peers struggled, these respondents indicated that many Hmong parents do not send the same messages to their children and also that, while many Hmong parents may try to send messages about the importance of school, not all children will listen:

*How you are raised up is every important. I saw someone whose parents are negligent, they don't do well. But I know people whose parents are supportive, and they do well at school. (18 year old female)*

*In my family, Mom and Dad work different shifts to make time for us kids. We have curfews at home. But nowadays in a lot of families, parents don't really control the kids. They only care about making money, they never talk to their kids, they even cover up for their kids if kids miss school. They don't care about kids' school work....but my parents are different....But even my parents control us so much, it's still a matter of personal choice. I am for school, my brother is for sports. (24 year old female)*

*Some kids start to mock their parents when they get older. They think they know more than their parents. They don't realize that they still need their parents. That's how they start to go wrong. (18 year old female).*

Respondents identified a variety of behavioral strategies used by parents to encourage academic achievement that included giving money or other rewards for good grades, threatening punishment for poor grades, and involvement by checking grades and going to school sponsored events. When asked what parents do specifically to support the achievement of children, one

male student commented, "It may be different in different families. To me, my parents not only check my homework and do stuff like that. When I do extra-curricular activities, they are very supportive. They make time to attend my activities. They are very proud that I am the vice-president of the International Student Association at school." Almost all students reported that their parents provided incentives for doing well in school such as money, gifts, or material goods. About half of students suggested that parents would yell, cajole, or use love withdrawal techniques to punish children when they earned low grades. More extreme punitive approaches included threats to "kick me out of the house" and a refusal to speak to or acknowledge the child. These more extreme parental strategies were apparently not infrequent but the students interpreted these threats as demonstrating care from parents. Also participants indicated that parents wouldn't actually follow through on these threats, but used this as an example of how far parents *might* go in promoting achievement. One parental strategy (that seemed more common among female respondents) was for parents to use social comparison as a way to motivate or shame children into wanting to achieve. An example of such a parenting strategy would include a parent saying (in front of their own child), "Oh, look at how smart she is her parents must be so proud" when referring to another person's child.

### **Hmong Group Identification as a Motivation to Achieve**

A final theme that we observed across focus groups was a strong motivation to achieve among our respondents as a means to demonstrate that Hmong youth can be successful. Many of the Hmong respondents were aware of negative stereotypes about the Hmong and also discussed how they became aware that many of their Hmong peers were failing in school. For some Hmong youth coming to the realization that many Hmong do not do well in school was the impetus for wanting to achieve. For example,

*In elementary school, I didn't realize it. When I entered high school, I saw a lot of Hmong kids taking low-level courses, and white kids are taking AP classes. I thought "why is that?". I want to step up and make a difference. (18 year old female).*

*We noticed that some of our friends don't want to take some hard classes. We want to prove that we actually can do it. (18 year old female)*

*It's motivation. I want to go to college. So far only 3 Hmongs from my school go to college. A lot of them want to get an easy way out, like going to a community college. But I don't. (18 year old female)*

For two students who had spent part of their elementary school years in a different state, they viewed Hmong underachievement as resulting from school personnel either ignoring or feeling that Hmong students don't possess a high degree of long-term educational potential in North Carolina:

*I went to a middle school with a much bigger Hmong community [referring to Minnesota]. Here, (Hmong) people are quiet and passive. Teachers would overlook us. If a Hmong kid misses school, the teachers wouldn't care or wouldn't notice it. (18 year old female)*

*I used to live in California. When I was there, a lot of my teachers would push me to higher level classes. But things were different when I came here. I talked to the counselor about taking higher level classes but he did not recommend it. But later I still took some honored classes to prepare for college.....I think the counselor here assume that Hmong students are the same "bad". They neglect Hmong kids. (24 year old female).*

One possible theme that differentiates high achieving Hmong American students from those who struggle in school is a strong and positive sense of ethnic identification. Students who strive to achieve may do so to demonstrate to people at school and to American society more broadly that Hmong Americans can be highly successful and they are motivated to do so because of a strong identification with being Hmong as a positive aspect of the self. Previous studies have suggested that some Hmong youth may feel embarrassed by their parents (Rumbaut & Portes, 2001) and others may feel that parental control attempts are too intrusive and deny the child normative (compared to the peer culture) developmental autonomy. If children reject parental authority and feel that parents' cultural traditions are not worth adhering to, a lack of

pride in being Hmong may result. These same processes may also lead to lowered motivation to excel in school. Alternatively some youth who lack strong connections to school or to parents may adopt strong, but negative identifications with being Hmong. These latter identifications may result more in deviant behaviors such as gang involvement rather than in positive outcomes such as doing well in school. The findings from this current study are likely limited given our focus on high achieving and successful students and because the area from which these student come is not a large metropolitan area. Overall, results from this study support previous research suggesting that successful parental ethnic socialization towards Hmong culture, when parents are perceived as supportive and loving, may lead to the internalization of group pride and a strong sense of ethnic identity. That strong sense of identity may, in turn, lead to improved effort in school and to better grades (Supple et al., 2006).

