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Caught Between Two Worlds: Hmong Youth, Culture, and Socio-Structural Barriers to Integration

by Bao Lo

Ethnic Studies
University of California, Berkeley
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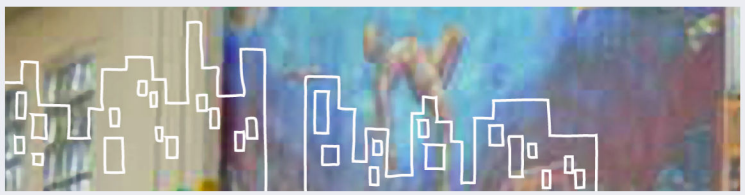

INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF SOCIAL CHANGE

Bao Lo
Ethnic Studies
University of California, Berkeley

bao@berkeley.edu

Studies on the children of post 1965 immigrants recognize that there are various paths to incorporation due to race and class barriers and suggest that a strong adherence to traditional immigrant culture and values helps contemporary immigrants achieve integration. These studies acknowledge that there is not a single core culture of American society into which these immigrants are assimilating. The concept of segmented assimilation has been used to suggest that the process of assimilation is not as linear, simple or inevitable as classical assimilation suggests. Despite its important contribution to the theoretical debates on immigrant integration, segmented assimilation continues to use a cultural argument, suggesting that immigrant culture can explain and account for immigrant integration. Regardless of whether immigrant culture is present to buffer and mediate youth behaviors, some youth still take a path toward downward assimilation due to race, class and gender barriers. Based on data from a survey distributed to Hmong youth at a youth conference and interviews with community members, this study examines the role of race, class and gender and their impact on the incorporation of Hmong youth into American society. The Hmong community, whose migration to the United States was a direct consequence of their participation and involvement in the Vietnam War as U.S. allies, provides an important lens to understand the broader conditions that contribute to the incorporation of other racialized, poor immigrants into American society.

Introduction

Since age 12, Melinda has been waking up at five am everyday to cook for her family. She goes to school during the day but has to be home by five pm to do her chores. As a Hmong girl, she is expected to cook, clean the house, baby-sit, help her parents, get an education, marry well, and never bring shame on her parents. However, Melinda wants to be a regular American teenager as well. She wants to go out with her friends, wear stylish clothes like platform shoes and bell-bottom pants, and have an American name like her friends. She changed her Hmong name to Melinda in the eighth grade. Melinda struggles with being Hmong and her desire to be the average American teenager. Her parents give her many responsibilities and have high expectations of her, especially to protect their family's reputation. However, Melinda longs to be independent. Melinda argues over her parents over dating, clothes and friends. Her parents do not like her clothes or short hair because they think those things make her look like a gangster.

Tired of her responsibilities and the expectations of her parents, she began ditching high school twice a month and hung out with her friends at their houses or at the mall. Her grades slipped from A's to F's. She explained, "I was just so determined to live my own life. It's so hard to live the life my parents want me to. I feel like if I get in trouble, then it's worth it." Her arguments with her parents escalated, her grades were failing, and she had boy troubles. She was very stressed and became depressed about her troubles. During her junior year, she cut her arms with a razor blade, making small cuts until they bled. She never intended to kill herself: "I did it whenever I stressed out. I just like to cut myself to get attention from friends." Her troubles

worsened in the middle of her junior year, pushing her to overdose on Tylenol pain relievers. Again, she said she did not intend to kill herself, "I knew it could kill me, but I was so angry so I just took it to see what would happen. I really just wanted attention. A lot of times I wanted to die. Well, not really to die but to hurt myself." Melinda explained that her depression and stress came from struggling to be an average teenager as a Hmong girl with many responsibilities and expectations from her parents. She said, "I just feel like I missed out on so much. I feel like I'm still trying to catch up." She expressed herself in a poem she wrote in her senior year:

I burnt my arm today
And cut my skin
But no one cares to know
I'll do it again
I hate my life
I have no fate
Angry at the world
Myself I truly hate.

Melinda's story was part of a series of news articles published by the *Fresno Bee* entitled "Lost in America" regarding Hmong teen suicides during August 2002. The articles documented the lives of the eight Hmong teens from Fresno County who had committed suicide since late 1998. The string of suicides accounted for nearly half of Fresno County's teen suicides in the last four years, though the Hmong are just 3% of the region's population. The newspaper reports attempted to comprehend and explain the string of teen suicides among a small immigrant group in Fresno, California (*Fresno Bee* 2002).

The article explained the string of suicides among the Hmong community as a cultural phenomenon, emphasizing the clash of two different cultures, the Hmong and American, as the contributing factor that led to a lost and confused group of Hmong youth who eventually committed suicide. More specifically, it was a cultural conflict between foreign-born Hmong parents and their children that led Hmong teens to contemplate and attempt suicide. The

narrative of Melinda Lee illustrated that the stress she endured from conflicts she had with her parents regarding dating, being an independent teenager, clothing, and friends led her to become so depressed that she cut her arms with a razor blade and tried to jump out of a moving car. The article explains, "Though Melinda's problems are not unlike those of other teenagers, her parents have difficulty dealing with them because they grew up in rural Laos. Their solution has been to impose rules so strict that Melinda feels she's missed out on being a teenager." The article attributes the suicide attempts of Melinda to a culture clash between her and her parents, or a difference of cultural values and expectations between being Hmong and American. The parents are depicted as unable to deal with their teenagers because they are refugees or immigrants, who are ill-equipped with the knowledge and values of Western society. Implicit in this explanation is the assumption that the inability or unwillingness of the Hmong parents to assimilate underlies the problems among Hmong youth. It is assumed that the resolution lies within the parents if they can only adopt the norms of the white, middle class.

