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### Publication Date

2013

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

The Second Generation Story of Hmong Americans

By

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A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Ethnic Studies

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

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Fall 2013



Abstract

The Second Generation Story of Hmong Americans

By

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Doctor of Philosophy in Ethnic Studies

University of California, Berkeley

Professor David Montejano, Chair

Research on the second generation of post 1965 immigrants has largely explained the integration of these youth into American society as an issue of human capital and ethnicity. The emphasis on ethnicity as strategy for upward mobility, such as maintaining ethnic attachment, employing “the best of both worlds”, or assimilating into a multicultural mainstream, downplays the tension girls experience within the immigrant culture, and simplifies the forces of racialization that make the boys susceptible to downward assimilation. Based on surveys and interviews with Hmong youth (ages 13-18) from Sacramento, California, my study of second generation Hmong Americans extends this research to show how gender and ethnicity matter for incorporation. My findings point to different integration pathways for boys and girls, with the girls having a more promising pathway with higher levels of academic achievement and lower levels of involvement with risky behaviors than the boys. The girls experience unpleasant and difficult experiences within the ethnic culture despite having positive outcomes; whereas, the boys face more overt discrimination and hostility in mainstream society that make them susceptible to downward assimilation despite their attachment to the ethnic culture and community. This study contributes knowledge about second generation Hmong Americans, who constitute the growing population of Southeast Asian refugee children in the United States.

## Table of Contents

Preface

Acknowledgments

**Chapter 1 Introduction: Gender and Ethnicity among the Second Generation**

**Chapter 2 The Hmong in the United States: Migration, Resettlement, and  
Integration**

**Chapter 3 Hmong Youth Assimilation**

**Chapter 4 Hmong Girls: Upward Assimilation at a Cost**

**Chapter 5 Hmong Boys: Downward Assimilation despite Ethnic Attachment**

**Chapter 6 Conclusion: Reconsidering the Second Generation Story**

## Preface

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 with her parents about 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, unknown immigrant group in Fresno, California (*Fresno Bee*, 11-27 August 2002).

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 and continued to hold onto the traditions and values of the 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 to be more stylish and accepting to her friends. Her parents objected because they believed those things made her look more like a "gangster". Her story showed how she constantly conflicted with her parents over her preference of American tastes and interests in clothing and dating. Melinda's story is an example of some of the struggles second generation Hmong youth experience within their home life, particularly among the girls, as they adjust to American 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. The news article explained that Hmong youth who got involved in gangs usually came from two parent homes. Even when their parents provided them with guidance, they chose not to listen to their parents because it was their individual choice to join a gang. The newspaper article also discussed the problem of gang violence in the Hmong community as largely a male phenomenon. Problems of teen suicide and gang violence were previously documented in local newspapers in the two largest Hmong communities in Fresno and Sacramento, California. The newspapers' depictions of these problems suggest there is a growing phenomenon among this segment of the Hmong population and call attention to addressing the needs and concerns of second generation Hmong youth. My research focuses specifically on the second generation Hmong in Sacramento to shed some light and understanding of these issues.

My study on second generation Hmong Americans contributes knowledge about this growing segment of the U.S. Hmong population. A study of second generation Hmong Americans contributes to our understanding of post 1965 immigrants. Similar to other Southeast Asian refugees, the Hmong migrated to the U.S. as political refugees due to the Vietnam War. Due to their involvement in the War as U.S. allies, the Hmong were resettled mainly in this country and began arriving in the United States in the mid 1970s. Like other Southeast Asian refugees, the Hmong were widely dispersed throughout the country during resettlement efforts. Today, the Hmong are concentrated in cities such as Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota and Fresno and Sacramento, California, making these groups important in these places.

The Hmong American experience in academic scholarship has been focused mainly on the first generation, such as their refugee experience and resettlement in the United States. Studies on second generation Hmong Americans have been relatively few. The number of

Hmong being born in the United States is increasing and suggests that the refugee model is no longer sufficient in understanding issues in the community. Hmong teen suicide and gang involvement that were documented by local newspapers in the Sacramento and Fresno regions of California attest to some of the issues the second generation may be experiencing that are different from first generation Hmong Americans.

My study of Hmong youth in Sacramento, California shows that gender is important to their story. Hmong boys and girls follow different assimilation pathways. The girls have a more promising pathway toward middle-class status and educational attainment while the boys are heading toward a pathway of downward assimilation with other poor, minority youth. Furthermore, the different experiences of the boys and girls within their home life and mainstream society challenges some of the existing explanations and use of ethnicity or immigrant culture as helping outcomes of the second generation. For instance, the girls experience unpleasant and difficult lived experiences within immigrant culture despite having positive outcomes; whereas, the boys face more overt discrimination and hostility in mainstream society that make them susceptible to downward assimilation despite their attachment to the ethnic culture and community.

My pursuit of the Ph.D. has been to understand and examine the story of second generation Hmong youth in more depth. Also, I am a second generation Hmong American with Hmong refugee parents, which help me relate to the experiences of other second generation Hmong youth. Similar to other second generation Hmong youth, I was born in the Thailand refugee camps after the War and came to the United States at a very young age. I have also had the opportunity to learn about the experiences of other second generation Hmong youth with my community and work experiences. I taught at a high school in Sacramento, California in which the student population was 30% Hmong. The student population was diverse and culturally rich with African Americans, Latinos, Whites, Pacific Islanders, Filipinos, Southeast Asians, Asian Indians, and Native American students. As 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher, I found myself taking on the role as a counselor to Hmong students who dropped out of school due to problems at home, and those who were delinquent. I learned of their struggles at home with their parents, problems related to school and peers, and fights and gang issues on and off campus.

In addition to being a high school teacher, I was also the program coordinator for the Hmong Women's Circle Program (HWC), a prevention program aimed at addressing the needs and celebrating the identities of Hmong female teens. This program focused mainly on Hmong girls in their adolescent years to help provide support for their development and for issues related to their adjustment in American society. Through this program, I witnessed the challenges Hmong girls faced including conflicts they experienced within the culture and with their parents. The girls in our program expressed that the ways they dealt with issues at home and with the culture were through resentment, compliance, and/or rebellion. A few shared that they had even contemplated and attempted suicide. My community, work, and life experiences have led me to embark on a study of second generation Hmong Americans to understand their situation in the hopes that their needs and concerns will be adequately addressed.



## Acknowledgments

I am extremely grateful to everyone who has been part of my journey to completing the Ph.D. First, I am thankful for the mentors that provided me with critical feedback and unending support. I thank my chair, Professor David Montejano, for spending endless office hours with me to revise and complete the dissertation. I also thank Professor Irene Bloemraad and Professor Michael Omi for their extensive comments that helped to advance my thinking and writing of the dissertation. I benefited immensely from the mentoring and funding provided by UC Berkeley's Institute for the Study of Social Change (ISSC). Christine Trost, Deborah Lustig, and David Minkus from ISSC provided me with limitless mentoring and support. Funding from the Center for the Study of Race and Gender, the Department of Ethnic Studies, and the UC Office of the President helped with the completion of this dissertation. I appreciate the ongoing support of my colleagues at UC Berkeley. Our shared experience of this journey has kept me afloat. I am indebted to the youth in this study who provided us the gift of understanding the second generation story in greater depth.

Acquiring a Ph.D. was an enormous undertaking that required me to sacrifice much of my time with my family and friends and I am indebted to them for their patience and understanding. I am grateful for my friends who support and love me regardless of whether I am at my best or at my worst. I thank my four brothers and two sisters for their support and love. I also thank my uncles, aunts, cousins, and extended family members. I owe my grandmother and my parents the greatest praise because it was their hard work, love, and faith that helped me achieve. I am especially grateful for this accomplishment because it is for my father who passed away before the completion of my doctoral degree. I am proud that his dream of a higher education was lived through me.

## Chapter 1

### Introduction: Gender and Ethnicity among the Second Generation

Since the mid-1960s, immigrants have mainly come from Asia, Latin American, and the Caribbean. They consisted of both low and high human capital. The 2010 Census estimates that almost 13% of the total U.S. population is foreign-born. It is estimated that if the “new” immigrants from these countries continue to account for the larger share of immigration, the population of the U.S. will acquire an additional 80 million as a direct or indirect consequence by 2050.<sup>1</sup> Immigration plays a significant role in our future population growth as the number of immigrants and their offspring continue to grow. Due to their diversity and growing numbers, the ability of contemporary immigrants and their offspring to assimilate and be incorporated into American society has become a central issue for academic discussion and policy debate. Scholars of immigrant integration advocate examining the success or failures of the “new second generation” as they are better indicators of how contemporary immigrants are faring and how subsequent generations will succeed.<sup>2</sup> As sociologists Alejandro Portes and Ruben Rumbaut (2001) define, the second generation are native-born children of foreign parents or foreign-born children who were brought to the United States before adolescence. Portes and Rumbaut argue that the social and economic integration of the second generation should be of particular concern to Americans because this group is still relatively young. They grow up American and are expected to be an integral part of American society.

The Hmong youth in this study are either native-born children of foreign parents or foreign-born children who were brought to the United States before adolescence and are, therefore, classified as second generation. Sixty percent of the total Hmong population in the United States is American born, with 31% under the age of 18. The growing number of American-born children among the U.S. Hmong population makes this segment of the population an important focus of study. Despite the significant presence and growing population of the second generation Hmong youth, little is known about their experiences. Much of the scholarship about the Hmong has focused mainly on refugees, and has situated their experience in the United States as a displaced people who were forced to immigrate to the U.S. as a result of the Vietnam War.<sup>3</sup> Research on the adaptation of Southeast Asian refugees and their children has largely documented the experiences of the Vietnamese, while some have begun to focus on Cambodians.<sup>4</sup> Research on second generation Hmong youth has been relatively few. This study contributes knowledge about second generation Hmong Americans, who constitute the growing population of Southeast Asian refugee children in the United States.

Like other Southeast Asians in the United States, the situation of the Hmong challenges the perception of Asian Americans as the model minority. Studies that emerged during the 1980s praised the newest group of Asian immigrants, particularly Southeast Asian refugee students who were mainly Vietnamese, as the exemplary immigrant minorities. These studies focused on the role of culture to explain immigrant minority youth integration. For instance, Caplan et al. (1991) explained the success of Southeast Asian students as a result of their values of hard work and education. Furthermore, Rutledge (1992) expressed how education has always been extremely important to the Vietnamese since it brings high honor and value to families. Despite the transition to a “strange” system, Vietnamese children have successfully transferred over these values to achieve in American classrooms. These studies used the argument of cultural

differences to account for disparities of educational achievement among immigrants and minorities, and have allowed little room for discussion of any barriers these immigrants might have faced due to race, class, or gender.<sup>5</sup> The attentiveness to culture in explaining the integration of Vietnamese refugees also masks the differential patterns of adaptation among members of this group. As sociologists Portes and Rumbaut (2001) have argued, the divergent backgrounds of contemporary immigrants create very different opportunities and resources for its offspring.

The Vietnamese entered the United States in three different waves and were made up of distinct socio-economic backgrounds that have impacted the assimilation of this group. The first wave of Vietnamese came after the fall of Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam, to the North Vietnamese troops in 1975 and consisted mostly of exiles such as military personnel, professionals, government officials, wealthy business owners, and members of the Catholic Church. This first wave was generally more westernized and consisted of the educated urban elite and middle class. The second wave of Vietnamese consisted of the boat people or those who escaped Vietnam by sea and were generally less educated, urbanized and westernized. These refugees suffered under the communist regimes and were unable to leave their countries immediately before or after the new government took control. The third wave consisted mainly of relatives of permanently settled refugees, Amerasians, and former reeducation camp internees.<sup>6</sup> Given the distinct socio-economic background of the Vietnamese population, there are different adaptation patterns that have been overlooked by existing studies on this group. Similar to the second wave of refugees, the majority of Hmong refugees who have been resettled in the United States are generally less educated, urbanized and westernized. Also, unlike the Vietnamese who had a larger disparity of human capital among members of its group, the majority of Hmong possessed low human capital when they entered the United States. This may explain why the Hmong have not been able to achieve the same levels of education and economic success of other Asian Americans. The experiences of the Hmong contribute to our understanding of the different Southeast Asian groups and show the diversity within Asian Americans.

### **The Debates on Second Generation Incorporation**

Immigrant integration, or incorporation, describes the processes by which they become part of the host society. Assimilation is one type of the incorporation process in which immigrants are eventually absorbed into the mainstream of the host society.<sup>7</sup> The old model, or the straight line theory, defined successful assimilation as Americanization (full acculturation of Anglo-Saxon norms) and economic mobility, which was contingent upon high human capital (education and the resources immigrants bring with them) and the ability to become fully and unambiguously white.<sup>8</sup> Immigrants and their children would have to adopt the ways and values of the native-born majority, mainly that of the Anglo-American middle-class. The success of the second generation came from the distancing of parents and adoption of the dominant group.<sup>9</sup> Recent studies on immigrant incorporation argues that the straight line model is not applicable in understanding the experiences of post 1965 immigrants, as the model is limited to viewing assimilation as a core American culture of Anglo-Saxon, middle class norms. These scholars argue that assimilation today does not mean having to completely give up one's ethnic culture in order to achieve economic mobility. For instance, scholars of segmented assimilation argue that selective acculturation, which means economic mobility and ethnic distinctiveness, offers the

best pathway for the second generation. Similarly, Alba and Nee (2003) suggest that immigrants and their children can enter the American mainstream without having to give up their ethnic cultures because today's mainstream is more accepting and accommodating of ethnic diversity. Additionally, Kasinitz and his associates (2011) believe keeping the best traits of an ethnic culture along with the norms and values of American culture offer the best possibilities for the second generation.

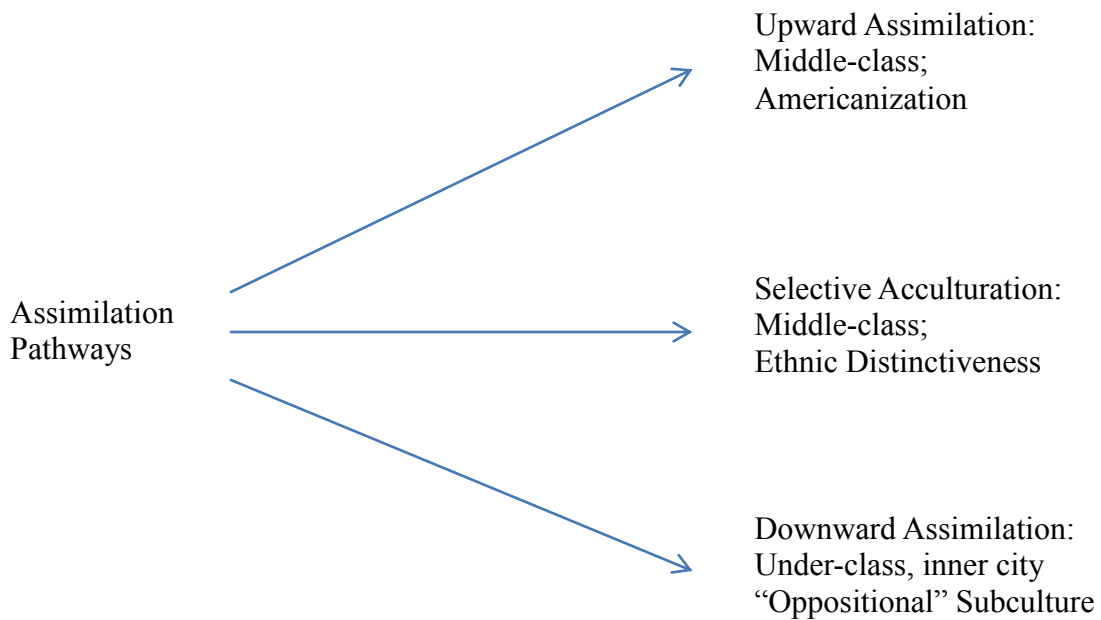
Alba and Nee (2003) and Kasinitz and his associates (2011) believe the second generation, especially those with parents of high human capital, will follow a pathway into a multicultural mainstream that is more accepting and accommodating of ethnic diversity and new immigrants. In contrast, Portes and Rumbaut (2001) argue that the second generation is following divergent pathways into different segments of American society that include a mainstream of white, middle-class norms, an ethnic community with economic attainment, and a "rainbow" underclass of poor minorities. Downward assimilation of the second generation is concentrated among groups that have low human capital, a negative mode of incorporation, and little or no immigrant advantage. Although there is agreement that high human capital leads to better outcomes, these scholars offer varying opinions about the meaning of assimilation and its determinants for new immigrants and their children. Particularly, opinions differ about how ethnic culture or their parents' culture from the sending country affects the incorporation of the second generation. For instance, Alba and Nee (2003) view assimilation for the children of new immigrants as economic mobility, which is contingent upon high human capital as well as acculturation into a multicultural mainstream. They believe assimilation into a multicultural mainstream America offers the best possibilities for new immigrants and their children. Similarly, Kasinitz and his associates (2011) argue that successful assimilation for the second generation means economic mobility and achieving higher status, education, and integration into mainstream than their immigrant parents. The best outcomes for the second generation come from their ability to be "in-between" or choose the best of both worlds (the immigrant culture and American norms). Alba and Nee (2003) and Kasinitz and his associates (2011) believe new immigrants can join the American mainstream much more easily because today's mainstream is multicultural because it is made up of immigrants who are also ethnically diverse and can provide more acceptance and tolerance of diversity. In contrast, scholars of segmented assimilation are less optimistic about the American mainstream as being welcoming and accommodating to ethnic diversity. Scholars of segmented assimilation believe the context of reception is unfavorable particularly for immigrants with low human capital, and thus stress that they have some agency in the form of social capital or ethnic networks and community resources to overcome these obstacles. For scholars of the segmented assimilation theory, an "immigrant advantage" is key for those who experience a negative mode of incorporation such as racism and with low human capital.