### **Discussion**

Research is needed to understand normative family processes that promote positive developmental outcomes for a growing population of American youth, those in immigrant and refugee families. To date, most studies of Hmong American youth have highlighted social problems and academic failure and thus ignored factors that are present for those Hmong American youth who are successful. The purpose of this study was to understand, from the perspective of Hmong American youth, how acculturative stress and relations with parents influenced their academic success. Results were consistent with previous studies as most respondents discussed a cultural gap that is stressful to navigate between Hmong American adolescents and their parents. Despite this gap, these Hmong American youth viewed their parents as supportive and felt a strong sense of obligation to their parents as important in promoting their success in school. The extent to which Hmong American youth are socialized



by parents is strongly influenced by gender. Typically Hmong youth describe favoritism and parental valuation of boys, and our results were consistent with that previous research. The extent to which boys benefit from this gendered socialization, however, may be in question given findings that emerged during gender-segregated focus groups. Finally, for some Hmong American youth, parents may exert an indirect effect on their achievement by promoting a strong ethnic identification as our respondents also indicated a strong desire to do well in school as a means to “show what Hmong can do”.

Consistent with a number of previous studies, our results suggest that Hmong American youth perceived a cultural gap as existing between themselves and their parents while they were growing up. A clear theme emerging from the focus groups was challenges associated with intergenerational relationships resulting from having to simultaneously adjust to American majority peer culture and to the cultural views of the parents. Respondents indicated that they considered adhering to and understanding parental cultural values and views as “adapting to” Hmong culture, suggesting that they may view the cultural views of the parents as relatively distant and foreign. Consequently, the main source of acculturative stress that these Hmong American youth reported experiencing related to their parents’ relative cultural distance from “American culture”. When asked to specify the sources of acculturative stress that they themselves may have encountered (language problems, discrimination) these respondents suggested that those typical issues that researchers focus on were relevant for the respondents’ parents, but not themselves. The key source of acculturative stress that these participants experience relates to the challenge of understanding and respecting parents’ cultural orientations while also fitting in with non-Hmong peers and at school. A key challenge in the development

of Hmong American youth seems to be how to best navigate potential cultural gaps between mainstream American culture and the culture of their parents.

While cultural gaps between generations clearly present a challenge for Hmong American youth, these gaps do not necessarily result in school problems. Some researchers have suggested that conflict in Hmong American families results from children engaging in problem behaviors and doing poorly in school (Xiong et al., 2008). Our results suggest that, even for highly successful Hmong American college students who are highly prosocial and who respect Hmong culture, the cultural gap exists. Rather than suggesting that children's own involvement in problem behaviors is the cause of conflict in Hmong American families, conflict may be relatively normative in Hmong American families as the older generation lacks understanding of the pressures (to fit in) that youth face and the younger generation does not understand the motivation for parental control and valuation of traditional cultural practices. For example, conflict likely occurs when parental concern is interpreted by children as unfair and children perceive a lack of trust from their parents. When youth see parental concern and restriction as conveying the importance of Hmong cultural traditions and values, it is possible that less conflict will result (Xiong et al., 2004). Moreover, cultural gaps and the resulting acculturative stress and conflict do not necessarily go hand-in-hand with delinquency and poor school outcomes. Consistent with other qualitative studies of Hmong youth, despite cultural gaps between parents and youth, our respondents felt loved by their parents and felt that Hmong parents behave the way they do to prepare their children for "the good life" and to be the "next generation" of Hmong (Lamborn & Moua, 2008).