Through my research, I am challenging these "culture clash" explanations because these accounts blame the Hmong community for their problems by emphasizing their failure to assimilate. These interpretations assume that the resolution to social problems lies within the individual or rather, the ethnic group. This explanation thus shifts the responsibility away from the State or other public institutions to provide appropriate and adequate resources and services for the Hmong community. My research examines the role of race, class and gender and their impact on the integration of Hmong youth into American society. Studying the Hmong in the U.S. contributes another complex layer of understanding to the experiences of post 1965 immigrants, given that the Hmong migrated to the U.S. as political refugees as a result of their participation in the Vietnam War as U.S. allies. More specifically, the experiences of Hmong

youth provides an important lens to understand the broader conditions that contribute to the integration of other racialized, poor immigrant youth into American society.

Immigrant Adaptation

Earlier immigration research, focused on European immigrants and their children, suggested that assimilation in the form of acceptance and adoption of Anglo-American middle-class standards was an inevitable outcome in a multiethnic society (Park 1950; Warner & Srole 1945; Gordon 1964). However, the mainstream media's depiction of the Hmong community echoes similar concerns about other post-1965 immigrants who have come from Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean and who seem not to be assimilating like earlier European immigrants. Contemporary immigration scholars have responded to these concerns by accounting for the different experiences of the newer immigrants who are more racially and ethnically diverse and suggesting that we allow "accommodation without assimilation" (Zhou & Bankston1998; Waters 1999; Portes & Rumbaut 2000). Furthermore, these studies acknowledge that there is not a single core culture of American society into which these immigrants are assimilating. The concept of segmented assimilation has been used to suggest that the process of assimilation is not as linear, simple or inevitable as classical assimilation suggests.

Segmented assimilation scholars recognize that there are various paths to incorporation due to race and class barriers and suggest that a strong adherence to traditional immigrant culture and values helps contemporary immigrants achieve integration. The first path leads toward upward mobility with successful acculturation and economic integration into the normative structures of middle-class America. The second assumes successful economic integration into the middle class, but with lagged acculturation and deliberate preservation of the immigrant

community's values and solidarity. The third path leads to integration into permanent poverty and assimilation into the "underclass."[1]

Segmented assimilation theory suggests that the immigrant culture is the buffer or protective measure against a downward path into poverty. In their case study of Vietnamese youth in New Orleans, Zhou and Bankston (1998) show that immigrant culture can help immigrant youth more effectively navigate race and class barriers. They argue that immigrant youth who associate with native-born minority youth of an "underclass" culture are more likely to spiral down a path of "downward assimilation", especially without support or control from the immigrant community. Zhou and Bankston explain that the "right" culture that provides the greatest chances of steering immigrant youth toward upward assimilation is the immigrant culture, not the native-born youth culture, particularly that of blacks. For instance, Zhou and Bankston show that non-delinquent Vietnamese youth enjoy traditional Vietnamese music, helping out around the house, and focusing on school. For the delinquent Vietnamese youth, Zhou and Bankston show that these youth like to "hang out" with their peers and like gold necklaces and rap music.

Zhou and Bankston explain that they did not argue that there is anything inherently superior about Vietnamese culture, only that they have used a case study of Vietnamese Americans to show that contemporary immigrants are using their ethnic communities as an institution to maneuver race and class barriers. However, their comparison of non-delinquent and delinquent youth suggested that the non-delinquent youth showed less acculturation and adoption of the native-born low-income youth culture, whereas the delinquent youth resembled more of

[1] Segmented assimilation scholars describe the underclass as residing in highly impoverished urban areas subject to poverty, poor schools, violence and drugs, and a generally disruptive social environment. These neighborhoods are mainly occupied by poor minorities and poorly educated and unskilled immigrants.

the native-born low-income youth. Although they did not explicitly state the superiority of one culture over the other, their comparative analysis suggests that a strong adherence to traditional immigrant culture and values helps social mobility and leads to better outcomes for youth.

As the case study of Zhou and Bankston demonstrates, a "right" kind of culture is assumed to be possible and needed to help contemporary immigrants achieve integration. However, focusing on culture, especially on immigrant culture, to address inequality and barriers to integration perpetuates the model minority thesis, which encourages minorities to pull themselves up by their own "bootstraps" in order to achieve successful integration into American society.[2] Consequently, segmented assimilation suggests that if immigrants have the "right" culture, it is possible to overcome race and class barriers. Segmented assimilation underestimates the power of race and class barriers as they cannot be overcome solely by culture. Despite its important contribution to the theoretical debates on immigrant integration, segmented assimilation continues to use a cultural argument, suggesting that immigrant culture can explain and account for immigrant integration. I argue that regardless of whether immigrant culture is present to buffer and mediate youth behaviors, some youth still take a path toward downward assimilation due to race, class and gender barriers. I am examining the gendered experiences, dual identities of Hmong youth, and structural constraints to understand the protective measures or factors other than culture that facilitate youth behaviors toward a more successful path of assimilation.

[2] The view of Asian Americans as the model minorities has been prominent since 1966 when two articles in national magazines praised the achievements of Japanese and Chinese Americans, who were the two largest Asian American groups at the time. Numerous articles have been published since to praise the virtues and accomplishments of Asian Americans for their educational achievements and economic upward mobility. The model minority image has become more of a burden than a breakthrough for Asian Americans because it diverts attention away from real social and economic problems of Asian American communities (Fong 2002, 60-72).