In their longitudinal study in Miami and San Diego, sociologists Portes and Rumbaut (2001), followed the achievements of immigrant youths from the 8<sup>th</sup> grade to their mid- twenties. They found that second-generation youth benefit from the immigrant advantages of their parents, such as strong ties to the ethnic culture and community that offer networks and values for second generation mobility. They saw the ethnic or immigrant community and culture as a resource that could steer immigrant youth away from an "oppositional" youth culture and toward a successful integration pathway. Those youth who were alienated from their culture or community could not

be protected and thus ended up on the downward path of assimilation. Portes and Rumbaut, in dealing with these possible outcomes, came up with the idea of “segmented assimilation”.<sup>10</sup>

The segmented assimilation model proposes three possible paths of second generation assimilation: 1) upward mobility toward complete acculturation and economic integration into the normative structures of middle-class America; 2) economic integration into the middle class, but with lagged acculturation and deliberate preservation of the community’s ethnic values and solidarity; or 3) downward mobility of acculturation and parallel integration into the underclass. The path of selective acculturation emphasizes the usefulness of ethnic distinctiveness or attachment for social mobility. This preferred pathway is contingent upon human capital from the first generation, a favorable context of reception (such as supportive government policies and positive attitudes of the native population), and having an immigrant advantage.<sup>11</sup> Figure 1.1 illustrates the different assimilation pathways of the segmented assimilation model.

**Figure 1.1 Segmented Assimilation and Assimilation Pathways**



## *Segmented Assimilation and Hmong Youth*

Although the different approaches contribute to an understanding of the possibilities for second generation Hmong youth, the segmented assimilation theory offers the most applicable approach for the experiences of the Hmong and their offspring. Given the low human capital of the parents and their inability to achieve the same levels of education and economic success of other Asian Americans, second generation Hmong youth are more susceptible to a downward assimilation pathway. According to segmented assimilation theory, Hmong youth are at higher risk of downward assimilation due to the low human capital of their immigrant parents and a negative mode of incorporation such as racism. Ethnic attachment provides Hmong youth support toward upward assimilation as the ethnically attached Hmong youth have higher academic achievement and aspirations than the more assimilated youth. Although my findings resonate with the claims of segmented assimilation theory that ethnic attachment leads to better school outcomes among both girls and boys, the stories of the girls showed that their successes came at a cost of a difficult lived experience within the immigrant culture. Segmented assimilation theory emphasizes immigrant culture as a form of agency for contemporary immigrants and their children, especially those of low human capital and who experience a negative mode of incorporation. However, it comes at a cost for girls, which gets minimized by the story of ethnicity told by the segmented assimilation theory.

The survey data also shows that boys have higher levels of involvement with risky behaviors, and points to how differences along degree of assimilation does not matter much for Hmong boys and downward assimilation. For instance, being ethnically attached does not entirely protect Hmong boys from downward assimilation because the less assimilated boys also have high levels of involvement with risky behaviors. Also, I found that downward assimilation was more prevalent among the boys than the girls, given the experiences of Hmong boys with a negative mode of incorporation such as racism. My findings are similar to the study by Haller, Portes, and Lynch (2011) who showed that downward assimilation was concentrated among second generation males of Mexican and Black Caribbean descent. The experiences with discrimination of the boys, despite degree of assimilation, illustrates that possessing a so-called “immigrant advantage” does not protect them entirely from a downward assimilation.

Although useful for understanding the diverse experiences and integration of new immigrants, segmented assimilation theory lacks a thorough discussion of gender, more specifically how gender illuminates our understanding of the different assimilation pathways for males and females. The Hmong youth, in this study, suggest that their trajectories follow the pathways of the segmented assimilation model but the outcomes vary by gender. My research indicates gendered pathways of second generation incorporation, or that boys and girls have different assimilation pathways and processes of integration. The gendered pathways of second generation youth are attributable to the different experiences of the boys and girls within their home life and in dominant society.

The literature on the second generation of contemporary immigrants has largely addressed what the incorporation of the second generation will look like. This research has also focused mainly on human capital and ethnicity to explain second generation incorporation, and misses the role of gender in the lives of the second generation. The question of gender and how it impacts second generation incorporation remains unanswered. My research shows evident

gender differences among the academic performance and risky behaviors of the boys and girls that have not been thoroughly examined by the segmented assimilation theory or the other approaches to second generation incorporation. Also, the focus on ethnicity as strategy (whether it is ethnic attachment or utilizing the best of both worlds) or assimilation into a multicultural mainstream downplays the tension girls experience within the immigrant culture, and simplifies the forces of racialization that make the boys susceptible to downward assimilation. The girls may employ ethnicity at an advantage, but it comes at a cost. The higher involvement of boys with risky behaviors indicate that downward assimilation may have more to do with their racialized experiences in dominant society and less to do with how the second generation employs their ethnicity. The current literature should rely less on culture, particularly immigrant culture, in predicting mobility as culture does not do much for upward mobility, either because the positive comes at a cost for girls, or because racism and gender subordination are so strong that culture does little to help the mobility of boys. My study helps to extend the existing research of the second generation with an understanding of how gender and ethnicity matter for incorporation. The questions that are central to my study are: How does gender impact second generation incorporation and how do the experiences of boys and girls within their community and dominant society contribute to their different pathways? Finally, in what ways does ethnicity matter for incorporation?

### **Ethnic Culture and Upward Assimilation**

Researchers of the second generation have assumed that culture matters and influences the process of incorporation into American society, including academic achievement. However, the proposals of ethnicity as a strategy (whether it is ethnic attachment or utilizing the best of both worlds) or assimilation into a multicultural mainstream downplay the tensions for girls and the negative experiences they have within the home and immigrant culture. The explanations of ethnic culture offered by these approaches are too simplistic and problematic to understand the realities of Hmong youth. I offer a more nuanced understanding of the role of ethnic culture on second generation adjustment to extend these studies.

Most of the existing studies that discuss the role of ethnic culture are too quick to praise ethnicity in predicting mobility or a successful assimilation pathway. These studies downplay the hardships that girls experience within the immigrant culture. For instance, studies of segmented assimilation tells the story of how culture is particularly useful for the girls because it offers protection from outside influences such as the involvement in risky behaviors and a path toward downward assimilation.<sup>12</sup> Sociologists Min Zhou and Carl Bankston (1998) found in their study with Vietnamese youth that social control or protection provided by the ethnic culture, the parents, and the community produced positive outcomes such as educational attainment, particularly among the girls, as the culture was stricter with females. Similarly, anthropologist Margaret Gibson (1998) showed that the traditional values enforced strict rules and boundaries to help protect and shield Sikh girls from engaging in risky behaviors. Laurie Olsen (1998) also demonstrated that strict parental monitoring of female behavior led girls to excel academically since they were able to perform or exercise their freedom and individuality in the classroom.

Studies of the segmented assimilation theory are accurate to claim that the outcomes for girls are mainly positive. However, their praise of ethnicity in helping mobility downplays the hardships girls experience within the ethnic culture. Although girls have positive outcomes as a

result of their attachment to ethnic culture, they really have to struggle in the process of achieving those outcomes. The process to achieve positive outcomes for young girls is difficult and even outright oppressive within the ethnic culture and home life. The process of integrating into American society for females deserves greater attention through a critical analysis of gender within the home and community life. Among studies of segmented assimilation, the emphasis and focus on the benefits and protection offered by the immigrant culture to protect and shield girls make the culture, and not gender, a more prominent explanation for the successful integration of second generation youth.

A few studies have provided a glimpse of the difficulties of the home life and culture for immigrant girls. For instance, professors of education and psychology, Marcelo Suarez-Orozco and Carola Suarez-Orozco (2001), have argued that the forces of migration generate opportunities and conflicts as women gain greater freedom and independence outside the home and adopt new cultural models and social practices within the home. For immigrant girls, their behaviors are heavily restricted within a home that seems unfair or even oppressive. Consequently, the girls outperformed the boys academically because the harsh restrictions of the parents and culture push the girls to utilize school and education as an outlet to live out their freedom. Although the Suarez-Orozco's started to explore aspects of the conflict and difficulties these girls face within the ethnic culture and community, they focused more on the benefits of the protection offered by parents and culture, such as the academic achievement of the girls. Their discussion on gender, home life, and culture lacked an in-depth critical analysis of the difficulties and conflict experienced by the girls.

Education professor Vivian Louie (2004) takes a more critical approach to examining the home life through the lens of gender. Louie pays attention to the contradictions arising from changing gender norms as a result of migration. Rather than suggesting that the immigrant culture "protects" girls, which other studies have used to account for why girls do well academically, Louie shows how immigrant culture sends contradictory messages for boys and girls about academic achievement and home life. For instance, appropriate standards of female behavior and a gendered division of labor was enforced for girls in the home and not for boys. At the same time, both girls and boys are given the same expectations to graduate from college and achieve financial freedom. Louie argues that contradictory messages reflect unequal gender relations in the home of immigrant families that further pushed the girls to excel at school.

Existing studies on integration, especially on the second generation, are not critical enough of the immigrant home and culture to show the harsh lived experiences of girls. A more critical analysis and evaluation of the home and culture is needed to challenge the role of ethnic culture in the incorporation of second generation females. The success story of the second generation is one about gender that highlights the more difficult experiences of the girls within the immigrant culture and home life. The gendered experiences of Hmong youth highlight the need to complicate and problematize culture as an explanation of second generation incorporation. The way that gender is experienced and lived within immigrant culture highlights the need to challenge the romanticization that culture helps and benefits immigrants and their ability to integrate successfully. Although immigrant culture may protect girls from engaging in risky behaviors and delinquency, the stories of the Hmong girls show that being integrated in the immigrant culture and community comes at a cost.



My findings with Hmong youth are consistent with the story that immigrant culture helps mobility, especially for girls. Gender differences in academic performance and risky behaviors such as gang involvement, highlight that more boys are on the path toward downward assimilation. This can be seen with their higher involvement with their lower levels of academic achievement. In contrast, more Hmong girls are achieving educational success and have a more successful pathway. The girls benefit and are protected by Hmong culture, but at a cost. For instance, the girls in my study talked about “having to do all the chores in the house while the boys get to come home, relax, and play games.” The boys seem to have a longer leash and more flexible boundaries within the Hmong culture and community. The harsher constraints placed on girls may also explain why more girls achieve academic success as they see and use education as an outlet. One girl explained how her motivation to do well in school comes from “having to fight for her happiness.” She sees school and her education as a way to obtain her freedom. For the girls, ethnic attachment comes as a double-edged sword: educational success and a harsh lived experience.

### **Racialization and Downward Assimilation**

Racialization is also central to the story of the second generation, particularly for males, and challenges the claim that ethnicity helps mobility. Racialization describes the process by which meanings and representations of race are assigned to groups that treat them differently. Through the process of racialization, the position of Hmong boys below other racial groups and outside American mainstream culture were reinforced and realized. The racial and ethnic identities and gender of Asian, Hmong, and male were viewed and treated as violent, deviant, criminal, sissy, and punk. Consequently, Hmong boys were subjected to subordination at the hands of more dominant groups and suffered institutional discriminatory practices by authorities such as the police. Violence and physical aggression became a response. Hmong boys used resistance largely to racial discrimination and gender subordination. They were forced to engage in violence to lay claim to an ethnic pride and masculinity that was denied them. Their racialized experiences made them susceptible to a pathway of downward assimilation despite protection of their immigrant culture or community.

Russell Jeung (2002) explains that in poor urban neighborhoods, ethnic groups find themselves pitted against one another in situations where African Americans feel that Asians are at the top of the socioeconomic ladder. At the same time Southeast Asians feel oppressed by Blacks, forcing poor urban minority youth to be divided along ethnic and racial lines for protection and power. The social positioning of Southeast Asians below Blacks comes from the collective process by which a racial group forms their identity in relation to another racial group.<sup>13</sup> Through this collective process, racial groups are positioned differently in the racial order, Blacks above Southeast Asians, and are rationalized with meanings of entitlement, superiority, threat, and foreignness. The product of group positions and relations between racial groups is discrimination.

Hmong boys are not only marginalized as an ethnic group but also as young men. Vincent Chong (2008) argues that “hegemonic masculinity” enforces power relations among men, in which young Southeast Asian men are positioned below Blacks and other groups. Messerschmidt (1993) describes masculinity as a social construct of gendered power relations that reflect particular social situations and relationships. Employing Connell’s (1987) notion of

hegemonic masculinity, Messerschmidt explains that the relationship between masculinity and violence comes from having to demonstrate power, aggressiveness, authority and respect. When used to perform and do masculinity, violence becomes a gendered construct and practice to uphold hegemonic masculinity, the dominant form of masculinity that deem heterosexuality, authority, control, aggressiveness, competitiveness, respect, and the capacity for violence as normative.<sup>14</sup> Violence or physical aggression is often used to enforce masculinity in the streets. As Messerschmidt (2000) explains, violence and crime among boys are used as a masculine practice. In other words, to engage in violence is to do or perform masculinity.

Similarly, in his work with Black and Latino youth, Rios (2011) uses the notion of ‘hypermasculinity’ to understand the act of agencies and resistance of these youths to fight against institutional marginalization. Rios finds that their resistance in the form of violence to assert their pride and hypermasculinity is a response to being subordinated as males. With his ethnographic study of Black and Latino young men, Rios argues that the deviant behaviors and over-aggressiveness of young minority men, which can manifest in the form of violence, are a result of institutionally constructed processes of hypermasculinity. The meanings of criminal, deviant behavior and exaggerated aggressiveness to prove one’s manhood are constructed and enforced by institutions such as schools, communities, families, and the criminal justice system. Rios shows how young minority men are pipelined into the criminal justice system through constant surveillance of their behaviors as deviant and criminal, as well as the exaggerated performance of masculinity on the streets such as proving their toughness and aggression as males. Rios argues that young minority men are caught in a double bind to act out their hypermasculinity in the streets for survival and respect, further intensifying their criminalization. Rios uses the term, “criminalization” to describe the process in which the police, schools, and the criminal justice system help to institutionalize notions of manhood and criminality among minority young men.

Previous studies also illustrate how oppressive social structures, domination, and subordination through institutional practices such as police harassment and surveillance lead to resistance in the form of violence and physical aggression, making minority male youth more susceptible to downward assimilation.<sup>15</sup> Education professor Nancy Lopez (2003) showed in her study with Caribbean youth that the racialized experiences of young minority men in the public sphere, such as schools and neighborhoods, subjected these boys to a process of “institutional expulsion.” Such expulsion was implemented through security measures that profiled and singled out young minority men as problematic students and then punished them as such. Lopez argues that social institutions such as the police and school administrators contribute to the racialization of minority boys such as Latinos and Blacks as violent, dangerous, and suspicious through racial profiling and constant surveillance and harassment. Since these Caribbean immigrant youth were phenotypically Black, the males were treated similar to other American-born Black youth as criminal and violent. The consequences of their racialized experiences in the public spheres negatively affected the Caribbean immigrant boys’ aspirations and views about social mobility through education. Institutions such as the police and schools were also complicit in marginalizing Hmong boys through discriminatory practices that targeted and racially stigmatized these young men as violent, criminal, and deviant, making Hmong boys susceptible to downward assimilation.

Moreover, boys experience overt racism and hostility in mainstream society more than girls. Studies have shown that young minority men, both immigrant and American-born are subjected to processes of racialization and gendering that punish and discipline them more harshly than girls through institutional discriminatory practices of constant surveillance, tracking into low level courses, and teacher practices and discourses.<sup>16</sup> In her study with West Indian immigrant youth, sociologist Mary Waters (2001) showed that West Indian boys experienced more policing and discrimination outside the home, which impacted their identity formation and how they came to interpret what being American meant. Similarly, Lopez (2003) found that the racialized experiences of the boys were much more violent and aggressive than the girls. For instance, even when they committed the same infractions, the boys were punished more harshly and were subjected to the process of institutional expulsion in ways that the girls were not. For the girls, their racialized experiences centered mainly on stigmatized notions of them as exotic, sexual objects, sexually promiscuous, and welfare queens. Unlike the boys, the racialized experiences of the girls invoked motivation for them to achieve an education to counteract and dismantle these depictions. The girls' racialized and gendered experiences in the public sphere were much more subtle in the form of stigmatized stereotypes about their immorality and sexuality. Consequently, the boys became less hopeful than the girls toward educational aspirations and success. In my study, more Hmong boys also reported harsher racialized experiences at school and in their neighborhoods.

Scholars of the segmented assimilation theory acknowledge that racial discrimination plays an important role in making the likelihood of downward assimilation greater among second generation youth with low human capital. They warn of a "reactive ethnicity" among this group, or rejection of assimilation into white, middle-class American mainstream and adoption of an oppositional identity of urban, "ghetto" culture as a response to racial discrimination. Scholars of the segmented assimilation theory claim that an oppositional identity to American mainstream culture that rejects academic achievement makes the second generation more susceptible to downward assimilation.