A key theme in research describing Hmong culture is the gendered socialization that results in a preference for boys. Consistent with previous studies, our focus group participants

suggested that Hmong girls are more tightly controlled and have their behaviors restricted, while boys are generally regarded as having more freedom and as being valued regardless of their actual accomplishments. Although it might be expected that preference for males would be harmful to females, a recent study suggested no gender differences exist in conflict with parents (Lee et al., 2008). Moreover, few of our female respondents seemed to suffer any adverse outcomes associated with being female. Most participants recognized the gendered socialization as simply a part of their culture and few internalized negative or positive messages about what it meant to be male or female. In fact, in single-gender focus groups, it became apparent that girls saw several advantages to being female including have a greater degree of cultural knowledge due to their greater involvement in household tasks and daily proximity to family members. Males, on the other hand, are expected to take on culturally prescribed roles as adults, but feel unprepared and inadequately trained to take on those roles. In the end, the greater freedom given to males may undermine their confidence in taking on gender roles in adulthood.

The Hmong American participants also spoke of changes in reference to gender roles for males and females resulting from academic success of female students. Many participants suggested that Hmong parents increasingly value their Hmong daughters due to their higher academic success compared to boys. If daughters have a greater probability of doing well in school and, thus bringing honor to their family, their perceived value is increased. Again, while the participants in this study clearly understood and were raised to expect gendered socialization, those experiences did not make Hmong females feel unloved. Rather, Hmong females report receiving more affection from parents, feeling closer to their mothers, and as having directly received more cultural training in what it means to be Hmong. While we also expected that girls would be more likely to take on household tasks and responsibilities related to caring for

younger siblings, males also reported having to take on extra tasks inside the home to care for younger siblings. Some respondents indicated that birth order and the number of children in the family would be a greater predictor of involvement in household tasks (rather than gender), which also indicates a surprisingly high degree of gender-role flexibility. This flexibility may also indicate changes in Hmong culture for those youth growing up in the U.S. as how parents value their children's contribution to the family may become less gendered.

A major finding of this study is that a primary source of motivation for Hmong American youth to achieve in school relates to a sense of obligation to parents. Consistent with previous research on Asian American adolescents, these respondents felt that academic success is a means to pay parents back, bring pride and honor to the Hmong, and that academic success is viewed as a collective success that is advantageous for the entire family (Fuligni et al., 1999). Students also felt that what differentiated them (college students) from their peers who had not been as successful academically was having parents who emphasized the importance of achievement by working hard in multiple jobs, taking leadership positions in the Hmong community, and visiting the school when students received awards or when asked by teachers. Given the consistency across studies that felt obligation to parents may motivate teens in immigrant families to succeed, future research may need to consider why or how *some* adolescents feel obligated and others do not. For example, the respondents in this study suggested that while most Hmong American youth may respect and understand their parents' struggle to be in the U.S., only those who perceive their parents as working hard, sending strong messages about the importance of education, and as employing specific strategies to both encourage achievement and punish low achievement will ultimately succeed. Such a line of research would focus more on how parents' inculcate family obligation values in their children rather than the approach previous studies take

in examining how family obligation leads to other adolescent values or behaviors (trying hard in school, sharing resources, or living close to or with parents in adulthood (Fuligni & Pederson, 2002)

These Hmong American participants discussed a variety of parental disciplinary and behavioral strategies designed to promote academic success. Outside the context of Hmong (or perhaps other Asian) culture, some of these behaviors would be classified as coercive, authoritarian, or highly controlling and considered detrimental to academic achievement. However the participants in this study spoke with a sense of fondness when remembering parents' threats, shaming, and punishments for not achieving. Moreover, despite characterizations of Asian parents more globally and Hmong parents more specifically as highly restrictive and authoritarian, many of these participants described parents as providing rewards for achievement rather than punishing low achievement. Respondents frequently reported that parents provided money for getting good grades or that those accepted into college were rewarded with expensive gifts (laptop computers, cellular phones). Clearly Hmong parents engage in a wide variety of strategies that were successful in instilling a sense of education and achievement as important in these participants. What was noteworthy was that respondents described behaviors that ranged from giving money, to verbal support, checking homework, yelling, and to even threats to expel a child from the house as positive, loving, and supportive of education. The only behavior that the participants described with a sense of ambivalence about how it made the young person feel was social comparisons. Although this strategy was only discussed by a few cases (all female), it was noteworthy that rather than perceiving this parenting strategy as inducing motivation, respondents indicated that this strategy made them feel bad. Overall, then, Hmong American youth reported a wide range of behaviors that their parents

relied upon to encourage academic achievement that respondents indicated as conveying love and concern. Given the restricted nature of this sample, such a conclusion should not be generalized across Hmong American youth.