The Hmong: Their History, Migration and Adjustment

The Hmong have had a relationship with the United States since the Vietnam War. The Vietnam War officially took place only in Vietnam, but Laos was engaged secretly. The U.S. used the CIA to create a secret army of 30,000 Hmong tribesmen in the mountains of northern Laos to combat Pathet Lao forces. The army remained secret to avoid the appearance of violating the 1962 Geneva Accords, which prohibited foreign intervention in Laos. The Secret War went on for nearly 15 years until the communist takeover of Laos occurred in 1975. Some 12,000-15,000 Hmong were evacuated by the CIA and taken to refugee camps in Thailand. Most fled on their own to neighboring Thailand. Subsequently, U.S. intervention led to the massive immigration of the Hmong to the U.S. and various parts of the world. Approximately 90 percent of the Hmong refugees that left Laos have been resettled to the U.S., as a result of their involvement with the United States in the Vietnam War. In all, about 180,000 Hmong refugees have come to the United States and have spread out over many parts of the country, with dense concentrations in particular cities such as Fresno and Sacramento, California and St. Paul, Minnesota (Faderman 1998; Hamilton-Merritt 1993; Pfaff 1995).

Resettlement in the U.S.

Hmong migration to the United States occurred in three waves. Hmong refugees began arriving in the United States in late 1975. About 3,000 Hmong refugees initially moved to the U.S. These refugees tended to be relatively educated, literate and experienced with urban life because they had had extensive contact with American military and support personnel. The first Hmong refugees to arrive were sponsored by voluntary agencies (VOLAGs), churches and individual American residents. Health screening, housing, orientation, ESL classes, job training,

and American values/practices training were provided to Hmong refugees. The second and largest wave of Hmong immigrants arrived in the United States between 1980 and 1990, which accounts for 46% of the Hmong refugees arriving from the Thailand refugee camps. This larger wave resulted from changes in regulations that permitted more Hmong to immigrate to the United States. These Hmong refugees were sponsored largely by the first wave of Hmong who had already been residing in the U.S. (Hmong Resettlement Study 1985).

The third flow of refugees came between 1990 and the present. This group accounts for 39% of the total Hmong refugees. All official refugee camps in Thailand serving the Hmong were closed by the mid-1990s. Many Hmong refugees were forced to leave because the Thai government never officially allowed Hmong resettlement within its borders. The closing of the camps accounts for this third wave of Hmong refugees, though many remained in transit camps or monasteries long after the refugee camps closed.

The U.S. government initially dispersed Hmong refugees all over the country in order to avoid the formation of ethnic enclaves and to lessen the impact of large numbers of refugees in one geographic area. Initial placement was determined by the location of American families and agencies sponsoring Hmong refugees. Cities such as St. Paul, Minnesota, and Portland, Oregon, had had previous experience settling immigrant groups and were chosen to place Hmong refugees. Many Hmong refugees were resettled in the states of Wisconsin, Minnesota, and California. Many Hmong families decided to migrate to a different city after their initial placement, mainly to reunite with their families and clan group. Hmong refugees also decided to resettle in different locations based on job opportunities and more liberal welfare policies. For instance, thousands of Hmong left Oregon and Washington for California in the spring of 1982 when changes in federal resettlement regulations allowed refugees to receive welfare benefits for

only the first 18 months instead of the original 36 months. Many refugees who were unemployed found themselves without financial support and were forced to move.

Another major reason for secondary migration among Hmong refugees was the hope of farming. Farming was an important livelihood for the Hmong in Laos. Without a formal education, many Hmong refugees could not find employment to live sufficiently. Many of them decided to migrate where there would be an opportunity to farm, such as Fresno and other parts of California's Central Valley. The first Hmong families in Fresno had success with farming and as word spread, a Hmong population boomed. Over 20,000 Hmong settled into the Central Valley between 1981 and 1983 (Hmong Resettlement Study 1985). Farming opportunities, family reunification, and liberal welfare policies were the major reasons that Hmong refugees relocated from their initial placement. This history of resettlement and secondary migration explains the large concentration of the Hmong today in states such as California and Minnesota.

Adjustment

This study focuses on youth in the Hmong community, given that there is a large number of first and second generation Hmong youth. The median age of the Hmong population in the U.S. is 16, while 56% of the Hmong population are under the age of 18 and 45% are American born (Hmong 2000 Census Publication 2003). Despite their significant presence and growing numbers, there is little research conducted about the contemporary issues facing the Hmong community, particularly youth. Scholarship about the Hmong tends to focus on the refugee experience and situates themas a displaced people who were forced to immigrate to the U.S. as a result of the Vietnam War (Pfaff 1995; Hamilton-Merritt 1993; Koltyk 1998).

There have been studies conducted on various aspects of Hmong youth acculturation; however, this scholarship has focused mainly on the literacy and schooling of Hmong children (Trueba et al 1990; Lee 2005). Recent ethnographic research has begun to look at the adaptation patterns of Hmong children and adults such as changes in intergenerational relations that threaten the ability of Hmong parents to instill within their children the Hmong ethnic identity, values and traditions (Chan 1994; Faderman 1998; Mote 2004). In particular, Faderman (1998) explains that a role reversal occurs among Hmong children and adults when the young have to teach the elders how to maneuver in the U.S. As a result, the young gain greater independence and are losing sight of the values and customs of the Hmong culture. Also, Chan (1994) notes that changing generational relations are threatening to Hmong elders because the elders regard age hierarchy to be one of the most important for maintaining their ethnicity.

Although these studies provide some understanding of the contemporary issues facing the Hmong community and youth, they tend to focus mainly on the role of culture in explaining the adaptational experiences of Hmong youth. More studies are needed that can move beyond using culture as the primary lens to examine and understand the problems of Hmong youth. I argue that culture alone cannot explain major problems such as Hmong teen suicides (*Fresno Bee* 2002) and gang violence (*Sacramento Bee* 2005).