In her study with second generation youth of Indian and Afro-Caribbean descent, Natasha Warikoo (2011) tackles the cultural explanation of segmented assimilation theorists showing that it is too simplistic and problematic in equating a ghetto culture of poverty with an urban African American youth culture. Warikoo found that perceived discrimination did not lead to downward assimilation. She also found that second generation youth did not hold oppositional attitudes and that urban youth culture, embodying cultural tastes such as hip hop and rap music, did not equate oppositional attitudes. Her findings go against the claims of segmented assimilation theorists that suggest reactive ethnicity, as a response to perceived discrimination, makes downward assimilation more likely among second generation youth. Instead, Warikoo shows that second generation youth gravitate towards an urban youth culture of American hip hop and rap because it is highly globalized as a result of the importance youth generally place on peer status, or the desire to be "cool" among peers. In this hierarchy of youth cultures, Warikoo argues that a Black racial identity is of high value among peer status. This explains the interest and involvement of second generation youth with the African American youth culture. Their behaviors, dress, and music tastes resembling African American youth, and are not "oppositional" but reflective and regulated by the need of second generation youth to adhere to this peer status. In essence,

Warikoo shows that there is no “contaminating effect” of African American peer culture regarding outcomes such as academic achievement.

Similarly, my study shows the same as Warikoo’s revealing a stratification system based on hierarchal youth cultures and how second generation youth respond. Segmented assimilation theorists have told a much more simplistic story of how culture and race influence behavior and outcomes among the second generation. Other critics of the segmented assimilation theory contend that the scholars’ theory focus too much on ethnicity, promoting mobility, and miss a critical engagement and discussion on racialization and gender.<sup>17</sup> The downward assimilation of young youth is not simply a result of an individual choice in response to racial intolerance such as adopting an “oppositional” identity to positive assimilation toward middle-class American mainstream. The racialized experiences of Hmong boys reveal a system of power relations that functions to maintain and make susceptible downward assimilation. Assuming that downward assimilation can be overcome with the immigrant culture or the ethnic community as agency, masks these complex power relations. Hmong boys cannot simply achieve successful integration through individual choice or through an immigrant advantage.

The segmented assimilation theory lacks a critical discussion and analysis of the processes of racialization and gender that inform and shape the male trajectories towards gang involvement and delinquent behaviors. Instead, segmented assimilation theorists treat the racialized experiences of second generation youth as a matter of racial and ethnic differences. The stories of the Hmong boys show that their experiences with racial discrimination are constituted through a series of power relations based on their racial and gender status. The protection and resources of the ethnic community does not shield them from racialization in a dominant society and a pathway toward downward assimilation. The problems of the boys really lie at the intersection of race and gender and are oppressive in such a way that “culture” can do little to help them, making the boys more susceptible to downward assimilation. Race and gender deserve greater attention in this discussion and explanation of second generation incorporation. The intersection of gender and racialization should be brought to the forefront of these debates to more fully capture immigrant youth experiences and incorporation.

### **Research site and Methodology**

This study took place in Sacramento, California from 2007-2009. It has a racially diverse and large immigrant population. At the time of the study, the greater metro area of Sacramento consisted of a population of 2,101,204 with a foreign-born population of 17%. The racial makeup of the city was 72% White, 9% African American, 2% American Indian, 13% Asian and Pacific Islander, and 4% from other races. The Hispanic and Latino population was counted at 398,520 persons.<sup>18</sup> In 2002, *Time* magazine labeled Sacramento as the most racially/ethnically integrated major city in America.<sup>19</sup> Within the Asian American and Pacific Islander group, Filipinos are the largest Asian American subgroup (24%), followed by the Chinese (22%), Asian Indians (13%), Hmong (10%), Japanese (9%), Vietnamese (9%), and Pacific Islanders (8%). Laotians, Cambodians and other smaller subgroups of the Asian American group constitute the other 5%. Sacramento is home to the third largest Hmong population after Minneapolis-St. Paul, and Fresno.

I conducted a survey of 86 Hmong youth in Sacramento to obtain a general description. They were all second generation youth, with 77% born in the U.S., while the rest were born in Thailand and immigrated to the U.S. between 1990 and 2004. All of their parents were foreign-born and ranged between 30-60 years of age. Females constituted 52% and males constituted 48% of the total respondents. Of the 86 Hmong youth who completed the survey, 51 filled out the survey while they attended a conference focused on Hmong youth issues. This conference sample was skewed to higher achieving youth. The conference was organized by students from the Hmong Club at Grant Union High School in Sacramento, and students from Hmong student organizations at Sacramento City College, UC Davis and CSU, Sacramento. They organized a one-day conference which was held at CSU, Sacramento on April 28, 2007. About 100 Hmong between 13 to 18 years of age attended the conference, from high schools in the Sacramento area. Many of the conferences held in the past have focused mainly on higher education or are education-based. This conference gave Hmong the chance to focus on issues and challenges they face that are not always related to school. The purpose of the conference was to focus on the issues and challenges faced such as suicide, gangs, teen pregnancy, drugs, and problems with school and parents. Since the conference was specifically for Hmong youth to address issues facing this specific group, it was a good opportunity to have the youth who attended the conference complete the survey in questionnaire format. The questionnaire asked various questions about their school and neighborhood, racial discrimination, friends, parents, values, tastes, and interests to assess how Hmong are adapting in the United States. As one of the key organizers for this conference, I was able to easily ask for participation from the participants. I asked them to complete the questionnaires during the last workshop that addressed some of the issues and challenges that were important to Hmong youth.

To complement the surveys, indepth interviews were conducted among 36 Hmong students from one high school in Sacramento. Grant Union High School is one of the largely populated Hmong high schools in Sacramento. There are over 2,000 students enrolled at Grant High School, with a 30% Hmong student population. Among the student population at Grant High School, 30% are English learners with 12% speaking Hmong and 14% speaking Spanish as their second language. The English learners have a significant number of immigrant students or students who are children of immigrants present at this school. Furthermore, the schools service mainly low-income students who are eligible to receive free or reduced lunch. Grant High School has 70% of its student population receiving free or reduced lunch.

By home language, a list of 200 Hmong students was generated from 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades during the 2008-2009 academic year. From this list, 40 students were chosen to participate in the interviews and 36 were interviewed. Among the participants, twenty were in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade and sixteen were in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade between the ages of 16 and 18. In this group, 18 were boys and 18 girls, with GPAs ranging from 1.0 to a 4.0, and they all participated in an indepth interview. The interviews provided specific details and examples of the experiences of Hmong youth to understand the processes and mechanisms that contribute to the different outcomes of Hmong girls and boys.

I also interviewed a total of fifteen teachers, parents, school administrators, and community members to get an overall perspective of the youths' experiences from the larger Sacramento and Hmong community. Since I have nine years of working with the Hmong and the larger community in Sacramento, I asked people I already knew who worked with the youth,

parents and other community members through non-profit agencies, as well as the schools, hospitals, and other government programs and agencies to be interviewed. I believed these people knew a lot about the diverse problems they saw in the Hmong community and were struggling with since they worked with the youth on a daily basis, particularly with issues related to social services, domestic violence, health problems, delinquency, and juveniles. With the school administrators, teachers and community leaders, I asked a general question about their overall opinion about how well they thought the Hmong community in Sacramento was adjusting. I wanted to get their opinion about the kinds of problems they saw in the community, and the issues the youth struggled with and what resources were being offered. I also asked for their perspective about the factors they felt contributed to these problems, so that I could compare them with those of the youth and parents. With the parents, I wanted to gain an understanding of the types of problems they struggled with on a daily basis, and also of the hopes and aspirations they had for their children. I wanted the parents' perspectives to compare with those of the youth in my interviews.

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 gave me an advantage when speaking with Hmong parents. Additionally, I observed how my gender impacted my interviews. For instance, the girls opened up more easily to me. Even though I was a stranger to them, many shared their hardships in depth and even cried at times. I believe my gender and ethnicity immensely helped the girls feel more comfortable and open to share honestly about their life experiences. One girl was even thankful that I had come to her school and asked about her life because she felt there was no one to listen to her troubles. For the boys, it was harder for them to open up to me. Only a handful of the boys I interviewed really went in depth about their life experiences. A few felt comfortable to be emotionally expressive and even cried while talking about their struggles. Overall, it was harder for the boys to trust me up front and open up about their feelings and life experiences, given my gender. I believe that if I had not been Hmong, they may not have shared as much as they did since Hmong boys are usually more careful about whom they interact with. As for the parents, I had a much harder time getting the fathers to talk with me. When I interviewed the parents at the same time, it was mostly the mother who would speak. The father remained silent unless I directed questions at him. Even then, the response would be short and abrupt. I believe this is not unusual of Hmong culture as the father mainly speaks when it is necessary and his words are usually minimal and to the point. The mother has the role and responsibility to know everything about the children, especially regarding school performance. Since I interviewed the parents mainly at the school site, they may have felt my questions or concerns about their children were school related.

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. Having nine years of experience working with the Hmong community in Sacramento, particularly with the Hmong students at Grant High School, the site of my research study, help me gain easier access to the school and students. My previous work experience as an English teacher at Grant High School allowed me to develop a good working relationship with the teachers, school personnel, and administrators at the school.

## **Organization of chapters**

My study of Hmong youth in Northern California extends the research on the second generation. This has centered mainly on class and ethnicity as determinants of second generation incorporation. Gender and racialization are also important to the story of the second generation, and show the tension and conflict girls experience within immigrant cultures despite positive outcomes. The racialized experiences of the boys in dominant society make them more susceptible towards a downward assimilation pathway in spite of the protection of the ethnic community. Chapter 2 provides an historical context and background of the Hmong community to better understand the adaptation patterns of their offspring. This chapter explains how war, displacement, low human capital, and the lack of formal education due to an agrarian society have affected the Hmong community's ability to provide economic support and resources for their American-born children. This chapter also describes the community and how resettlement and adjustment in American society has disrupted traditional familial structures and belief systems. Lastly, a detailed description of the research site is provided, along with a mapping of the Hmong community in Sacramento and a discussion of the various issues facing the Sacramento Hmong community. Chapter 3 introduces and describes the Hmong youth in this study and how they sort themselves along the lines of assimilation. Survey data with Hmong youth also point to important gender differences in peer association, ethnic organizational membership, academic performance, and risky behaviors that point to the central role of gender in second generation incorporation. More specifically, gender differences with academic performance and risky behaviors help to distinguish the different integration pathways of the boys and girls. Chapter 4 examines the experiences of the girls as mainly a gendered response to the harsher cultural constraints that are placed on girls. Despite a successful pathway, the process of integration for girls is a difficult experience in immigrant culture. This chapter provides a critical analysis of immigrant home life and culture to show how the girls resist and negotiate gender within their culture to show that the positive outcomes of the girls comes at a cost. Chapter 5 shows that the problems of the boys are much more about their racialized and gendered experiences in a dominant society. This chapter explains how the boys react to abuse from other groups through physical aggression, and at times, gang involvement as a way to resist discrimination and gender subordination. Racialization through institutional practices such as police harassment and surveillance of Hmong boys is also discussed to better understand the higher tendency of the boys toward downward assimilation. Chapter 6 takes up the discussion on ethnicity as a strategy to include issues of gender and racialization in shaping the incorporation of the second generation.

## Chapter 2

### **The Hmong in the United States: Migration, Resettlement, and Integration**

The majority of Hmong refugees who were resettled in the United States after the Vietnam War had no formal education and limited exposure to Western society prior to their arrival, which has made their adjustment to American society difficult. In Laos, the Hmong lived as an agrarian society and did not have a need for formal education.<sup>1</sup> As peasant farmers in their homeland, Hmong parents and elders arrived in the United States with limited human capital. Additionally, they have suffered the trauma of war and forced displacement. This chapter provides the context for my study of second generation Hmong youth by outlining the history of war, migration, and resettlement patterns of the Hmong in the United States. The history and background of the Hmong provide an illustration of the barriers and challenges Hmong elders and parents faced after their arrival in the United States, which has also impacted the incorporation of their second generation youth. This chapter introduces the Hmong community of Sacramento, California, and the various issues facing this community that impact the integration of the youth in this study.

#### **War, Migration, and Resettlement**

The Hmong like other Southeast Asian refugees from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, shared a similar fate of displacement and resettlement in the United States after the Vietnam War. However, the Hmong had a unique relationship with the United States as secret war allies before their arrival in this country. An array of scholarship speaks about the historical and political ties between the United States and the Hmong. Much of this insight discusses the recruitment of a secret army of Hmong tribesmen in the mountains of northern Laos by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) during the Vietnam War. They were to combat communist Pathet Lao forces. The involvement of the Hmong with the CIA is termed the “Secret War,” because the recruitment of the Hmong in the War took place in Laos and remained “secret” to avoid violating the agreements of the Geneva Accords of 1954 and 1962 that prohibited foreign intervention in Laos, which was established as a neutral, sovereign state after the fall of French control in 1954.<sup>2</sup> From 1961, General Vang Pao led the Hmong in the Secret War, which went on for nearly 15 years until the communist took over Laos in 1975. Once the United States decided to pull out of Laos, 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. The Hmong who reside in the United States today are a result of U.S. foreign intervention and militarization in Southeast Asia.

U.S. intervention and foreign policy led to the forced migration and displacement of the Hmong, which resulted in a mass migration to the United States. In 1975, the United States enacted the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act and admitted the first wave of 130,000 Indochinese refugees. This legislation was initially intended for the Vietnamese who were at high risk for persecution following the fall of Saigon in April 1975. However, by May of 1976, 11,000 Hmong and Lao refugees were permitted entry through new provisions under the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1975. Most of these Hmong refugees were high ranking military officers and their families. They tended to be relatively literate and experienced with American customs because they had had extensive contact with American military and support personnel.<sup>3</sup>



Hmong refugees gradually arrived in the United States between 1976 and 1978 with less than 4,000 per fiscal year (3,058 in 1976; 1,655 in 1977; 3,873 in 1978). The peak of Hmong refugee arrivals occurred between 1979 (11,301) and 1980 (27,242). The influx of Hmong refugees resulted as the Carter administration, which allocated monthly admissions of 14,000 Southeast Asian refugees between 1979 and 1980. Political pressure from the international and American community to help the Vietnamese “boat people” fleeing Communist takeover and persecution in Vietnam also opened the doors for nearly any Hmong refugee in Thailand refugee camps who wanted to enter the United States. During 1980, a total of 166,727 refugees from Southeast Asia were admitted to the United States, more than double the 80,678 who arrived in 1979. Of the 166,727 Southeast Asian refugees who entered the United States, in 1980, over 27,000 were Hmong refugees, the peak year for Hmong refugee arrivals.<sup>4</sup> Between 1984 and 1995, Hmong refugees continued to arrive in the United States mainly through sponsorships of their families. With the closures of Thailand refugee camps by 1995, the processing and resettlement of all Hmong refugees came to a halt.<sup>5</sup>

When all official refugee camps in Thailand serving the Hmong were closed by the mid-1990s, Hmong refugees were forced to leave because the Thai government never officially allowed Hmong resettlement within its borders. Those who remained in the camps at the time of their closure were sent to transit camps to await repatriation to Laos. Several thousand fled to rural areas of Thailand or to Wat Tham Krabok, a Buddhist monastery where a local religious leader organized shelter and services. Wat Tham Krabok Hmong refugees are the newest refugees to be resettled in the United States. About 15,000 Hmong have been resettled since 2004.

Approximately 90 percent of the Hmong refugees who left Laos have been resettled in the United States. An estimated total of 130,000 Hmong refugees have been spread out over many parts of the country, with dense concentrations in cities such as Fresno, or St. Paul, by the mid-1990s. The other 10 percent have been resettled to various parts of the world including Australia, France, Germany, French Guiana, Argentina, and Canada. The various settlements of the Hmong throughout the world are evidence of the Hmong diaspora, which has been one of the major consequences of their political engagement and military involvement with not just the United States but other Western countries. An estimated 15,000 Hmong live in France today as a direct result of their military involvement with the French before and during the Vietnam War (1940-1954).<sup>6</sup>

Like other Southeast Asian refugees, initial placement of the Hmong was determined by the location of American families and sponsoring agencies. Cities such as St. Paul, Minnesota, and Portland, Oregon, had had previous experience settling immigrant groups and were chosen to initially place Hmong refugees. Many Hmong refugees were resettled in the states of Wisconsin and Minnesota, along with California. The first Hmong refugees to arrive were sponsored by voluntary agencies, churches, and individual American residents. The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) provided refugee assistance and services such as cash assistance, medical assistance, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), social services, education, and health screening. Under the 1980 Refugee Act, states were to administer these programs and ORR would reimburse states for administration and program costs. Although ORR provided funding for social services for refugees, its main focus or goal was to help refugees achieve economic self-sufficiency as quickly as possible, which meant cutting cash aid encouraging them to

participate in the workforce.<sup>7</sup> Refugees were to receive welfare benefits for only 18 months instead of the standard 36 months. States were reimbursed by ORR for only eighteen months but once their time expired, refugees could apply for existing county-funded 'General Assistance' programs, which created financial hardships for states with the most refugees.