The final theme we identified related to the high achievement of the Hmong American respondents was ethnic identification as a motivation to succeed. Many of our respondents expressed surprise that some peers did not try hard in school or take advantage of educational opportunities. While these respondents often pointed to lax parenting as the root cause of this lack of motivation, many of our respondents discussed wanting to achieve as a means to prove that Hmong are “as good as anyone else”. These youth felt that by doing well in school they would represent all Hmong well by being productive members of the “next generation” of Hmong Americans. These high achieving students likely have internalized socialization messages from their parents both regarding hard work and achievement, but also regarding broader issues regarding what it means to be Hmong and how to move the Hmong, as a group, forward. Such a finding parallels other studies suggesting that cultural socialization can have positive influences in achievement, particularly when it promotes a strong sense of ethnic identity (Supple et al., 2006).

Future research on Hmong American youth specifically and students in immigrant and refugee families more broadly should continue to consider how achievement motivation is influenced and develops. While many Hmong youth likely feel a strong sense of obligation and acknowledge their parents' sacrifices, many do not do well in school. According to the respondents in this study, those students have parents who fail to consistently emphasize the importance of academic achievement. Outside of the family, Hmong American youth may be perceived by school staff as passive and quiet (leading to them being ignored) or may receive

messages from school personnel that college is not a likely possibility. Such school-related factors may lead to Hmong youth not having sufficient motivation to take more challenging courses in school or have the desire to work hard enough to get into a 4-year university. While some students react to this negative “social mirroring” (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001) by internalizing negative attitudes about their own potential to achieve, our respondents appeared motivated by their desire to “step up” and show that Hmong students could be as good as other ethnic groups. What remains a question, however, is what differentiates these highly successful students from other Hmong youth who do not succeed. These respondents faced similar obstacles at school, also had parents with little education or understanding of American peer culture, and also grew up in families with low socioeconomic standing. The difference, according to these respondents, is having parents who are highly supportive and who demand that their children do well. Parents who also specifically tie together achievement with the youths’ familial obligations seemed to induce a high degree of motivation in their children. These findings suggest that it is the combination of a strong sense of familial obligation, a collectivistic attitude, supportive and hard-working parents, and a strong desire to represent the Hmong that may lead to high motivation to achieve for Hmong American youth.

Several limitations to the current study do have the potential to undermine these findings. One specific limitation includes the narrow focus on highly achieving college students. While this focus was deliberate to shift the focus to positive aspects of development for Hmong youth, our findings do little to discover what differentiates high achieving Hmong youth from low achieving Hmong youth. Findings from this study most accurately represent the perceptions of the respondents who were reflecting back on their experiences growing up as Hmong in the U.S. Certain questions pertaining to how certain Hmong individuals might claim a strong sense of

“Hmong pride” as justification for their gang activity while others point to representing the Hmong well as a motivation to achieve are important, but not possible to address with these data. Our findings also might represent the experience of Hmong youth in a region of the U.S. that has experienced rapid growth in the Hmong population but not necessarily Hmong across the U.S.

While the majority of research on Hmong American youth portrays a grim portrait of involvement in deviant behaviors, problems in school, and difficult relationships with parents, few studies have focused on what factors promote positive outcomes for these youth. Findings from the current study suggest that normative family experiences do include a cultural gap that leads to stressful development. Cultural gaps do not necessarily, however, go hand-in-hand with problem behaviors and school failure. Instead, Hmong American youth who feel a strong sense of connection to being Hmong, who achieve as a means to “pay their parents back”, and whose parents encouraged them to succeed view success as tied to the success of the larger Hmong community and as a means to show that Hmong American youth are thriving.



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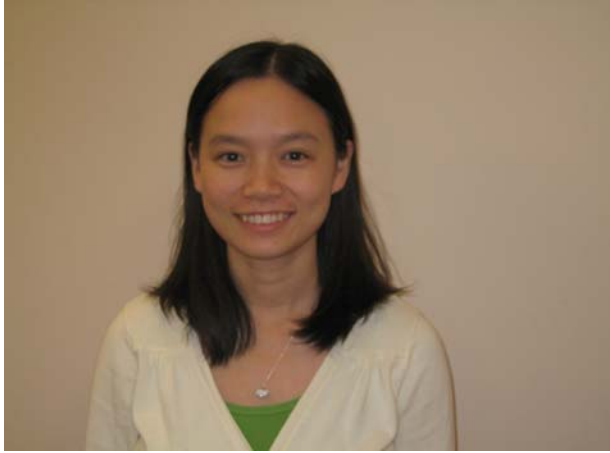
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