Research Site and Methodology

This study is based in Sacramento, California, which has a Hmong population of 17,000. It is home to the second largest Hmong population in California after Fresno. In 2002, *Time Magazine* labeled Sacramento as the most racially/ethnically integrated major city in America (Stodghill and Bower 2002). The racial makeup of the city is 47% White, 21% Latino, 16%

Asian American, 15% African American, 1% Native American, and 1% Pacific Islander. Chinese Americans are the largest Asian American subgroup in Sacramento and represent about 30% of the total Asian American population, followed by the Hmong, who constitute 17.3%. Although Chinese Americans represent the largest Asian American subgroup in Sacramento, Hmong Americans are the fastest growing subgroup (Fong and Kim-Ju 2004).

Methods

In this preliminary stage of my research, I conducted surveys with Hmong youth and interviews with Hmong community leaders. A questionnaire was distributed to Hmong youth who attended a youth conference organized by students from the Hmong Club at Grant Union High School in Sacramento and students from the Hmong student organizations at Sacramento City College, UC Davis and California State University (CSU), Sacramento. They organized a one-day conference which was held at CSU, Sacramento on April 28, 2007. About 100 Hmong youth between 13 and 18 years of age from the Sacramento area attended the conference. The purpose of the conference was to focus on the issues and challenges Hmong youth face such as suicide, gangs, teen pregnancy, drugs, and problems with school and parents. Many of the conferences held for Hmong youth in the past have focused mainly on education. This conference gave Hmong youth the chance to focus on issues and challenges they face that are not always related to school. The main goal of the conference was to help Hmong youth connect with other youth to establish support groups and network with Hmong college students.

The questionnaire asked various questions about their school, friends, parents, values, tastes and interests to assess how Hmong youth are adapting in the U.S. As one of the key organizers for this conference, I was able to easily ask for participation from these youth. I

asked participants to complete the questionnaires during the last workshop that addressed some of the issues and challenges that were important to the youth. 51 Hmong youth completed the survey. The average age of the respondents was 16 years, in grades 9th to 12th. Of the total respondents, 82% were U.S. born, while the rest were born in Thailand and immigrated to the U.S. between 1990 and 1994. Females constituted 59% and males constituted 41% of the respondents. Many of the respondents are first or second generation youth who have immigrant parents. The majority of their parents were born in Laos and range between the ages of 30-60 years. The majority of respondents self identify as Hmong or Hmong American. Their self-reported GPA averaged 3.5. The majority of these students do not have any truancy or delinquency problems. 96% feel that getting a college education is important. Thus, the respondents are mostly academic achievers and not representative of the larger population or experiences of Hmong youth in general.

I also interviewed 10 community leaders such as teachers, school administrators, and community-based organization staff who work with Hmong youth and the Hmong community in Sacramento. All of these community leaders are Hmong whom I know from previously working with them. In the interviews, I asked their perspective on the well-being of the Hmong community in Sacramento and what they believed were the major problems facing Hmong youth. My ethnicity is Hmong and I am well aware of the customs and beliefs of the Hmong culture. I also speak and understand the language which gives me an advantage in working with Hmong elders, since many Hmong elders and parents are wary of outsiders. My knowledge and familiarity of appropriate and respectful behavior among the elders and parents allowed me to conduct research with the members of the Hmong community in an appropriate and culturally sensitive manner. I also have nine years of experience working with the Hmong community, the

schools and community-based organizations in Sacramento. I was able to easily access and gain trust from study participants.

I have used these survey and interview results to plan future interviews with parents and youth. My dissertation will explore these themes in more depth but so far, from the survey and interviews, three major themes emerged: gendered experiences, the role of culture, and race and class barriers that impact the integration of Hmong youth. I will discuss these findings in the next section. Afterward, these major themes will be discussed in greater detail with segmented assimilation theory to better explain Hmong youth integration.

Gendered Experiences

The survey and interviews show that gender plays a key role in the experiences of Hmong youth, impacting academic performance, peer association, and risky behaviors. Although the respondents to the questionnaire consisted mostly of academic achievers, there are some main differences between the academic performance of males and females. The males and females have similar GPAs. For instance, 80% of the females say they have a 3.0 GPA or higher, compared to 76% of the males. However, the females seem to be more academically motivated in terms of pursuing a college degree. For example, 90% of the females feel it is very important to go to college, while only 67% of the males feel it is very important to go to college. This supports the comments made by one of the Hmong teachers that females are more academically motivated and successful than males: "In my class, the girls do more homework than the boys, and they do it better than the boys. If the boys do homework, they do it only to finish it. However, some boys are very strong."

A major explanation for the gender difference in academic performance is due to the Hmong cultural expectations that differ for males and females. As the Hmong teacher explains:

> The Hmong culture says that girls are supposed to stay home and help their parents. The guys can relax, do whatever they want yet they're considered the best. That's why they're not trying their best. It is because of these cultural values that make the ladies stronger. The girls are more motivated and doing much better. Even in college, the girls are graduating more than the guys. In five more years, I would say that the females will dominate the males. We are culturally shifting in terms of gender differences in academic performance and even in the families. Usually the male will dominate in the family and go to work. With the gender difference, now the female will go to work and the male will take care of the family.

The teacher feels that the higher achievements of the females in high school will transfer over to college, the workplace, and eventually their families and households, in which many of the Hmong females will transition into more dominating roles. Other members of the Hmong community share the same views about academic performance among males and females and speculate that the number of women in higher education has significantly increased and has quite possibly surpassed the number of men in higher education since the 1980s and 1990s when more Hmong men were achieving a higher education. The change can be attributed to the changing roles and expectations for men and women as the Hmong community slowly adjusts to the norms and values of American society. Historically, Hmong men have received much of the support from their families to pursue an education, whereas Hmong girls were taught to cook and clean and prepare themselves to be a good wife. As the educational opportunities presented themselves to Hmong girls in the U.S., Hmong girls have taken up these opportunities and they have become more successful than males in higher education (Hmong 2000 Census Publication 2003).