Only certain states such as California were able to provide cash assistance for time-expired refugees through its county-funded General Assistance programs. Under California's refugee program, refugees were eligible for Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), state AFDC-U, Refugee Cash Assistance (RCA), and the Emergency Assistance Program (EAP). Time-expired refugees who were not eligible for AFDC, could apply for county General Assistance programs which were funded entirely at the local level by local governments. In response to the cuts in welfare benefits, refugees moved to a different state that provided assistance through county-funded programs after their eighteen months expired. Although California had received only 21% of initial placements of Indochinese refugees, by September 1984, California was home to the largest population of Indochinese refugees with 259,100. Of this population, 85% were Vietnamese who were concentrated in the Los Angeles and Orange counties.<sup>8</sup>

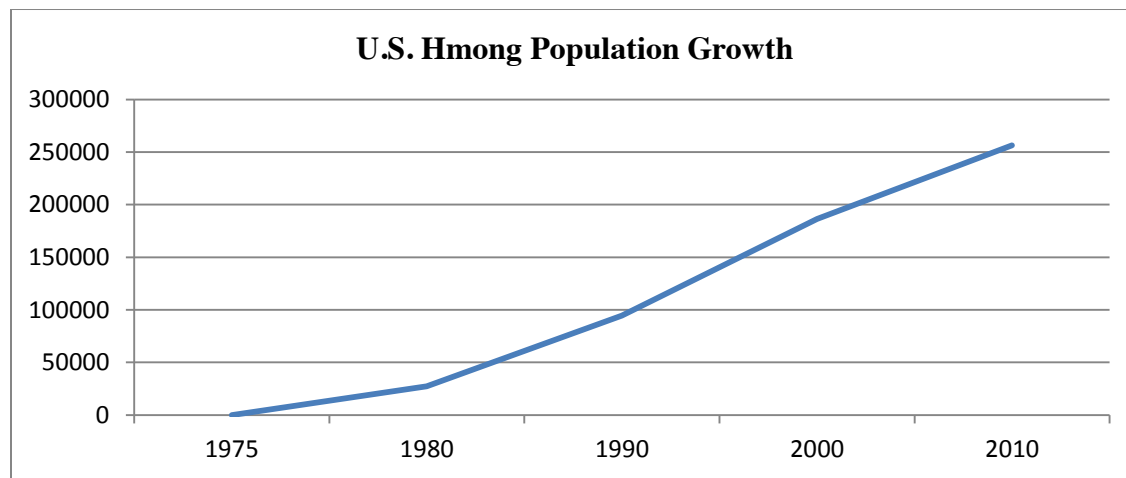
Thousands of Hmong refugees left Oregon and Washington for California in the spring of 1982 when changes in federal resettlement regulations allowed refugees to receive welfare benefits for the first 18 months rather than the original 36 months. Additionally, in the midst of a national recession in the early 1980s, many Hmong could not find employment in Oregon and Washington. Hmong refugees who were unemployed found themselves without financial support and were forced to move. The cut to welfare benefits combined with high unemployment was a primary reason for the secondary migration of refugees, such as the Hmong, in search of more liberal welfare programs and employment opportunities.<sup>9</sup>

California experienced a dramatic growth in the Hmong population in the early to mid-1980s as a result of secondary migration, particularly in the Merced and Fresno counties. From 1979 to 1982, Fresno County saw a 1,346% increase in the number of refugees on public assistance; from 400 in 1979 to 5,400 in 1982. In Merced County, refugees on public assistance increased from 200 in 1980 to 6,000 in 1982. One major reason for secondary migration among Hmong refugees to California was the hope of farming. Farming was an important livelihood for the Hmong in Laos. Without a formal education, many Hmong could not find employment to live sufficiently. Many of them decided to migrate where there would be an opportunity to farm, such as Fresno, CA and other parts of California's Central Valley. The first Hmong families in Fresno had successes with farming and as word spread, a Hmong population boomed. The initial concentrations of the Hmong population were Fresno (over 8,000), Stockton (4,000), and Merced (5,000). An additional 20,000 Hmong settled into the Central Valley between 1981 and 1983. The in-migration of the Hmong happened so rapidly that Fresno County, for instance, could not accurately determine the number of Hmong in Fresno. Hmong leaders in the area reported that an average of three new families were arriving every day, totaling 500 additional Hmong persons per month. Today, California contains the largest U.S. Hmong population. In California, the Hmong mainly reside in the cities of the Central Valley, from as far north as Chico and Yuba City, to the south of Fresno and Visalia. Cities with the largest concentration of the Hmong include Fresno (31,771), Sacramento (26,996), Merced (7,254), and Stockton (6,968).<sup>10</sup>

## The U.S. Hmong Population

The history of resettlement and secondary migration explains the large concentration of the Hmong today in states such as California and Minnesota. The three largest states of the Hmong include California (91,224), Minnesota (66,181), and Wisconsin (49,240). Other states with a significant Hmong population include North Carolina with 10,864, Michigan with 5,924 and Colorado with 3,859.<sup>11</sup> Compared to the total U.S. population and other immigrant groups such as the Mexicans, Asian Indians, Vietnamese, the Hmong population is not as big. However, there are large concentrations of the Hmong in particular cities such as Fresno and Sacramento, California and St. Paul and Minneapolis, Minnesota, making these groups important in those places. The 2010 Census counted the U.S. Hmong population at 256,430 persons. Figure 2.1 provides a timeline showing the Hmong population growth in the United States.

Figure 2.1 U.S. Hmong Population Growth

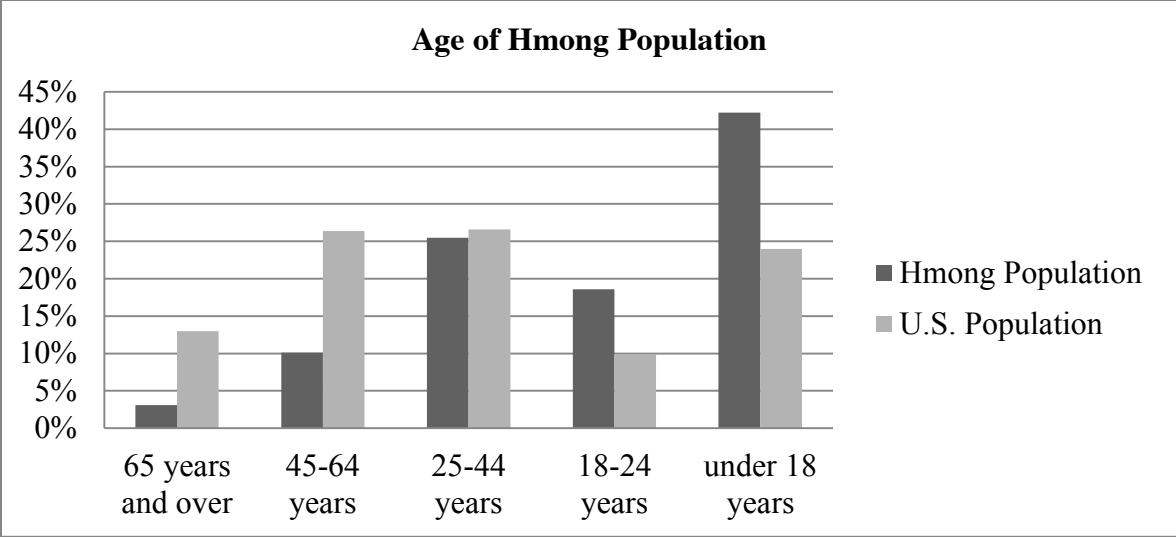


Source: 2008 *Immigration Statistical Yearbook*; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 American Community Survey

Of the total U.S. Hmong population, 60% are American born. The gender distribution is about even as there are 49% females and 51% males. The average household size of a Hmong family is six people, which is much larger than the overall U.S. population that averages only about 3 people per household. The median age of the Hmong population is 20 years of age, as 42% of this population is under the age of 18, which is relatively larger than 24% of the U.S. population that is under the age of 18. The percentage of young Hmong adults between 18 to 24 years of age is about 19%, while 26% of the Hmong population is between 25 to 44 years of age. The percentage for those between 45 to 64 years of age accounts for most of the first generation Hmong parents at about 10%. Lastly, elders who are 65 years and older only constitute 3% of the Hmong population.<sup>12</sup> These numbers indicate that the majority of Hmong Americans are a relatively young population with a significant American-born second generation youth segment. Figure 2.2 illustrates the Hmong population in comparison to the larger U.S. population. Most of

18 and under are second generation because the flow of Hmong refugees stopped in the early 1990s.

Figure 2.2 Hmong Americans



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 American Community Survey

This growing second generation is adjusting amidst social and economic problems that include continued reliance on public assistance of the Hmong community, high poverty rates, violence and racial discrimination against members of the community, and cultural adjustment issues. This group of American-born second generation Hmong youth is an integral part of the U.S. Hmong community and deserves greater attention.

*Socioeconomic Characteristics*

Regional differences in the socioeconomic profiles of the two largest concentrations of the U.S. Hmong population in California and Minnesota highlight the different socioeconomic situation of the Hmong population in the United States. California’s Hmong community does not seem to fare as well as Minnesota’s Hmong community. For instance, the average income for a Hmong household California was \$43,464 compared to \$49,399 for a Hmong household in Minnesota. Furthermore, 19% of California’s Hmong population received public assistance income, while only 14% of Minnesota’s Hmong population received public assistance. 49% of California’s Hmong population were employed compared to 59% of Minnesota’s Hmong population. Additionally, only 32% of California’s Hmong population owns a home compared to 52% of Minnesota’s Hmong population. Researchers believe the lower levels of skills, employment, and income in California’s Central Valley, where many of the Hmong communities are concentrated, explain much of this regional gap in Hmong home ownership.<sup>13</sup>

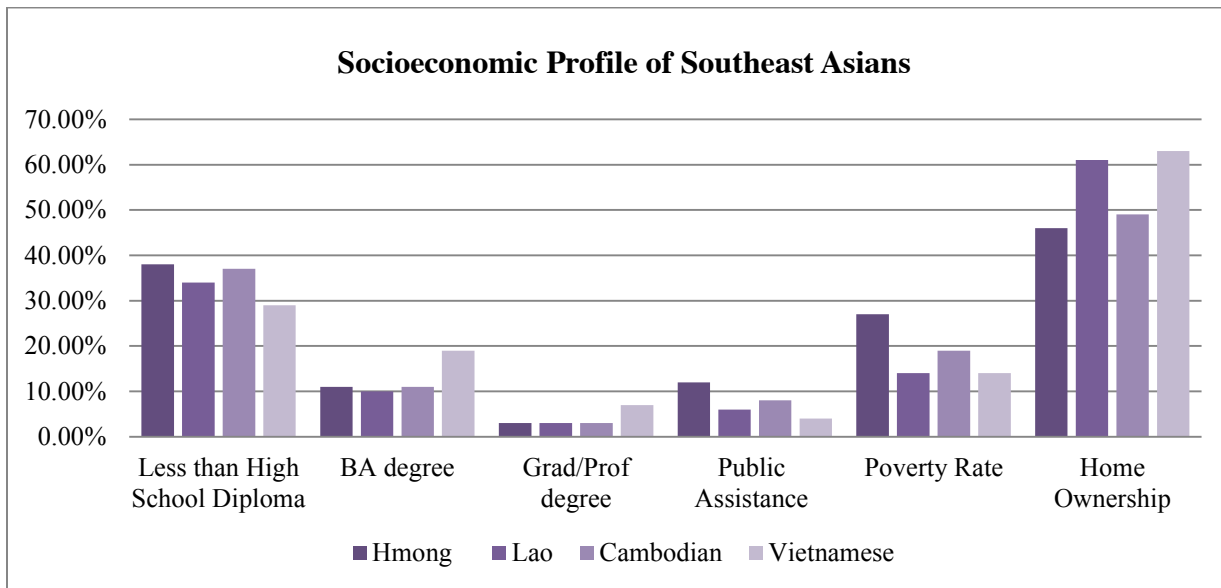
Although there are regional differences in economic success of the Hmong community in the United States, the overall economic integration of the Hmong community compared to the

rest of the U.S. population is still relatively low. After 30 years in the United States, the Hmong community continues to rely on the public assistance and face high poverty rates. For instance, the 1990 Census showed that 67% of the total Hmong population (94,439) was receiving public assistance. By 2000, the dependence rate was dramatically reduced to 30% of the total Hmong population (186,310). Although the rate of dependency on public assistance has reduced been further by 2010, with 13% of the total Hmong population (256,430) receiving public assistance, the rate of dependency on public assistance for the U.S. Hmong is still relatively high when compared to only 3% of the entire U.S. population that receives public assistance.

Of the total Hmong population, 27% live below the Federal Poverty Level compared to only 14% of the total U.S. population. The median household income of the Hmong population is only \$43,464 compared to the U.S. population of \$60,016. Furthermore, only 46% of the Hmong population owns a home compared to 66% of the total U.S. population who owns their home. Of the number of people aged 25 years or older, 11% of the entire Hmong population in the U.S. has obtained a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 18% of the total U.S. population who have received a bachelor's degree or higher. However, 38% of this portion of the Hmong population has less than a high school diploma compared to 15% of the U.S. population that are 25 years of age or older.<sup>14</sup> The continued reliance on public assistance, high poverty rates, and lower rates of home ownership, educational attainment, and income among the U.S. Hmong population indicate that the Hmong community continue to experience economic hardship, even though it has been over thirty years since their arrival in the United States.

The Hmong have more in common with other Southeast Asian refugees who entered the United States with low human capital. Although they share similar socioeconomic characteristics, distinctions also exist among Southeast Asians. Figure 2.3 shows that the Hmong (38%), Lao (34%), and Cambodian (37%) have less than a high school diploma compared to the Vietnamese (29%). The Hmong also share similar levels of higher education with the Lao and Cambodian, than the Vietnamese. However, public assistance and poverty rates are highest among the Hmong. Also, home ownership is the lowest among the Hmong. Additionally, the median household income for the Hmong is \$47,178, for the Lao is \$54,079, for the Cambodian is \$49,295, and for the Vietnamese is \$54,036.

Figure 2.3 Socioeconomic Characteristics of Southeast Asians



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2008-2010 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates

Zhou and Bankston (1998) explain that the extent of economic advancement among Southeast Asians should be assessed in light of the economic situation in which these refugees arrived. For instance, at the time of their arrival the majority of Hmong refugees had low human capital because they lived mainly as an agrarian people who did not have a need for formal education. The situation of the Hmong was unlike the Vietnamese who had a more diverse range of high human capital and low human capital immigrants. The Hmong were more similar to the Cambodians who also entered the United States with lower human capital because they were mainly poor peasants, fishermen, and laborers.<sup>15</sup> The diverse economic backgrounds of Southeast Asian refugees help account for why there are similar yet different socioeconomic characteristics among members of this group.

#### *Civic Life and Political Participation*

Despite the low socioeconomic profile of the Hmong in the United States, there has been growth and progress among the different Hmong communities around the country, such as politics and civic life. For instance, the St. Paul Hmong community has developed over 10 community-based organizations that provide complete social services to the Hmong community of St. Paul. These include the Center for Hmong Arts and Talents (CHAT), Hmong American Partnership (HAP), Hmong Cultural Center (HCC), and the Center for Hmong Studies. CHAT is the first Hmong arts organization in the country and has contributed to the Twin-Cities' reputation as an international arts community. HAP was founded in 1990 and provides English classes and job placement for Hmong refugees and has become one of the largest Hmong social service organizations in the country. HCC and the Center for Hmong Studies participate in creating an academic community of Hmong scholars and scholarly writing of the Hmong in the United States and around the world.

In addition to a vast array of community resources and organizations, the Hmong community in Minnesota has made huge strides in the world of politics. For almost two decades, the Hmong in Minnesota have been politically active. The election of Choua Lee as a member of St. Paul's School Board was a defining mark of the Hmong political participation in Minnesota. The greatest success has been the successful elections of Mee Moua into the State Senate and Cy Thao into the House of Representatives in 2002. Furthermore, Minnesotan politicians have worked closely with the Hmong community to address a number of important issues. Congressman Bruce Vento and U.S. Senator Paul Wellstone were both instrumental in advocating for the passage of the Hmong Naturalization Act, which provided special exemptions to Hmong veterans when they applied for naturalization. In 2004, the St. Paul mayor led an unprecedented trip with a delegation of mostly Hmong educators and professionals to Thailand to assess the conditions of 15,000 Hmong refugees recently sponsored by the U.S. government to come to America. These actions point to the increasing political influence and visibility of the Hmong community in Minnesota, and that the Hmong community in St. Paul is a growing political force.

The Hmong community in Fresno has also been able to make some progress over the last 30 years. Fresno holds the world's largest and most successful Hmong New Year festival, drawing thousands of Hmong individuals from, annually, throughout the country. Two Hmong radio stations broadcast Hmong news and entertainment throughout the Central Valley. There are also a number of Hmong-owned businesses, including over 10 supermarkets, a few clinics and chiropractic centers, video rentals stores, ranches and farms, insurance, and financial service agencies. Community-based organizations such as Fresno Interdenominational Refugee Ministries (FIRM), Stone Soup Fresno, Lao Family Community of Fresno, and Fresno Center for New Americans (FCNA) provide job placement and training, English classes, and social services related to health and cultural adjustment. Unlike the political success of the Hmong community in Minnesota, the Hmong community of Fresno has been slower in political participation. However, the Hmong community of Fresno is beginning to show its political power with the successful election of Blong Xiong as one of Fresno City's council members in 2006; however, it still lags behind Minnesota's Hmong community in the world of politics. Their electoral turnouts are low and the Hmong make up only a small percentage of the Asian American population which makes it harder for California's Hmong community to have a strong political voice. California's racially diverse population also makes the Hmong communities of California less visible.

### *Hmong Culture and Social Organization*

Understanding the traditional values and beliefs for how Hmong families and society function is important in evaluating how transition and adjustment to the American way of life has challenged and disrupted the traditional understanding of hierarchal families and lineages. Similar to the Vietnamese and Khmer, the majority group in Cambodia, the Hmong value kinship systems. However, the social organization of the Hmong is also uniquely different. For the Hmong, membership in society is organized along kinship and ancestral worship, two aspects of Hmong culture that are intricately inter-related. Ancestral worship through the male line is very important to the Hmong and informs their kinship ties and social organization. Anthropologist Gary Yia Lee explains, "A Hmong's religion cannot be separated from his social groupings, and his relations with other Hmong are meaningful only in terms of whether or not

they share similar ancestral ties. He cannot do without his kinsmen and a good knowledge of their rituals in order to carry on his Hmong existence.” The social relationships and organization of Hmong society are informed by patrilineal ancestral lines and the beliefs the Hmong have about the co-existence and interaction between living descendants and their dead ancestors.

The social organization of the Hmong starts from the family to the lineage (cluster of brothers) and the clan. A Hmong household may consist of the immediate family members and extended families. After marriage, the daughters are usually seen as “other people’s women” because they marry out into other families and clans while the sons remain in the household of their fathers and carry on the family name. After the family, they are organized along a lineage which consists of all the members of a group who share the same family name and have ties to a known ancestor. Above the lineage is the patrilineal clan system, where men dominate in power relationships and are given more prominence in family and community affairs. Men function to maintain unity and to organize, support, and govern family and social positions.<sup>16</sup> There are eighteen clans in the United States. They are further separated by subclans based on lineages. Clan membership is based on a common surname such as Vang, Yang, Cha (Chang), Cheng, Chu, Fang, Hang, Her (Heu), Khang, Kong, Kue, Lo (Lor), Lee (Ly), Moua, Pha (Phang), Thao (Thor), Vue, and Xiong. The most common Hmong surnames in the United States today are Vang and Yang.<sup>17</sup> Although members of the same clan are considered to be part of a larger family, not all members are related. Historian Chia Y. Vang explains, “Marriage among clan members is prohibited. To be considered close relatives, clan members have to be able to trace their lineage to a common male ancestor.” Without a genealogical connection, ancestral worship, which varies from one clan to another, determines whether members belong to the same subclan or the same ceremonial household that practices similar ancestral rituals. The clan system designates membership and belonging through kinship and ancestral worship. Elder males within each clan serve members of the clan by supervising the performance of religious rituals and directing a system of conflict resolution over disputes of every nature. The clan is sought after for conflict resolution once the appropriate channels have been utilized, starting with the family or household and then the lineage. Essentially, Hmong life is organized around the family, the clan, and extended families.

The social values and religious beliefs, of the Hmong, have largely been influenced by the Chinese after living many centuries under Chinese domination. Their cultural belief system more closely resembles the Vietnamese whose cultural values have also been largely influenced by Confucianism as a result of Chinese rule. Similar to the Vietnamese, the Hmong value hard work, a tight-knit family and community; family name and honor; individual and group reputation; respect for elders and their wisdom; and generosity and hospitality. The Hmong enforce these values and beliefs within cultural norms and practices such as having the clan system regulate marriage and social relationships with clan and non-clan members, following the authority structure of the patriarchal family with clear gender roles and privileges, and valuing and having male descendants fulfill their obligations.

The Hmong family structure is also organized similarly to the Vietnamese family which is based on hierarchical Confucian principles in which the males dominate over the females and the elders over the young.<sup>18</sup> This organization works to instill a strong sense of family and community over the individual. The Hmong family structure is based on large, extended families averaging between six to ten people in one household. Similar to other Southeast Asian refugees,



the Hmong underwent a process of flight and resettlement that disrupted their family structure and lineages, leading to their arrival in the United States in fragments of extended families. For instance, the sex ratio of the Vietnamese was more men to women, while there were more women to men for the Cambodians, due to the killings of the Khmer Rouge. For the Hmong, the men who fought and were killed in the War disrupted the extended kinship network of the Hmong. However, Chan (1994) explains that widows of fallen Hmong fighters married the brothers or cousins of their deceased husbands as dictated by Hmong custom in order to keep the lineages intact.

The family is comprised of the husband or father who is the head and makes all major decisions regarding family members. The wife or mother follows his lead and helps implement his decisions. The father is also responsible for teaching the sons about male responsibilities such as agriculture, socializing, and ritual performance. The mother is responsible for training the daughters in household work. Both parents are responsible for teaching their children about proper behavior and to provide for their physical and moral upbringing. The children are expected to obey and listen to their parents. They are also expected to help care for their younger siblings and carry out their roles as daughters and sons.

The roles for boys and girls in Hmong culture vary greatly based on the social values and religious beliefs of the Hmong. For instance, the sons and their wives are expected to care for their elderly parents and to offer them food and paper money after death, as a way of respecting and honoring the souls of their parents and ancestors in order to receive protection from sickness and harm. Ancestral worship combined with shamanism and beliefs in a wide variety of spirits make up the religious belief system of the Hmong. As a way of honoring and respecting and to receive the blessings and protection of the ancestors against illness and misfortune, the head of the household usually performs a ritual during the New Year to honor the spirits of the dead with offerings. The Hmong believe the souls of the dead still need food and money to use in an afterlife with their ancestors and male descendants, or the sons need to provide offerings in the form of paper money and animal sacrifice on special occasions like New Year celebrations and weddings. Spiritual offerings can only be made by the sons as the daughters are expected to marry out of the family into other clans. This explains why Hmong parents value sons, so that their needs will be taken care of in the Afterworld. These religious beliefs determine the more important roles of Hmong boys and the higher value placed on the sons who are expected to care for elderly parents and carry out ancestral rituals. Therefore, boys are trained from early on to fulfill their roles of being the head or man of the household, performing rituals, and carrying on the family name and line by marrying early and having children.

Unlike the boys, the girls are trained in household work and to carry on their roles when they marry outside their clans. Once married, Hmong women are responsible for cooking, cleaning, childcare, and ensuring proper behavior. From a young age, Hmong girls are taught proper behavior such as not challenging authority or parents, being obedient and non-assertive, and fulfilling their household duties. Both boys and girls are expected to marry a member of another clan. However, after marriage Hmong girls must move out of her parents' home to live with her husband and his household as she will become part of her husband's family and clan.

Hmong social behavior is organized around the family, clan, and extended families. Their behaviors are largely enforced to maintain the social organization of Hmong society, a ritual structure with religious rites and beliefs specific to each category of relationships such as the

household, the lineage, the sub-clan, and the clan.<sup>19</sup> The belief system and practices of Hmong culture and the social organization of Hmong society show how adopting values and norms of American society challenges and disrupts this traditional belief system. Also, transition and adjustment to the American way of life have disrupted and threatened hierarchical families and lineages as conflict ensues between Hmong parents and their children who adopt more American norms and values.

Previous studies on the resettlement experiences and acculturation of Hmong refugees have shown how the Hmong social organization, based on a kinship-network of authority and control, has been disrupted by the values of American society. For instance, the greater equality accorded to women, as a result of greater opportunities as well as an economic need to enter the workforce due to poverty, has ruptured the social organization of Hmong families. Traditionally, Hmong women had a low status in Hmong society and were bounded to roles of childbearing and rearing and contributing to economic subsistence.<sup>20</sup> For instance, Donnelly (1989) has shown how tensions are growing in many households because the men feel they have lost their position as the head of household, as they cannot find work because they do not possess the skills to work in a technological society. In households where the women are employed, the men feel a loss of prestige, self-esteem and authority.

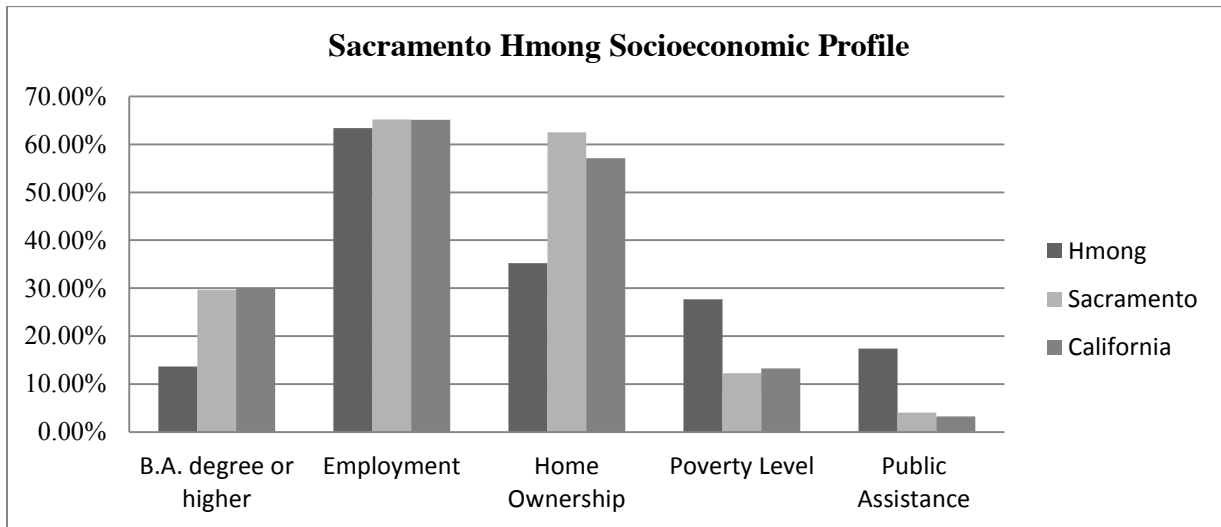
Also, the social organization of Hmong families and the clan system is changing as Hmong elders and parents face intergenerational conflicts with their children who have grown up accustomed to American values and ways of living. Chan (1994) argues that American schools have played a key role in Americanizing newcomers, in which children of refugees and immigrants are pressured to acquire English skills and internalize American values and norms so they can integrate more efficiently and successfully into American society. The fast paced acculturation of children is disrupting Hmong families as the children are learning behaviors that contradict their parents' own teachings. Similarly, Faderman (1998) shows that the social organization of Hmong families has fallen apart as the children and parents experience cultural adjustment. In Laos, the father was at the top of the family hierarchy, while the mother was in between and the children were at the bottom. However, in the United States, Hmong parents and elders feel that they have been reduced to helpless children who have to depend on their children to teach them the American ways of life such as how to dial the phone or even to cross the street. Faderman suggests that this new family configuration creates pain for the parents but creates greater independence for the children, which can be useful for making their way through America. Moreover, this can also be disruptive to the social organization of Hmong families because the children develop a sense of personal freedom and individualism that is less about fulfilling their obligations to the family and clan and more about exercising individual freedom.<sup>21</sup>

Similar to the Hmong, the Vietnamese also face challenges and disruptions to their traditional family structure as women exercise more power in the home, particularly as they gain employment outside the home. Kibria (1993) shows that with economic necessity, the changing roles for men and women are disrupting and challenging the hierarchical rules within the family and home.<sup>22</sup> Cultural adjustment issues are not unique to the Hmong but characteristic of the process of integration into American society for groups of these distinct cultural backgrounds and belief systems. The disruption of a traditional social organization and conflict that ensues between immigrants and their offspring are evidence of this process, which is one of the major concerns of this study.

## The Hmong Community of Sacramento, California

Sacramento is home to the second largest Hmong population (26,996), following Fresno (31,771), in California. Among Sacramento's Hmong population, 43% are under the age of 18, which is relatively larger than 25% of Sacramento, 25% of California, and 24% of the total U.S. population that are under the age of 18. Although the Hmong make up only 3% of Sacramento's population and an even smaller portion of California's total population, the educational levels and economic attainment of the Hmong population in Sacramento are quite low when compared to the rest of Sacramento and California's population. Figure 2.3 highlights these differences.

Figure 2.3 Education and Economic Attainment



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2007-2009 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates

The Hmong have relatively low education levels as reflected by only 14% of the Hmong population of 25 years, and over who have obtained a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to Sacramento's population of 30% and California's population of 30% with a bachelor's degree or higher. Although the employment rate of the Hmong population (63%) is similar to Sacramento (65%) and California (65%), the lower level of economic attainment of the Hmong population can be seen with lower rates of home ownership, higher dependency on public assistance, and higher poverty levels. The home ownership rate of the Hmong population is only 35% compared to 63% of Sacramento, and 57% of California. The Hmong population also has a higher poverty rate (28%) than the rest of Sacramento (12%) and California (13%). The higher level of public assistance of the Hmong population (18%) compared to Sacramento (4%) and California (3%), is another indicator that the Hmong community fares worse economically than the larger Sacramento and overall California populations.<sup>23</sup>

It may seem that Asian Americans may be doing well compared to other groups in Sacramento as a whole, but great differences and disparities exist among this group. Asian Americans consist of vastly different ethnic groups, cultures, and experiences. Asian Americans represent the highest median household income earners in Sacramento, with a median household

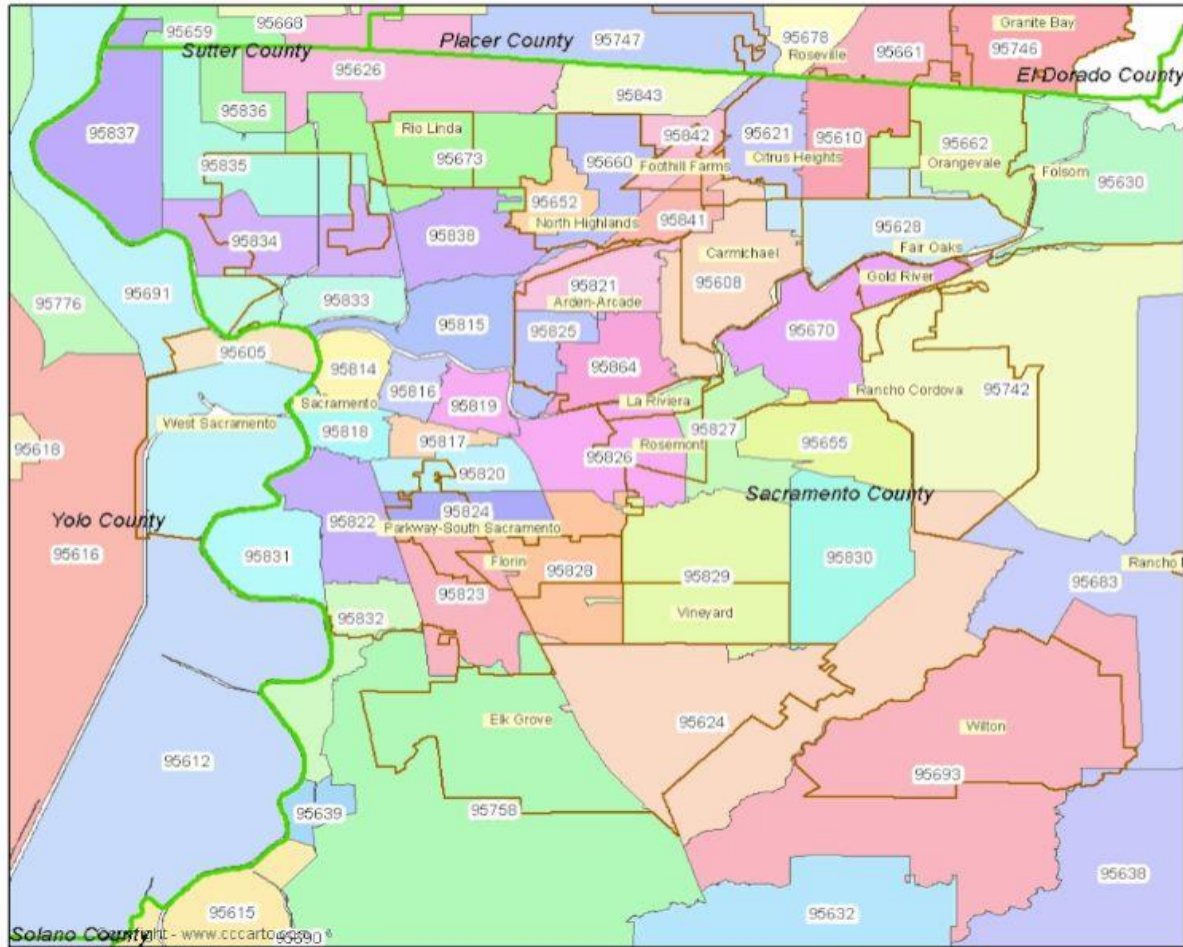
income of \$73,887 compared to \$60,422 of Sacramento's population. However, there is vast economic disparity among this group as the Hmong and Vietnamese earn an annual household income between \$47,000 and \$51,000, while the Japanese, Chinese and Pacific Islanders earn an income between \$63,000 and \$67,000. Asian Indians (\$78,775) and Filipinos (\$74,037) are the highest median household income earners among Asian Americans in Sacramento. There are also differences in poverty rates and public assistance among the subgroups. The Hmong (28%) and the Vietnamese (21%) have higher poverty rates compared to the Chinese (15%), Pacific Islanders (11%), Asian Indians (10%), Japanese (9%), and Filipinos (7%). Also, the Hmong (17%) receive more public assistance than the Vietnamese (7%), Chinese (2%), Pacific Islanders (2%), Asian Indians (3%), Japanese (2%), and Filipinos (4%).<sup>24</sup>

Likewise, in terms of education, Asian Americans do better than the general population. Among Asian Americans of age 25 or older, 38% have a bachelor's degree or higher, which is slightly higher than 30% of Sacramento's population. However, there exists educational disparity among Asian Americans. For instance, only 14% of the Hmong and 16% of Pacific Islanders have received a bachelor's degree or higher. In contrast, the Vietnamese (31%), Asian Indians (49%), Chinese (43%), Filipino (40%), and Japanese (47%) have received a bachelor's degree or higher.<sup>25</sup> The difference in educational levels and the economic disparities among Asian Americans pose many challenges for the Asian American community as well as the larger Sacramento community, especially since Asian Americans make up a significant portion of the city's population. This calls attention to the needs of the most disadvantaged groups within the Asian American community, such as the Hmong.