The question then is: what happens to the males and where are they, if they are not in college? Can this difference in academic achievement also explain why more males join gangs than females? Mainstream media suggest that many Hmong males are in gangs and have focused mostly on the negatives of Hmong males, portraying them as violent and a threat to society. In

March 2005, a *Sacramento Bee* news article documented that a dozen members of the Hmong community have been shot and nine have died in gang violence since November 2004.

In addition to gang involvement, gender also impacts peer association or the kind of friends Hmong youth choose to have (see Table One). The survey data show that only 13% of the females compared to 57% of the males said they have friends who have dropped out of high school. Furthermore, only 10% of the females compared to 52% of the males said they have friends who joined or are currently in a gang. In addition, only 10% of the females compared to 48% of the males said they have friends who were arrested and put in jail. Also, 37% of the females and 52% of the males said they have friends who drink alcohol on a regular basis. Lastly, 27% of the females and 57% of the males said they have friends who do drugs. In terms of their own risky behaviors, only 17% of the females compared to 43% of the males said they have drank or done drugs.

	Have friends who dropped out of school	**Have friends who are in a gang**	**Have friends who were incarcerated**	**Have friends who drink regularly**	**Have friends who do drugs**	**Has drunk or done drugs**
Males	57%	52%	48%	52%	57%	43%
Females	13%	10%	10%	37%	27%	17%

Table 1: Gender, Peer Associations, and Risky Behaviors

A majority of the males report having friends who dropped out of high school, are currently in a gang or have joined in the past, and who drink alcohol and do drugs. Also, a large portion of the males report using drugs and alcohol themselves. In contrast, the females associate less with friends who can negatively influence them toward a downward path. The males differ

even though they are also academically successful. The males are doing well in school, but also associating themselves with risky activity that indicates that they are between a successful and unsuccessful path or "borderline".

A Hmong teacher at one of the high schools with a large Hmong student population in Sacramento believes many of the Hmong youth who turn to gangs are looking for support and not necessarily violent. He explains:

> I think there are different kinds of meanings for gangs. When we think of gangs, we think they're going to do something bad initially. I think the Hmong kids especially, just need a sense of belonging. They just need to feel that they are a part of something. Their friends help them connect on that aspect. Their friends make them feel like it is okay to not be so perfect. One of my students told me, "My friends make me feel that it's okay to laugh. When I'm at home and if I'm trying to tell a joke, my mom and dad criticize me all the time." Then, every time they get a chance, they would rather hang out with their buddies.

Many of the males are borderline between becoming successful and unsuccessful. The Hmong teacher explains that they are only looking for support from their parents, their schools and larger society. They are not violent as the media portrays or destined to become gang members if they engage in risky behaviors. The females are significantly outperforming the males. However, the females also have their fair share of struggles. These findings suggest that among those who are academically successful, the experiences of Hmong girls and boys differ.

Between Two Worlds

In addition to gender, culture plays a key role in the experiences of Hmong youth. The *Fresno Bee* newspaper articles in 2002 suggested that the Hmong teens who committed suicide struggled with being Hmong-American. Being Hmong-American meant they were Hmong, which meant holding on to the traditional cultural beliefs and values of the Hmong culture, but they also longed to be part of American society. Melinda Lee's story showed how she embraced Hmong culture by wearing traditional Hmong clothing at New Year, but she wanted to belong or

have a sense of belonging to her American identity. She changed her Hmong name, See, into an American one, Melinda. She also wanted to cut her hair and wear clothes that were more stylish, but her father refused and said that would make her look more like a "gangster". Her story showed how she constantly had conflicts with her parents over her tastes and interests in clothes, friends, and boyfriends and dating.

Similarly, 40% of the survey respondents identify as Hmong-American, showing that they adhere to both the Hmong and American cultures. For example, 85% of those who identify as Hmong-American said they like to wear Hmong clothes, 90% eat Hmong food more than other kinds of food, and 80% said they attend regular gatherings and meetings with relatives and the Hmong community. However, only 55% enjoy listening to traditional Hmong music and only 15% said their favorite type of music is Hmong. A majority said their favorite type of music is American such as R&B, Hip Hop, Pop, Country, Rock, etc. Fewer are also involved in clubs at school that relate to their Hmong or Asian culture and identity and fewer said they will most likely marry a Hmong person, compared to youth who identify themselves as just Hmong. The survey data and Melinda's story from the newspaper article show that for some Hmong youth, they do not identify themselves as just Hmong or American but Hmong-American because they see themselves as both.

The newspaper article also suggested that the suicidal tendencies of Melinda resulted from her struggle to have a sense of belonging or identity of both Hmong and American. Data from the survey also show that there is a relationship between culture and risky behaviors and delinquent peers. For instance, Hmong-American youth have more friends involved in gangs and friends who have been arrested and put in jail and/or have been involved in a gang and have drunk or done drugs themselves than youth who identify as just Hmong. One explanation from a

vice-principal can help us understand this relationship between culture and risky behaviors and delinquent peers. He explains:

> When youth do not know where they come from or who they are, they are confused and want to understand the outside world. They start seeking influences outside that are negative to gain friendship, love, or relationships. For the last four years since I have been at Grant High School, the top 10% has been Hmong women after Hmong women. There are some rare occasions when it will be a Hmong male. The males start getting into gangs or seeking negative attention elsewhere and that is when they come to school that they lose respect for adults and for themselves. That's where I see most of the problems. I think that Hmong males are heading the same direction as Hispanic and black males who end up in jail. You see less and less of the Hmong males becoming educated.