In Sacramento, the Hmong community is concentrated mainly in the northern and southern sections of the city.<sup>26</sup> In northern Sacramento, many Hmong reside in the neighborhoods of Strawberry Manor, Hagginwood and Del Paso Heights (zip code, 95838). In the Southern, the two neighborhoods with the largest concentration of Hmong people include Meadowview in the southwestern part, and Florin in the southeastern part of Sacramento (zip code, 95823). Figure 2.4 illustrates the Sacramento neighborhoods by zip code with large concentrations of the Hmong in the areas with zip codes of 95838 and 95823.

The racial demographic of the neighborhoods (zip codes of 95838 and 95823) is relatively similar to the rest of Sacramento. For whites, there are 32% (95823), 42% (95838), and 48% (Sacramento). For blacks, there are 26% (95823), 23% (95838), and 16% (Sacramento). For Asians, there are 20% (95823), 16% (95838), and 17% (Sacramento). For Latinos, there are 24% (95823), 19% (95838) and 22% (Sacramento). However, the neighborhoods with high concentrations of the Hmong have higher public assistance and poverty rates than the rest of Sacramento. The rate of public assistance of neighborhoods 95838 (18%) and 95823 (12%) are higher than the larger Sacramento population (9%). Additionally, the poverty rates of neighborhoods 95838 (28%) and 95823 (22%) are slightly higher than the rest of Sacramento (20%).<sup>27</sup> The higher rates of public assistance and poverty rates of these neighborhoods show that the Hmong in Sacramento reside mainly in poor, urban neighborhoods.

Figure 2.4 Sacramento Neighborhoods by Zip Code



Source: [http://www.cccarto.com/ca/sacramento\\_zipcodes/](http://www.cccarto.com/ca/sacramento_zipcodes/)

Several public school districts serve Sacramento. Sacramento City Unified School District serves most of Sacramento. Other portions are served by the Center Unified School District, Natomas Unified School District, San Juan Unified School District, and Twin Rivers Unified School District which merged together four school districts: the North Sacramento School District, the Del Paso Heights School District, the Rio Linda Union School District, and the Grant Joint Union High School District. The Valley Hi/North Laguna area is served by the Elk Grove Unified School District, despite being in the city limits of Sacramento and not in Elk Grove. Sacramento City Unified School District which serves most of the southern and central areas of Sacramento and Twin Rivers Unified School District which serves most of the northern area of Sacramento have the highest population of Hmong students. For instance, the student population of Grant High School in the Twin Rivers School District is 30% Hmong and Luther Burbank High School of the Sacramento City School District has a Hmong student population of 35%. Grant High School and Luther Burbank High School are closest to the largely concentrated neighborhoods of the Hmong community, which explains the largely populated Hmong student body at these schools.

Many Hmong-owned businesses were started around the neighborhoods of the Hmong community. For instance, a majority of small grocery and mini-markets are located in the largely concentrated Hmong neighborhoods. In northern Sacramento, there are about seven small grocery and mini-markets and about six in the southern area of Sacramento. These stores usually carry specific items for the Hmong community such as incense and items for shaman rituals or food supplies specific for making traditional Hmong dishes. There are several video and music stores in southern Sacramento that rent out Hmong movies made from abroad. There are also ten auto body shops in both the northern and southern areas of Sacramento. Their clientele usually increases through word of mouth, especially when the Hmong mechanic is fairly good and can fix most cars. Most of the Hmong-owned businesses sell food, rent or sell video and music, and repair automobiles. There are about five chiropractic offices run by Hmong chiropractors and about two dental offices, but many of the Hmong-owned businesses in Sacramento were started by those who have had no formal education or training for employment. There is also a Hmong radio station that advertises events and news occurring in the Hmong community. These businesses are important for the Hmong community in Sacramento because it fosters relationships and distributes resources and information among members of the community. It also helps to maintain a sense of cohesiveness and identity of the Hmong neighborhoods among the rest of Sacramento.

The Hmong community of Sacramento is serviced by several community based organizations. Two of them have been around the longest and are the most influential in connecting members of the Hmong community with other local organizations. They are also the most utilized by members of the Hmong community. Hmong Women's Heritage Association is a non-profit, community-based organization that started as a support group in 1993 for Hmong women and their children after significant arrivals of the Hmong in Sacramento. The organization became incorporated as a non-profit organization in 1994. They continue to service the Hmong community and provide 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, providing translation and interpreting for members of the community, and work with Hmong youth to foster leadership skills and development.

Another community based organization that has been important for the Sacramento Hmong community is Lao Family Community, one of the eight Lao Family Organizations in the nation which was founded by General Vang Pao, general of the Hmong army that fought with the CIA during the Vietnam War. The first Lao Family Community Based Organization was founded in Santa Ana, California in 1977, to help transition Southeast Asian refugees, particularly the Hmong, into American society. As a response to the growing Southeast Asian refugee population, a Lao Family Community was formed in 1982 to assist the growing Lao, Hmong, and Mien population in Sacramento and Yolo counties. 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 to 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. Other community based organizations and county agencies have played a

significant role in helping the Hmong adjust. The Southeast Asian Assistance Center started in 1979 as a response to the influx of Southeast Asian refugees resettling in Sacramento. They continue to provide social services, particularly related to mental health for all Southeast Asians in Sacramento.

Some challenges faced by community-based organizations and the kind of services they can offer and provide for members of the Hmong community include limited funding and resources, the use of the clans versus support offered by community-based organizations, and divided and unequal services between the north and south areas of Sacramento. Those who work in community-based organizations express the need for long-term, sustainable funding and resources to help their organizations deliver appropriate and sufficient services for members of the Hmong community. One non-profit employee explains:

“There is not a lot of funding available to support our programs and organization. Most of the challenges we face have to do with the lack of funding. We need office space, computers, more manpower, and training. There are four staff, including myself, working with over 200 Hmong youth in our program. It makes it difficult because even with the four of us, with all the work that we do, we are really stretched. We put a lot of extra hours outside our regular work hours to make our program really work for the kids.”<sup>28</sup>

Community-based organizations face challenges with limited funding and resources which limit their ability to provide appropriate and sufficient resources and services to members of the Hmong community. Despite these challenges, they try to provide services and support to the Hmong community. However, not all members of the community choose to utilize these services. In the Hmong community, there are traditional and appropriate ways of seeking help from the community. As one community member explained, help has to be sought with the husband’s clan first. If it does not get resolved there, then they can go to the wife’s clan. If the problems do not get resolved at this point, then they can go to the 18 clans, which control all the different clans. After all of these appropriate channels have been utilized and the issues are still not resolved, then they can go to the court system or other mainstream resources. Often times, the traditional ways of seeking help in the Hmong community pose challenges for service providers or create conflict for those wanting the help of community based organizations or services offered by mainstream. One community member explains:

“Clan members are for disputes, whether it’s between family or different clans. They go through clan leaders to mediate. The clan is very helpful because they understand the culture, the issues that are involved and the traditional ways to handle them. Sometimes they are not effective because there is no intervention. The clan tries to help and if this does not get resolved then they go to community organizations. In the Hmong culture, you are showing respect to the Hmong community if you go to the clan. If you just go straight to the court system, the community will frown upon you. You will get the reputation as someone who disrespected the community.”<sup>29</sup>

Although culturally appropriate resources and services may be offered by community based organizations, the traditional ways of seeking help in the Hmong community poses challenges for those seeking or wanting the help of these organizations, which may prevent them from seeking and utilizing the services offered by community-based organizations.

Divided and unequal services between the north and south areas of Sacramento also contribute to preventing members of the Sacramento Hmong community from receiving and utilizing services offered by community-based organizations and mainstream. A community leader states:

“Resources for the Hmong population are divided among the north and south areas. Downtown divides the north and south sides of Sacramento. All of the community-based organizations that provide direct services and resources for the Hmong community are concentrated in the southern area. In the northern area, there is a large Hmong population but there is no community-based organization to help them, especially the youth. The youth in the north need a lot of help and a lot of times they don’t have guidance or anyone to pull them through. They usually don’t make it because there’s not enough support for them or someone to reach out to them.”<sup>30</sup>

The concentration of community-based organizations and resources in the south area of Sacramento has prevented members of the Hmong community, particularly the youth, who live in the north area from receiving resources and services. Community members who reside in the north area, especially the elder and youth who lack transportation, cannot access the resources and services offered by community-based organizations. Additionally, the new and old Hmong refugees are the ones who mainly utilize the services of community-based organizations in Sacramento, given that these organizations have traditionally focused on providing services for the transition and adjustment of refugees. The lack of limited resources and programs for youth is a problem and poses significant challenges for a growing segment of the Sacramento Hmong population, that is second generation and American-born.

Many of the same problems related to health, limited social services, education, housing, employment, and youth that the first Hmong refugee arrivals experienced, continue to be prevalent in the Sacramento Hmong community today. Zhang Fang, a community member and professional with over ten years of experience providing social services to the Sacramento Hmong community, describes the problems that he has witnessed:

“The community faces a lot of challenges such as language and cultural barriers, generation gap, transportation issues, financial issues, and mental health and health problems. You have families who struggle with transportation because they have only one car and the husband or wife takes it to work. There are also families who have no transportation to take their kids to school. Other families have mental health issues and serious health problems. Domestic violence also occurs in some Hmong families.”<sup>31</sup>

These problems are mainly experienced by the elders and parents. However, the problems filter down the family to the youth as Zhang explains:

“Hmong elders and parents are still going through the transition and adjustment to American society and it is harder for them because they can’t speak English well. They have their own issues but their barriers also affect the children. For instance, they don’t have money and education so they cannot support their youth. They don’t know how to support their kids through the U.S. education system. They can’t communicate with the teachers and they don’t know the kind of problems their youth have that affects their



ability to do well in school. At the same time, they are overwhelmed by trying to make ends meet”.

Another barrier that prevents Hmong youth from accessing the Hmong culture is language and cultural barriers. Shane Yang, a community member and Vice Principal of a middle school with a large population of Hmong students, explains:

“After 30 years in the U.S., Hmong elders are still facing language and cultural barriers. They can’t speak the language and they don’t know how to support their kids through the U.S. system. Their whole thinking process is so different from the U.S. The parents’ barriers affect their children. Their children are assimilating too fast and their parents are not. Sometimes their children are assimilating so fast that they feel alone because they are not getting that support they need.”<sup>32</sup>

Hmong youth who see themselves as both Hmong and American are struggling to have a sense of belonging or identity in both. Hmong elders and parents continue to face problems related to their transition and adjustment to American society as refugees. As the two community members explain, the problems of the elders and parents impact the integration of their youth.

The problems of the Sacramento Hmong community highlight the long term effects of the refugee experience. Many of the same problems the Hmong first experienced when they arrived continue to be prevalent in the Sacramento community today. These refugees are Hmong elders and parents who face problems related to their transition and adjustment to American society. Due to their own challenges and barriers, Hmong elders and parents are unable to fully support their youth. The needs of second generation Hmong also differ from Hmong refugees. Additionally, the existing problems of the Hmong community continue to impact this growing segment of the population.

The various issues of the Hmong community of Sacramento have a significant impact on the integration of Hmong youth in this study and help provide understanding of the context in which the youth are adjusting and being integrated in this local community. Home to the second largest Hmong population in California, Sacramento is an important site of study. A growing second generation, American-born Hmong also makes this study and its focus on the second generation in this local community vital.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter described the history and background of the U.S. Hmong population to illustrate the context in which second generation Hmong are growing up. War and displacement led to Hmong refugees to migrate in large numbers and resettle in the United States. Resettlement efforts and secondary migration explain the large concentrations in particular cities around the country. Their concentration in those particular cities has a significant impact on those regions. The majority of Hmong refugees had no formal education and limited exposure to western society since they lived in isolation as an agrarian society in Laos, which has made their adjustment to American society difficult.

The social and economic problems of the U.S. Hmong include a poor socioeconomic status due to the low human capital of the immigrant parents, which has placed the second generation Hmong in primarily poor, urban neighborhoods. A sketch of the poor, urban

environment in which the youth in this study are growing up among other poor whites and minorities is important so we can understand the racialized experiences of the boys that contribute to their downward assimilation, which I will discuss in detail in a later chapter. Furthermore, the Hmong community continues to hold onto their traditional-cultural belief system that revolves around a collective rather than the individual. Hmong society has traditionally survived upon the notion of communal lives that revolve around the clan and family. Transition and adjustment to American ways of life have posed major challenges to the Hmong social organization of life, particularly as women and children gain greater independence and grow accustomed to values of personal freedom and individualism. The conflict that develops between immigrants and their offspring not only illustrates disruption of this traditional social organization, but also points to the difficulties second generation youth face in their adjustment as they adopt more American norms and values. The different experiences of girls and boys within the Hmong culture and the ethnic community are also a focus of this study and will be discussed in subsequent chapters to show the tension and difficulties girls experience despite their ability to achieve academic success.

## Chapter 3

### Hmong Youth Assimilation

One important contribution of this study is to provide an understanding of how the offspring of the U.S. Hmong are becoming part of the American mainstream. As I discussed in chapter 1, assimilation is one way of understanding their incorporation into American society. Bean and Stevens (2003) argue that the economic and sociocultural assimilation of immigrants are good indicators of the public reaction at the individual and policy level about immigration. Economic assimilation of immigrants assists in gauging levels of aggregate economic growth and individual measures of economic well-being that have implications for the American economy. Sociocultural assimilation of immigrants generates more ambivalent responses to immigration from the public about the costs and benefits of immigration because it determines the ways immigrants view and think of themselves in terms of language, social relationships, and racial and ethnic identification.

In the debates about immigrant incorporation, there are differing opinions about the connections between economic and sociocultural integration. The assimilationist perspective views sociocultural assimilation or acculturation as a precursor to or a simultaneous occurrence with economic assimilation.<sup>1</sup> Other researchers argue that the assimilation model inadequately explains the integration of new immigrant groups, and see aspects of sociocultural assimilation as consequences rather than causes of economic assimilation. For instance, research on the second generation view ethnicity as strategy, whether it is ethnic attachment or utilizing the best of both worlds, for maximizing economic opportunity. The economic situation of immigrants such as low human capital along with discrimination and institutional barriers can also lead second generation youth to embrace a “reactive ethnicity,” or rejection of middle-class mainstream norms. My study of Hmong youth assimilation is situated within these debates and understandings of immigrant incorporation.

Segmented assimilation theory offers the most applicable approach for the experiences of the Hmong and their offspring. Portes and Rumbaut (2001) maintain that the rapid growth and concentration in a few areas of settlement of the second generation make it necessary to determine the adaptation outcomes, such as the social stability and economic mobility, of the second generation. They argue that the outcomes of school performance, language knowledge and use, ethnic identities, level of parent-child generational conflict, and peer association beyond the ethnic circle, which had not previously been captured by census data, are telling of the social stability and economic mobility of the second generation as adults. Given that scholars of the segmented assimilation theory rely heavily on selective acculturation for economic mobility, I employed similar measures of assimilation from the segmented assimilation model to understand the situation of second generation Hmong youth.<sup>2</sup> In my study with the youth, I adopted similar measures of assimilation from the segmented assimilation model to examine their pace of acculturation and economic mobility. I focused on identity, language, marriage preference, favorite music, membership in ethnic organizations, and the ethnicity of their closest friends. I also looked at academic grade point averages, college aspirations, parental relations, and involvement in risky behaviors.

Like other second generation youth in Portes and Rumbaut’s longitudinal study, the more assimilated Hmong were attached to an American identity and had more of an affinity toward

American tastes, interests, and values, while the less assimilated youth were more attached to their ethnic identity and values. However, my survey provides a more complex picture about gender and second generation incorporation. Introducing gender did not provide major differences between the more and less assimilated Hmong youth on questions regarding identity, language, marriage preference and music tastes. However, their responses concerning peer association, ethnic organizational membership, academic performance, and risky behaviors reveal some important gender differences. The following section provides a descriptive profile of the second generation Hmong youth I surveyed.

## **A Descriptive Profile**

The 86 Hmong youth in this study answered six questions about their identity, language, marriage preference, favorite music, membership in ethnic organizations, and the ethnicity of their closest friends. I used this information to generate an assimilation index score to distinguish the degree of assimilation among the youth. The responses of each question was scored using a 1 point scale, in which a response that received a 1 was assimilated, .5 was somewhat assimilated, and 0 was “not assimilated,” or ethnically attached. For the question on identity, a response of “Hmong-American” was denoted as more assimilated which received a score of 1. A response of “Hmong” was denoted as ethnically attached and received a score of 0, and a response of “Other” was denoted as somewhat assimilated and received a score of .5. For the question on native language ability, a response of “does not speak well” was denoted as more assimilated, receiving a score of 1. A response of “speaks well” was denoted as ethnically attached and received a score of 0, and a response of “somewhat” received a score of .5. For the question on marriage preference, a response of “non-Hmong” or “Uncertain” was denoted as more assimilated, receiving a score of 1. A response of “Hmong only” was denoted as ethnically attached and received a score of 0. For the question on music preference, a response of “American” was denoted as more assimilated, receiving a score of 1. A response of “Hmong” was denoted as ethnically attached and received a score of 0, and a response of “Both” received a score of .5. For the question on ethnic organizational membership, a response of “non-ethnic organization membership” was denoted as more assimilated which received a score of 1. A response of “ethnic organization membership” was denoted as ethnically attached and received a score of 0, and a response of “none” received a score of .5. For the question on ethnicity of friends, a response of “other ethnicity” was denoted as more assimilated which received a score of 1. A response of “Hmong only” was denoted as ethnically attached and received a score of 0, and a response of “both” received a score of .5.

With the points from each of the six indicator questions, an assimilation index score was generated for each youth. The maximum index score for all six indicator questions was a 6, which was most assimilated. The lowest score was a zero, indicating a status of not assimilated, or ethnically attached. A total score of a 3 would denote being somewhat or moderately assimilated. Youth who scored a 3 or higher were categorized as “more assimilated” and those who scored a 2.5 or lower were “less assimilated”. Of the eighty-six youth, 28, or 33%, received an index score of 3 or higher while 58, or 67%, scored between a 0 and 2.5, demonstrating that the majority of the youth in this study were less assimilated. The average assimilation index score of the 86 youth who participated in the study was a 2.

A description of the “more assimilated” and “less assimilated” according to responses to the six indicator questions shows the robustness of the distinction. Table 3.1 shows that 89% of

the more assimilated youth identified as Hmong-American while only 40% of the less assimilated youth identified as Hmong-American. Not surprisingly, 84% of the less assimilated youth reported being able to speak their native language well compared to only 43% of the more assimilated youth. With music preference, 79% of the more assimilated youth listen mostly to American music compared to only 24% of the less assimilated youth. The more assimilated youth (68%) said they were more open to marrying someone who is non-Hmong, compared to only 16% of the less assimilated youth. Also, almost half of the more assimilated youth (43%) had friends that were both Hmong and of another ethnicity or race compared to only 17% of the less assimilated youth. Lastly, the more assimilated youth (57%) have more membership in non-ethnic organizations compared to the less assimilated youth (17%).

Table 3.1 The More and Less Assimilated Youth

Assimilation Measures	Less Assimilated Youth (n= 58)	More Assimilated Youth (n= 28)
Identifies as Hmong-American	40%	89%
Able to speak Hmong	84%	43%
Prefers American Music	24%	79%
Open to marrying Non-Hmong	16%	68%
Has non-Hmong friends	17%	43%
Belongs to non-ethnic Organizations	17%	57%

*Source:* Hmong Youth Adjustment Questionnaire (n= 86)

Place of birth may contribute to the different tastes and attachment to ethnicity as the majority of the more assimilated youth (93%) were born in the United States while the majority of the less assimilated youth (69%) were mainly foreign-born and immigrated to the U.S. between 1990 and 2004. All of their parents were foreign-born and ranged between the ages of 30-60 years. The average age of these respondents was 16 years of age, in grades 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup>. In order to see if there were any apparent gender differences in the youth survey, I divided the Hmong respondents into four groups of the less assimilated boys and girls and the more assimilated boys and girls. Of the total respondents, the less assimilated boys numbered 25 (29%), the more assimilated boys numbered 17 (20%), the less assimilated girls numbered 33 (38%), and the more assimilated girls numbered 11 (13%).

*On Identity, Language, and Music Preference*

Introducing gender does not seem to alter the differences between the more and less assimilated Hmong. For instance, the less assimilated boys and girls had more of an attachment to their ethnic identity and values, while the more assimilated boys and girls had a higher preference for American tastes, interests, and values. Table 3.2 shows that 60% of the less assimilated boys identified as Hmong while none (0%) of the more assimilated boys identified as Hmong. The great majority (88%) of the more assimilated boys identified as Hmong-American compared to less than half (40%) of the less assimilated boys. Similar to the boys, table 3.2 also shows that 45% of the less assimilated girls identified as Hmong compared to only 9% of the more assimilated girls. Moreover, all but one of the more assimilated girls (91%) identified mainly as Hmong-American. Identity is an important indicator of the level of assimilation among second generation Hmong youth.

Table 3.2 Identity, Assimilation and Gender

Identity	Less Assim boys (n= 25)	More Assim boys (n= 17)	Less Assim girls (n= 33)	More Assim girls (n= 11)
Hmong	(15) 60%	(0) 0%	(15) 45%	(1) 9%
Hmong-American	(10) 40%	(15) 88%	(13) 40%	(10) 91%
Other	(0) 0%	(2) 12%	(5) 15%	(0) 0%

*Source:* Hmong Youth Adjustment Questionnaire (n= 86)

The less assimilated boys and girls were also better able to speak their native language of Hmong compared to the more assimilated boys and girls. Table 3.3 shows that 88% of the less assimilated boys reported being able to speak their native language well compared to only 41% of the more assimilated boys. Additionally, only 8% of the less assimilated boys reported being able to speak Hmong somewhat well compared to 53% of the more assimilated boys. The less assimilated girls were also better able to speak their native language of Hmong compared to the more assimilated girls. The majority (82%) of the less assimilated girls reported being able to speak their native language well compared to only 45% of the more assimilated girls. Additionally, 45% of the more assimilated girls reported being able to speak Hmong somewhat well compared to only 18% of the less assimilated girls. Native language ability is effective for measuring the degree of assimilation among the second generation.

Table 3.3 Language, Assimilation and Gender

Language Ability	Less Assim boys (n= 25)	More Assim boys (n= 17)	Less Assim girls (n= 33)	More Assim girls (n= 11)
Speaks Hmong well	(22) 88%	(7) 41%	(27) 82%	(5) 45%
Speaks Hmong somewhat well	(2) 8%	(9) 53%	(6) 18%	(5) 45%
Does not speak Hmong well	(1) 4%	(1) 6%	(0) 0%	(1) 10%

*Source:* Hmong Youth Adjustment Questionnaire (n= 86)

Music tastes showed that over a third of the less assimilated boys (36%) and girls (38%) enjoyed Hmong music while none of the more assimilated boys (0%) and girls (0%) did so. The more assimilated boys (71%) and girls (91%) preferred American music. Except for the more assimilated girls, approximately one third of the other groups listened to both Hmong and American music (see table 3.4). Music tastes is another primary indicator of Hmong youth assimilation.

Table 3.4 Music, Assimilation, and Gender

Music Preference	Less Assim boys (n= 25)	More Assim boys (n= 17)	Less Assim girls (n= 33)	More Assim girls (n= 11)
Hmong	(9) 36%	(0) 0%	(12) 36%	(0) 0%
American	(7) 28%	(12) 71%	(7) 21%	(10) 91%
Both	(9) 36%	(5) 29%	(14) 43%	(1) 9%

*Source:* Hmong Youth Adjustment Questionnaire (n= 86)

#### *On Friendship and Marriage Preference*

The great majority of the less assimilated boys (88%) reported associating mainly with friends who are Hmong. Two thirds of the more assimilated boys (65%) associated with only Hmong friends. The less assimilated girls also reported associating mainly with friends who are Hmong. Table 3.5 shows that 79% of the less assimilated girls have mainly Hmong friends. In

contrast, 55% of the more assimilated girls had non-Hmong friends. These numbers indicate that there is a slight gender difference as the girls reported that they are more likely to have non-Hmong friends than the boys. I will explore this finding about why the boys are more likely to have mainly Hmong friends in a later chapter.

Table 3.5 Ethnicity/Race of Closest Friends, Assimilation, and Gender

Ethnicity of Friends	Less Assim boys (n= 25)	More Assim boys (n= 17)	Less Assim girls (n= 33)	More Assim girls (n= 11)
Hmong	(22) 88%	(11) 65%	(26) 79%	(5) 45%
Hmong and Other Ethnicity/Race	(3) 12%	(6) 35%	(7) 21%	(6) 55%

*Source:* Hmong Youth Adjustment Questionnaire (n= 86)

Regarding marriage, table 3.6 shows that the majority of the less assimilated boys (84%) preferred to marry someone who is Hmong. In contrast, the more assimilated boys (71%) were more open to marrying someone who is non-Hmong. The majority of the less assimilated girls (85%) preferred to marry someone who is Hmong. In contrast, the more assimilated girls (64%) were more open to marrying someone who is non-Hmong. Willingness to marry outside the group is a principal indicator of assimilationist tendencies, with no major gender differences.

Table 3.6 Marriage, Assimilation, and Gender

Marriage Preference	Less Assim boys (n= 25)	More Assim boys (n= 17)	Less Assim girls (n= 33)	More Assim girls (n= 11)
Marry Hmong	(21) 84%	(5) 29%	(28) 85%	(4) 36%
No or Uncertain	(4) 16%	(12) 71%	(5) 15%	(7) 64%

*Source:* Hmong Youth Adjustment Questionnaire (n= 86)



### *On Organizational Membership*

On the question about organizational membership, I found what seem to be a significant gender difference. Girls tended to belong to more school organizations than boys. Organizational membership reveals that the less assimilated girls (67%) were more likely to belong to ethnic organizations such as a Hmong club, compared to the less assimilated boys (36%) and the more assimilated boys (23%) and girls (36%). Table 3.7 also shows that the more assimilated boys (59%) and girls (55%) were more likely to belong in non-ethnic organizations. Another interesting finding was that almost half of the less assimilated boys (44%) did not belong to any organization at all. These findings suggest there are gender differences in ethnic organizational membership among Hmong youth, particularly with the higher tendency of the less assimilated girls to join ethnic organizations and likelihood that the less assimilated boys do not have any organizational membership. These differences deserve greater attention and explanation, which I will explore in a later chapter.

Table 3.7 Ethnic Organization Membership, Assimilation, and Gender

Organizational Membership	Less Assim boys (n= 25)	More Assim boys (n= 17)	Less Assim girls (n= 33)	More Assim girls (n= 11)
Ethnic	(9) 36%	(4) 23%	(22) 67%	(4) 36%
Non-Ethnic	(5) 20%	(10) 59%	(5) 15%	(6) 55%
None	(11) 44%	(3) 18%	(6) 18%	(1) 9%

*Source:* Hmong Youth Adjustment Questionnaire (n= 86)

### *On Academic Performance and Attitude*

Survey data from the Hmong youth point to gender disparities in academic achievement. Since the GPAs of these youth were self-reported, there was a likely tendency towards exaggeration. Nonetheless, the self reports point to some interesting patterns. Table 3.8 shows that 64% of the less assimilated boys reported a GPA of 3.0 or higher compared to 35% of the more assimilated boys and 55% of the more assimilated girls. Out of the less assimilated girls, 88% reported a GPA of a 3.0 or higher. Regardless of degree of assimilation, the girls are outperforming the boys academically. Additionally, the less assimilated boys and girls have much higher GPAs than the more assimilated boys and girls.

Table 3.8 GPA (Self-reported)

	Less Assim boys (n= 25)	More Assim boys (n= 17)	Less Assim girls (n= 33)	More Assim girls (n= 11)
3.0 or higher	(16) 64%	(6) 35%	(29) 88%	(6) 55%
2.9 or lower	(9) 36%	(11) 65%	(4) 12%	(5) 45%

*Source:* Hmong Youth Adjustment Questionnaire (n= 86)

Moreover, attitudes toward college reveal a more significant difference between the boys and girls. Attitudes towards college reflect the higher level of academic achievement among the girls. Table 3.9 shows that 64% of the less assimilated boys believe that college is very important. In contrast, 41% of the more assimilated boys believe that college is very important. Among the girls, 94% of the less assimilated girls believe college is important, while 73% of the more assimilated girls believe the same (see table 3.9). Overall, more girls than boys believe college is important. The less assimilated boys and girls also have much higher aspirations than the more assimilated boys and girls.

Table 3.9 College Attitude

	Less Assim boys (n= 25)	More Assim boys (n= 17)	Less Assim girls (n= 33)	More Assim girls (n= 11)
Very Important	(16) 64%	(7) 41%	(31) 94%	(8) 73%
Fairly Important	(9) 36%	(7) 41%	(2) 6%	(2) 18%
Not Important	(0) 0%	(3) 18%	(0) 0%	(1) 9%

*Source:* Hmong Youth Adjustment Questionnaire (n= 86)

### *On Risky Behaviors*

The 86 Hmong youth answered questions about whether they have friends who have dropped out of school, friends who have joined or are currently in a gang, friends who have been arrested and put in jail, friends who have drunk alcohol, or friends who have done drugs to assess their level of risky behaviors. There were also additional questions about whether the

respondents have drunk alcohol, done drugs, or have been involved in gangs. Table 3.10 shows clear gender differences in the responses.

Table 3.10 Risky Behaviors and Gender Differences

Risky Behaviors	Boys (n= 42)	Girls (n= 44)
Have friends who Dropped out of school	60%	33%
Have friends in a gang	52%	16%
Have friends in jail	50%	18%
Have friends who drink	52%	38%
Have friends who do drugs	52%	33%
Has drunk or done drugs	36%	16%
Is in a gang	7%	0%

*Source:* Hmong Youth Adjustment Questionnaire (n=86)

Each of the seven questions was scored using a 1 point scale, in which a response of a yes received a 1 and a no received a 0. With the points from each question, a risky behavior index score was generated for each youth. The maximum index score for all seven indicated questions of risky behavior, which is given the value label of ‘very risky’. The lowest score would be a 0, which is labeled as ‘non-risky’. Using the risk scale, youth who scored a 4 or higher were categorized as risky, and those who scored a 3 or lower were categorized as non-risky. The average risky behavior index score for the 86 youth who participated in the study was a 2.4. The median risky behavior index score for the boys was a 3, while the median score for the girls was only a 1.5, highlighting that the boys are more likely to participate and have a higher level of risk than the girls. Of the 42 boys, half were engaged in risky behavior. Of the 44 girls, only 9 (20%) were engaged in risky behavior.

Breaking down the boys and girls according to degree of assimilation illustrates that assimilation makes no difference in terms of risky behavior (see table 3.11). The survey data shows that 52% of the less assimilated boys and 47% of the more assimilated boys fall into the risky category while only 21% of the less assimilated girls and 18% of the more assimilated girls scored a risky behavior index score of 4 or higher. Assimilation is not a factor in risky behavior regardless of whether we look at the boys or the girls. Rather, the difference in levels of risky behavior is driven by gender.

Table 3.11 Assimilation, Gender, and Risky Behavior

	Less Assim boys (n= 25)	More Assim boys (n= 17)	Less Assim girls (n= 33)	More Assim girls (n= 11)
Risky	(13) 52%	(8) 47%	(7) 21%	(2) 18%
Non-Risky	(12) 48%	(9) 53%	(26) 79%	(9) 82%

*Source:* Hmong Youth Adjustment Questionnaire (n= 86)

Examining the seven indicator questions of risky behavior among the four groups of the more and less assimilated youth reveals the same basic pattern. Regardless of assimilation, approximately half the boys were engaged in risky behavior while about 20% of the girls were so engaged. Gender is more eminent than assimilation or ethnic attachment in determining if the youth engage in risky behaviors. The survey data illustrates that despite the level of assimilation among Hmong boys, they are more likely to engage in risky behaviors than girls.

Table 3.12 Indicators of Risky Behavior

	Less Assim boys (n= 25)	More Assim boys (n= 17)	Less Assim girls (n= 33)	More Assim girls (n= 11)
Have friends who Dropped out of school	56%	65%	36%	36%
Have friends in a gang	56%	47%	21%	9%
Have friends in jail	52%	47%	18%	27%
Have friends who drink	56%	47%	42%	36%
Have friends who do drugs	64%	35%	41%	27%
Has drank or done drugs	36%	35%	15%	18%
Is in a gang	4%	12%	0%	0%

*Source:* Hmong Youth Adjustment Questionnaire (n= 86)

*Grant High School GPAs and the API Risk Factors Survey*

My survey data reveals that despite the degree of assimilation, Hmong girls have a more successful integration pathway with a higher level of academic achievement and a lower level of involvement with risky behavior, while Hmong boys have a less successful integration pathway with lower levels of academic achievement and higher levels of involvement with risky behaviors. The actual GPAs of Hmong girls and boys collected from the high school chosen for this study also suggest that the girls are outperforming the boys.<sup>3</sup> A list was generated by home language with 104 Hmong students in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade and 95 Hmong students in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade for the 2008-2009 academic school year. Among the 104 students in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade, only 31 students or 30% achieved a 3.0 or higher GPA, while 73 students or 70% achieved a 2.9 or lower GPA. However, when broken down by gender, the actual GPAs for Hmong students in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade showed that more girls (50%) are achieving academic success with a GPA of 3.0 or higher, compared to only 14% of the boys. The following table shows the differences in academic achievement of the boys and girls in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

Table 3.13 Gender and Academic Performance (12<sup>th</sup> Graders)

GPA	Males (n=58)	Females (n=46)
3.0 or higher	(8) 14%	(23) 50%
2.9 or lower	(50) 86%	(23) 50%

*Source:* Grant High School, 2008-2009 (N=104)

Among the ninety-five students in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, only 25 students or 26% achieved a GPA of 3.0 or higher, while 70 students or 74% achieved a GPA of 2.9 or lower. Similar to the students in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade, the actual GPAs for Hmong students in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade showed that more girls (42%) are achieving academic success than boys (12%). The following table shows the differences in academic achievement of the boys and girls in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade.