The vice-principal feels that Hmong youth can be pressured to join gangs because they do not have a sense of belonging and identity from their Hmong culture. Other teachers support the idea that Hmong culture can help steer Hmong youth toward more positive paths. One teacher comments:

> I think a lot of Hmong kids don't really respect the culture anymore. They don't really understand it. But, I think Hmong culture helps Hmong youth identify who they are. If they know more about the culture, they would have a lot more pride in their culture. They would say, "You know I'm Hmong. I do this because it's me." They wouldn't want to be just like their friends. Sometimes a lot of their friends who are pushing their buttons are the ones that don't know who they really are.

Another Hmong teacher talks about the effect a Hmong class, which is offered as a foreign language class at their school, has had on his students:

> In the Hmong class, they learn their culture and language. They learn their history. We teach them about respect and how to respect their mother and father. With history, we teach them that we used to have a Hmong king a long time ago. Then they know and they take pride. When they know and learn these things, they respect themselves and they start doing good. This shows in their grades and attendance.

One teacher suggests that too much control from the parents such as nagging their children about who they hang out with and immediately judging and labeling their friends as gangsters, actually pushes youth further away. The teacher explains:

> Sometimes, their mom and dad thinks that hanging out with their friends is gang related and yell at them for doing that. They'll ask, "How come you're always hanging out with those gangsters?" But, they're really not up to anything bad. A lot of times, when the parents put that pressure on the kids, they'll say, "You know I don't care what my mom and dad say anymore because they're always thinking of me as a bad person anyway so I don't care." So after a while, as they've been out there with their friends, they just give up their work ethic that their parents have for them.

The teacher suggests that too much control from the parents actually causes conflict for Hmong youth. This control comes from the fact that many Hmong parents are still emotionally and mentally attached to their home country of Laos and expect their children to obey and listen to them and to know and respect the traditional ways of Hmong culture. In contrast, the youth are assimilating faster than their parents and want their parents to give them more support and the freedom to live like an American teenager. These differing views create an intense environment and potential conflict between parents and youth. This may also explain why more Hmong youth from the survey who identify themselves with both the Hmong and American culture have conflict with their parents.

It is clear from the vice-principal, teachers, and the newspaper article on Melinda's story, that culture impacts the choices of Hmong youth. Community members, like segmented assimilation scholars, emphasize that more adherence to Hmong culture will help Hmong youth adjust better while mainstream media proposes it is assimilation into mainstream America, particularly of the parents, that will help youth adjust. All these explanations suggest that the struggle of Hmong youth to have an identity and sense of belonging in both the Hmong and American cultures is the contributing factor to their risky behaviors and paths toward suicide and gangs. However, these explanations have focused mainly on the choices of Hmong youth, suggesting they have more control over their choices to be both Hmong and American than they actually do. As I will discuss further below, there are obstacles and conditions that contribute to the struggle of Hmong youth to find their place within the two worlds that have not been explored with these explanations.

My data suggest that Hmong youth who see themselves as both Hmong and American are struggling to have a sense of belonging or identity in both. The teachers and school

administrators who work with Hmong youth suggest that integration into the Hmong culture can help their adjustment particularly with their academic performance, choice of friends, and social lives and decisions. However, too much control from parents and the faster acculturation rate of the youth make it harder for Hmong youth to find their place within the Hmong culture. These are obstacles that challenge Hmong youth and their choices to be a part of Hmong culture. However, this is only half of their struggle. Hmong youth also struggle to find their place and fit in American culture. The next section will show how race and class barriers do not allow Hmong youth to be fully accepted and integrated into American society.

Race and Class Barriers

Race and class barriers make it harder for Hmong youth to access middle-class American society. For instance, 59% of the survey respondents reported having been discriminated against. 80% of these respondents said they were discriminated against on the basis of their race or immigrant status. Also, 20% of the respondents said they have been discriminated against by someone of authority such as a teacher, school administrator, or the police. One youth advocate discusses how many Hmong youth, especially the males, experience regular police harassment and discrimination:

> I remember, in my experience, when we were just kids and hanging out. The next thing you know a police car comes up and starts harassing everybody, identifying us as future gang members. This happened frequently, more than it should. When police see a lot of young people hang out in a poor neighborhood they come out and question them. How they approach the youth is very threatening. Youth are profiled all the time, especially young people who hang out together. If youth are in an after-school program they are more safe, but when they are out on the street they are either more likely to cause trouble or be pushed towards that direction. When I was living in the north side of Sacramento, a lot of Hmong youth were treated like that.

As the youth advocate explains, unnecessary and constant harassment and policing of youth can actually initiate a violent response from youth in order to protect or assert themselves.

The youth do not only experience harassment and discrimination in their neighborhoods but also in the schools. More importantly, the discrimination Hmong youth face in the school setting affects their academic performance. A vice-principal explains:

> One of our Hmong students was in a high math class, pre-calculus. He was real bright and a sharp kid. He started telling the teacher that the teacher needs to explain to him more because he was not understanding the material. The teacher got fed up and just and went and changed his class to a regular math class. The student asked the teacher, "Why did you give me a D in the class when I was trying to learn. The regular math class is just too easy for me." The student was right but the teacher said the student was starting to argue with the teacher and that is why he was taken out of the class. The teacher said to the student, "No matter what you do, you're going to fail this class." That was the first time that student ever spoke up to the teacher. The student literally challenged the teacher and the teacher felt the need to do something about the student since Hmong students are always quiet. They don't talk back and they always do what they are told so the teacher got really frustrated. That was a form of discrimination on the part of the teacher because the teacher was denying the student's ability to learn and grow based on the teacher's stereotype of what Hmong students are supposed to be.

As this story illustrates, discrimination by an authority such as a teacher negatively impacts the opportunities and outcomes of Hmong youth such as their academic performance. The student was not failing because he was lacking the academic abilities, but he disrupted the teacher's notion of how good Hmong students are supposed to behave.

In addition to discrimination, the Hmong community is also faced with high poverty rates, concentration in poor and unsafe neighborhoods and schools, and limited support and services from the larger community. Asian Americans represent the second highest median household income earners in Sacramento. However, there is vast economic disparity among this group. As Fong and Kim-Ju (2004) have shown, the Hmong, Laotians, and Vietnamese earn an annual household income between $22,000 and $28,000, while the Japanese, Asian Indian, Filipino, Korean and Chinese earn an income between $40,000 and $55,000. Compared to the median household income of $37,049 for the rest of Sacramento, the Hmong, other Southeast Asians and Pacific Islanders fare far worst economically. Additionally, Hmong Americans have the highest poverty rate (46.1%) among Asian Americans compared to twenty percent of Sacramento's population that lives below the poverty line. The Hmong also have one of the

highest unemployment rates (15%) among Asian Americans. Furthermore, 53% of Hmong households receive public assistance income, more than any other Asian American or Pacific Islander subgroup in Sacramento.

Poverty is a persistent challenge for the Hmong community and presents barriers for the youth that impact their academic performance and life choices. Poverty has located the Hmong community in poor and unsafe neighborhoods and schools in which youth do not feel safe because of the presence or potential of violence. For instance, 39% said they feel safe in their neighborhood only some of the time. One coordinator of a program for Hmong youth explains a potential cause of violence and danger in these neighborhoods:

> Gangs are a reality for youth in the Hmong community. The boys I work with, they don't feel comfortable going to the north or different areas of the south side. They know it is a different territory of gangs and they can be targeted because they are different. A drive-by or getting jumped can happen. One of their friend's cars was shot up just by going into the wrong part of town. Gangs occupy those territories, protecting their turf if they see a car they don't recognize. Even mature men who are 28, don't feel comfortable going to certain areas because they know about the gangs and that they'll be targeted.

In addition to their neighborhoods, youth also do not feel safe at their school. For instance, 25% of the respondents said they do not feel safe at their school, 59% said fights often occur between different racial and ethnic groups at their schools, 45% said there are many gangs at their school, 55% said something was stolen from them, 20% said someone threatened to hurt them and 18% said someone offered them drugs at least once at their school. Attending schools where they do not feel safe and where there is the potential for violence threatens their safety and their ability to do well in school and access opportunities.

Poverty also directly affects the educational opportunities and outcomes of Hmong youth. One vice-principal offers his insight on how poverty affects the academic performance of Hmong youth:

> For some Hmong kids, they are struggling in school because of their hierarchy of needs. A lot of them come from a poor background, so they just want to hurry up with school. They don't really

> care about their grades. They just want to graduate in order to look for a job and will not continue with their education. Coming from a poor background, a lot of the kids don't see the long term investment of education. I think they're used to surviving in poor communities. If there wasn't a law for them to go to school, I think a lot of them would not. They would work in a factory or some other kind of job to get a car or something like that.

The vice-principal's comments show that some Hmong youth are not very concerned about their academic performance because they have more urgent needs and priorities such as surviving in their poor communities. This speaks to the challenge of poverty for Hmong youth and how poverty negatively impacts their educational outcome, especially when youth are just trying to get through high school in order to obtain a job to economically sustain themselves.

Another challenge for the Hmong community is the limited resources and programs for their youth and elders. For instance, the Hmong community of Sacramento is served by several community based organizations but there are only two that really provide direct services to the Hmong community. They include Hmong Women's Heritage Association, a non-profit, community-based organization that provides support for Hmong families such as crisis intervention, paraprofessional counseling, and referrals to other county and federal agencies and community based organizations. They also do outreach to the Hmong community, provide translation and interpreting for members of the community and work with Hmong youth to foster leadership skills and development. The other organization in the Sacramento Hmong community is Lao Family Community. They provide English language courses, assist with job placement and training and help refugees through the process of becoming a U.S. citizen. They have also helped to resettle the newest Hmong refugees coming from Thailand since 2004. These two community based organizations have been instrumental in the transition and adjustment of the Hmong in Sacramento since many of their goals have focused specifically on addressing the needs of the Hmong community in Sacramento. However, the resources are scarce and services are limited as there are only these two main community based organizations and funding for

programs is never secure. As one member from the community commented, “We have over 30,000 Hmong people in Sacramento. With a city this size, and we’re not getting enough help, then this becomes a problem for the community.”

Discrimination and aggressive policing of youth and high poverty rates impact the opportunities and choices of Hmong youth to access middle-class American society. Hmong youth are struggling to find their place and fit within American culture but they are harassed, policed and discriminated against, pushing them toward a downward path of crime, violence and even death. Furthermore, their struggle with poverty, such as fulfilling their immediate economic needs, negatively impacts their ability to do well in school and ultimately college. Poverty has also concentrated many Hmong people in poor, unsafe neighborhoods and schools in which youth do not feel safe because of the presence or potential of violence which threatens their safety and educational opportunities. Furthermore, only limited resources and programs are available to address the needs and issues of the Hmong community. These race and class barriers prevent Hmong youth from being fully accepted and integrated into middle-class American society.

Community Response and Support

The response from the Hmong community to address the problems of Hmong youth has been to try to instill stronger Hmong values among the youth, whereas the larger American community imposes interventions such as individual counseling and mental health services and increasing manpower in the Police Department’s gang task force. Even among members of the Hmong and larger community, there is disagreement as to the most effective solution to resolve and prevent these problems among Hmong youth. The mainstream wants the Hmong to

culturally assimilate and utilize mainstream resources such as counseling and mental health services. However, the Hmong want to be able to address these problems with the help and resources they think are appropriate and adequate from the mainstream. Members of the Hmong community say they lack help from the mainstream. One community member from Sacramento suggests:

> I think the resources available from the mainstream are not sufficient in helping or accommodating the amount of Hmong people in Sacramento. The community-based organizations that are providing direct service to help the Hmong community are able to serve only 10% of the Hmong population in Sacramento. Also, they can only get funding for a limited time. Once the funding stops, they are limited in helping the Hmong community. They need sufficient funding that is stable and doesn't go away. This has to come from the mainstream.

Resources offered by the mainstream such as counseling and mental health services are seen as invasive by the Hmong community because members of the community believe these issues should be addressed and discussed with them first. Also, the term "mental health" places a stigma on the community and suggests that something is wrong with them, which prevents members of the community from seeking these kinds of services in the first place. If these kinds of interventions are the only ones offered, then it suggests that the problems of Hmong youth, such as suicide and gangs, are pathological and can be resolved if the individual had counseling, mental health services or stronger enforcement placed on them. One community member explains:

> We need more programs and people who understand them to help these youth. If we can support them now, even though they are in gangs it might help some to turn around. The only reason they haven't turned around is because they feel that lack of support. You need to get someone who has been in their shoes and done what they've done to help these kids. I lived a life similar to these kids and I was able to turn my life around. I spoke to a couple of "borderline" kids, and when they said something about themselves to me I'd say, "You mean this huh? But nobody understands you huh?" Because I went through it, I was able to respond to what they were feeling. They saw that someone who was able to listen to them and give them support. A lot of these kids don't have direction. They don't even see themselves surviving in the next five years. In order to help these kids you need someone who's been in their shoes. Once you can turn them around then they will be ready to listen to you.

As the community member suggests, Hmong youth do not feel supported by their parents, the Hmong community or the larger community. They do not need more people telling them that they are doing something wrong and that they need to be helped or fixed. They need someone who understands them and can listen to them, either because they have been through it themselves or can help without judging or trying to fix them. Gang violence and suicide among Hmong youth are not pathologies that stem from the Hmong culture as mainstream media would like to portray nor can they be resolved through cultural resources, as scholars have suggested. Rather, these youth are calling out for help in their own ways that are not being heard or understood by their own community or the larger community.

Hmong Youth Integration: How Do We Explain It?

Mainstream media say the Hmong culture is to blame, particularly the parents for not culturally assimilating into the American culture to obtain the attitudes and values to effectively raise their children and prevent violence and death. In addition, mainstream media have focused mostly on the negatives of the community such as violence in the Hmong community, portraying the men especially as violent or members of gangs. This is evident from the recent Hollywood film “Gran Torino”, in which many of the Hmong males are portrayed as violent gang members. This kind of portrayal gives the perception that Hmong men are not succeeding and are often violent and a menace to society. In contrast, immigration scholars claim that immigrant culture can help immigrant youth toward an upward path to assimilation (Zhou & Bankston 1998; Waters 1999; Portes & Rumbaut 2000). My study with Hmong youth has challenged the use of both of these cultural explanations; instead, I try to account for the role race, class, and gender play in the adjustment and integration of Hmong Americans.

Although my study is limited in providing a detailed description of the lives of Hmong youth, it is the first stage of my research. In the second stage of my research, I will conduct in-depth interviews with both youth and their parents to get at their lived realities. This study is not a representative sample of Hmong youth, but the findings from this research help present some of the major problems and successes of Hmong youth and offer an explanation. The survey and interviews show that gender plays a key role in the experiences of Hmong youth, impacting academic performance, peer association, and gang involvement. The females are more academically motivated than the males and aspire to obtain a college degree, while many of the males are borderline, or between becoming successful and unsuccessful, as shown by their peer association and involvement in risky behaviors such as alcohol consumption and drug use.

Furthermore, culture does impact Hmong youth experiences, but in ways that differ from what the mainstream and immigration scholars suggest. Culture can help and hurt their adjustment. It was suggested by the community leaders that Hmong culture can help Hmong youth achieve an identity and a sense of belonging, which then helps them become more motivated to academically achieve and be successful. However, too much control from parents and the faster acculturation rate of the youth become barriers for youth to access Hmong culture. These barriers negatively impact Hmong youth and their choices to be a part of Hmong culture. Additionally, Hmong youth are also struggling to find their place in American culture, but race and class barriers prevent them from accessing the opportunities and values of middle-class America that can steer them toward an upward path toward assimilation, as immigration scholars suggest.

Segmented assimilation theory suggests that the immigrant community, particularly the immigrant culture, is a resource to help immigrant youth achieve integration. However, the data

also show that immigrant culture can hinder Hmong youth integration as seen with their involvement in risky behaviors, gangs, and suicide. Apparently, too much control from the parents pushes youth away and toward a downward path. Segmented assimilation theory suggests that the immigrant community and culture is a resource for immigrants but for the Hmong community, it is a barrier to their integration in some ways. Furthermore, the mainstream suggests that assimilation is a resource for the integration of the Hmong community and assumes it can be easily obtained and is inevitable. However, race and class barriers prevent the community and youth from accessing middle-class American society. Also, race and class barriers play key roles in the lived experiences of Hmong youth, which segmented assimilation theory underestimates by emphasizing culture as the key resource in the integration of contemporary immigrants. As demonstrated with Hmong youth, the cultural resources of the community become even harder for immigrant youth to access when culture becomes a site of contestation and conflict. Further research is needed to understand the realities of Hmong youth and to adjust the segmented assimilation model of immigrant integration to more effectively capture the lived experiences of Hmong youth and other immigrant youth who share similar experiences.

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INSTITUTE FOR
THE STUDY OF
SOCIAL CHANGE

2420 Bowditch Street #5670
Berkeley, CA 94720-5670

tel: 510-642-0813
fax: 510-642-8674

email: ISSC@berkeley.edu
web: http://issc.berkeley.edu