Table 3.14 Gender and Academic Performance (11<sup>th</sup> Graders)

GPA	Males (n=50)	Females (n=45)
3.0 or higher	(6) 12%	(19) 42%
2.9 or lower	(44) 88%	(26) 58%

*Source:* Grant High School, 2008-2009 (N=95)

Although the data shows that only about one third of the Hmong students at this school in both the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade levels are achieving a GPA of 3.0 or higher, the GPAs of both groups suggest that the females are outperforming the males. In both grade levels, there are large numbers of males achieving GPAs of 2.9 or lower, while significantly larger numbers of females are achieving GPAs of 3.0 or higher. The actual GPAs of students from this high school with a large population of Hmong students suggest that the girls are doing well academically compared to the boys.

Additionally, I analyzed data from a survey assessing risk and protective factors of Asian Pacific Islander youth. This survey asked various questions about school, parents, risky behaviors and delinquency, arrest and criminal history, friends, self-worth and depression, and cultural values and beliefs. Participants for this survey were recruited at the annual Sacramento Hmong New Year Celebration, from two high schools in Sacramento, from friends of friends, and from the Hmong, Mien, and Lao Task Force, which addresses youth violence in the Southeast Asian communities in Sacramento. In total, 69 Hmong youth completed this survey. The average age of these respondents was 16 years of age in grades 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup>. Many of the respondents are first or second-generation youth who have immigrant parents. 79% of them are U.S. born, and the rest were born in Thailand and immigrated to the U.S. between 1989 and 1997. The majority of their parents were born in Laos. Males constituted 53% and females constituted 39% of the respondents. The remaining 8% were missing or unidentified. Everyone identifies themselves as Hmong. The average GPA is a 3.0. The majority of these students do not have any truancy or delinquency problems.

My survey was distributed to attendees of a conference for Hmong youth that was focused on addressing issues they face. The purpose was to get a description of the youth who attended the conference and whether their experiences could tell us more about the general Hmong youth population in Sacramento. Data from my survey served as preliminary findings for my dissertation research and to frame questions for the in-depth interviews. In contrast, the survey assessing risk and protective factors of Asian Pacific Islander youth was distributed by community members and a non-profit agency based in Sacramento to Hmong youth as a community response to the highly publicized gang violence in the Sacramento Hmong community in March 2005. The survey was used to assess risk and protective measures for Hmong youth in Sacramento. These youth were recruited from several sites in Sacramento,

which obtained a wider range of Hmong youth experiences than my survey. Although data from both surveys do not fully reflect the experiences of the general Hmong youth population in Sacramento, both surveys assessed a population of Hmong youth who average similar GPAs, are of similar age, are mostly U.S. born with immigrant parents, and who share similar values such as education and cultural tastes and interests.

Data from the API risk and protective factor survey also shows gender differences of self-reported GPAs with 59% of the males and 72% of the females achieving a 3.0 or higher GPA. Furthermore, the data shows gender differences with regards to attitudes toward school and college. For instance, 93% of the females, compared to only 78% of the males, feel that college is very important. Furthermore, 86% of the females, compared to only 58% of the males, usually complete their homework (see table 3.15).

Table 3.15 Gender, Academic Performance, and Attitudes

	Males (n= 40)	Females (n=29)
GPA (3.0 or higher)	62%	72%
Feels College is very important	78%	93%
Usually completes homework	58%	86%

*Source:* Asian Pacific Islander Risk Factors Survey (N= 69)

Data from the API risk/protective factor survey also reveals important gender differences with risky behaviors. Table 3.16 illustrates that more boys are involved with risky behaviors such as skipping school, drinking alcohol, doing drugs, running away from home, and gang involvement.

Table 3.16 Gender and Peer Association/Risky Behaviors

Peer Association/Risky Behaviors	Males (n =40)	Females (n=29)
Have friends who cut school	83%	79%
Have friends in a gang	25%	0%
Have friends in jail	28%	17%
Have friends who drink	43%	31%
Have friends who do drugs	25%	10%
Has skipped school	35%	24%
Has drank alcohol	43%	24%
Has used marijuana	18%	7%
Has run away from home	15%	7%
Has been in a gang fight	10%	0%
Is in a gang	3%	0%

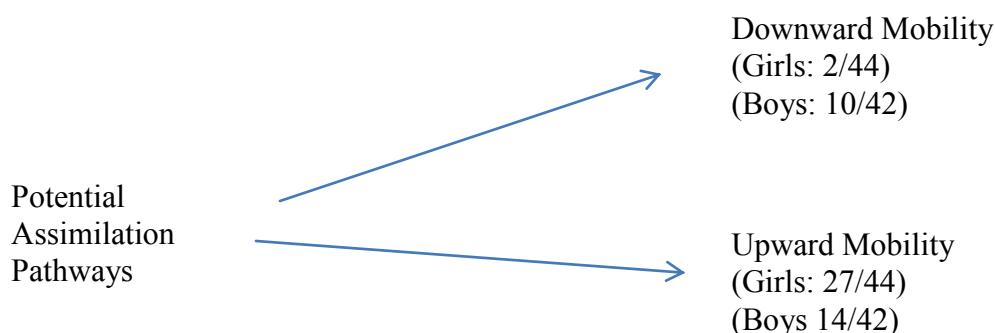
*Source:* Asian Pacific Islander Risk Factors Survey (N= 69)

### **The Different Pathways of the Boys and Girls**

Gender differences with academic performance and risky behaviors highlight the different integration pathways of the boys and girls toward upward mobility or downward assimilation. The potential toward a pathway of upward mobility is denoted by non-risky behavior and a GPA of a 3.0 or higher, while downward assimilation is denoted by risky behavior and a GPA of a 2.9 or lower. Among the 86 youth in my study, 27 of the 44 girls compared to 14 of the 42 boys demonstrated potential toward an integration pathway of upward mobility. Among those who seemed to be following a pathway toward downward assimilation, there were 2 of the 44 girls compared to 10 of the 42 boys. Figure 3.1 illustrates that Hmong youth assimilation resembles a more gendered integration pathway with more girls following a path toward upward mobility whereas more boys are following a path toward downward mobility. Of the 44 girls, 15 girls could not be categorized as upward or downward bound. Of the 42 boys, 18 boys could not be categorized as upward or downward bound. For these youth, it could not be determined which way they might go.



**Figure 3.1 Hmong Youth Assimilation**



One of the teachers with a large population of Hmong students confirms that the girls in his classes are more academically motivated and outperform the boys:

“In my classes, 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.”<sup>4</sup>

Members of the Hmong community share similar views about the difference in academic performance among males and females. They believe the changing roles and expectations for men and women as the Hmong community slowly adjusts to the norms and values of American society attribute to these academic differences. Historically, Hmong men have received much of the support from their families to pursue an education, whereas Hmong girls were taught to cook, clean, and prepare themselves to be good wives. As educational opportunities present themselves to Hmong girls in the U.S., Hmong girls have taken up these opportunities, and have become more successful than the males in higher education. They speculate that the number of women in higher education has significantly increased and has quite possibly surpassed the number of men since the 1980s and 1990s, when more Hmong men were achieving a higher education.<sup>5</sup>

Another Hmong teacher believes it is the differing Hmong cultural expectations and roles for boys and girls that have helped the academic performance of the girls:

“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.”<sup>6</sup>

The teacher suggests that cultural norms for boys and girls enforce stronger work ethics and responsibility for the girls within the home, which then transfer over to how boys and girls perform at school. The girls have responsibilities to help out in the home and are expected to help their parents with chores, whereas the boys can just “relax.” As a result, the boys are not trying their best, and the girls are more motivated and do much better in school. The teacher also 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. This is also supported by opinions from community members of the Hmong community, who believe that Hmong cultural expectations and roles help to improve the girls’ academic performance. Although the girls do have positive academic outcomes, their difficult experience in the immigrant culture and home life shows that these outcomes come at a cost. The following chapter discusses the experiences of the girls in greater detail.

### *Goals and Aspirations of Hmong Youth*

The goals and aspirations of Hmong youth may also speak to the different pathways that boys and girls follow. James, one of the less assimilated boys, talked about how he will attend a vocational school in order to get into the workforce faster to help his family financially:

“I would really like to get a job so I can help out my family. I would really like to go to college, but I’m thinking of going to a vocational school so I can get my degree faster. Vocational school would be better so I can finish my education faster and get back to my family quicker. I just don’t want my family struggling so much. If I get a job, I can really help them. If I didn’t have to help them, I’d really like to go to a four year university like UC Davis or Sacramento State.”

Due to his duty as a good son, James chooses to attend a vocational school after high school so he can obtain his degree faster to help his family. He expresses how he would like to go to a four year university like a University of California or California State University, but his educational choices and opportunities are limited by the obligation and pressure he feels to help out his family’s immediate financial needs. For James, fulfilling his role as a dutiful son is important to him. He will most likely stay close to his family and community to meet the financial needs of his family and fulfill the roles and expectations of him as a son.

Unlike James, David, one of the more assimilated boys, spoke about fulfilling the dreams he has for himself rather than meet the expectations his father has of him:

“My dad wants me to be a doctor, a PhD or doctor, basically all the Hmong dreams. He basically wants to control my life because he never got the chance to live that kind of life for himself. It’s hard to please my father. I just ignore what he wants me to do. I’d rather do things I want to do. My dream is to be a motivational speaker because kids in this area or school have little motivation or hope to do anything. I grew up with that and I was never okay with that, seeing people without hope, second chances or nowhere to go in life. I think that these kids don’t have adult support from their parents or their teachers. I want to pursue a career to help people who grew up in my kind of situation.”

For David, his future aspirations are geared towards fulfilling his own happiness. He has been in conflict with his father about career choices and future goals, but ultimately David has decided for himself that he would rather fulfill his own dreams and goals. David values individual choice and happiness over his father's expectations of him to fulfill his role as a dutiful son by obtaining a higher status and a better reputation in the community with a high college education. In contrast to James, David may not stay as close to his family and community to participate and fulfill the roles and expectations of him as a son.

The girls also have similar aspirations to obtain a better life to help themselves and their families in the future. Michelle, one of the more assimilated girls, expresses her desire to obtain a higher education to help her family financially:

‘I just want to get out there already and finish my education and get a good job and career and come back and help my family. My plan for the future is to go to college. I definitely want to keep my grades up. I have this rule for myself of getting nothing below a ‘C’ and so far I’ve never gotten a ‘C’ so I kinda want to keep that in college even though I know that it is going to be hard. After college, right now, I’m thinking that I want to be a pediatrician cause I like little kids and well, being a doctor, you get paid really well. I think I will marry maybe in my mid-twenties.’

Similarly, Mary, one of the less assimilated girls, aspires to obtain a college education, even though she understands that the value of a girl's education may not be the same as a boy's education for the Hmong community and her parents:

“In my family, no one actually finished college so I want to do that. Sometimes I think about why I should do that because I’m a girl. One time, I heard my parents agree with my uncle about how one of his daughters did get a college degree but it doesn’t mean much because she is only a girl. It made me feel sad that my parents really feel that way about girls.”

The boys and girls seem to have different aspirations and goals. For the boys, they are making choices about whether they will fulfill their roles and expectations as a Hmong son. For the girls, they emphasize higher aspirations for college and education. However, Mary's story also suggests that girls are treated unequally in the culture even when they are able to obtain educational success. The following chapters explore in more depth the experiences of the girls and boys in their ethnic community and mainstream society.

## **Conclusion**

The survey data shows that there are no major gender differences among the more and less assimilated Hmong youth regarding assimilation measures of identity, native language ability, marriage preference, and music tastes. These are effective measures of assimilation for Hmong youth and support similar measures used by existing models.<sup>7</sup> However, the responses concerning peer association, organizational membership, academic performance and attitude, and risky behaviors reveal some important gender differences that deserve greater exploration and explanation. For instance, the girls are more likely to have non-Hmong friends while the boys have mainly Hmong friends. The less assimilated girls also have a higher tendency to have organizational memberships while the less assimilated boys mainly do not belong in any

organization. Regardless of degree of assimilation, the girls are academically outperforming the boys while the boys have higher levels of involvement with risky behaviors.

Differences along the degree of assimilation show that the less assimilated boys and girls have much higher GPAs and higher aspirations than the more assimilated boys and girls. The correlation found between less assimilated Hmong youth and greater school success and higher academic aspirations resonates with the segmented assimilation theory, which argues that ethnic attachment leads to positive outcomes. According to the segmented assimilation theory, Hmong youth are at a higher risk of downward assimilation due to the low human capital of their immigrant parents and a negative mode of incorporation such as racism. However, being ethnically attached does provide Hmong youth an “immigrant advantage” toward upward assimilation as the less assimilated youth have higher academic achievement and aspirations than the more assimilated youth. The data seems consistent with the claims of the segmented theory about ethnicity predicting mobility. However, other variables such as gender complicate the story told by the segmented assimilation theory about ethnicity.

The higher involvement of boys with risky behaviors indicate that downward assimilation may have more to do with their racialized experiences in dominant society and less to do with how the second generation employs their ethnicity, whether as a second generation advantage or immigrant advantage. The current literature should rely less on culture, particularly immigrant culture, in predicting mobility. This is because culture does not do much positive, either because the positive outcomes at such a cost for second-generation girls, or because racism and gender subordination are so strong that culture does little to help the mobility of second generation boys. Gender is a stronger predictor of downward assimilation. The correlation found between gender and risky behaviors among Hmong youth does not resonate well with the approaches of the current debate on second generation incorporation and deserves greater attention and exploration. These survey findings will be explored in more depth in the following chapters with the stories of the girls and boys.

## Chapter 4

### **Hmong Girls: Upward Assimilation at a Cost**

The girls may benefit from ethnic attachment and achieve a more successful integration pathway than the boys, but it comes at a cost. Examining the role of gender within immigrant culture exposes the different realities of the boys and girls within the home life. More importantly it reveals the difficult experiences of the girls in immigrant culture. The cultural boundaries and restrictions of immigrant culture bind the girls to their roles and responsibilities in the home and limit their freedom of movement and association in their social world more harshly than the boys. Even when the girls comply with the cultural rules and boundaries, they are still not completely accepted or treated in the same way as the boys. Some girls negotiate these cultural boundaries with rebellious behaviors that lead to harsh and enduring judgment and punishment by the immigrant community and larger society. Other girls use education and school as an outlet or fulfill their role in the home and community and thus maintain their ethnic attachment. Hmong culture imposes harsher constraints and judgment on the girls, making their experiences within immigrant culture and the ethnic community difficult.

In this chapter, I explore the difficult experiences of the girls in immigrant culture and the ethnic community, and the different ways in which the girls respond that may contribute to their assimilation pathways. I provide a critical analysis and understanding of immigrant culture and home life for second generation girls to challenge the romanticization and usefulness of immigrant culture as an explanation for immigrant integration (given that the benefits and protection of ethnic attachment comes at a cost). The harsh realities of Hmong girls within immigrant culture and home life illustrate the difficult process of integration for second-generation girls and demonstrate the central role of gender in the lives of the second generation.

#### **Gender and Parental Relations**

The survey data of Hmong youth revealed important gender differences with parental relations that help to illustrate the difficult experiences of the girls within the immigrant culture. The 86 Hmong youth in this study answered three questions about parental relations such as whether they get along well with parents, fight often with parents, or feel supported by their parents. These questions generated a parental index score to assess the level of parental conflict among the Hmong youth in this study. The responses of each question was scored using a 1 point scale, in which a response that received a 1 was high parental conflict, .5 was moderate parental conflict, and 0 was low parental conflict. For the question on getting along with parents, a response of “very well” was denoted as low parental conflict which received a score of 0. A response of “somewhat” was denoted as moderate parental conflict and received a score of .5, and a response of “not at all” was denoted as high parental conflict and received a score of 1. For the question on fighting often with parents, a response of “not at all” was denoted as low parental conflict which received a score of 0. A response of “somewhat” was denoted as moderate parental conflict and received a score of .5, and a response of “very” was denoted as high parental conflict and received a score of 1. For the question on feeling support of parents, a response of “very” was denoted as low parental conflict which received a score of 0. A response of “somewhat” was denoted as moderate parental conflict and received a score of .5, and a response of “not at all” was denoted as high parental conflict and received a score of 1.

With the points from each question, a parental conflict index score was generated for each youth. The maximum index score for all six indicator questions would be a 3, or high parental conflict. The lowest score would be a zero, or low parental conflict. Youth who scored a 1.5 or higher were categorized as having high parental conflict and youth who scored a 1 or lower were designated as having low parental conflict. Table 4.1 reveals that 27 of the eighty-six youth or 31% received a parental conflict index score of 1.5 or higher while 59 youth or 69% scored between a 0 and 1, suggesting that more than half of the youth in this study have low parental conflict. Comparing the four groups of the more and less assimilated boys and girls affirms low levels of parental conflict among the youth in this study. For instance, more than half of youth from each of the four groups reported having low levels of parental conflict. In contrast, only 32% of the less assimilated boys and 35% of the more assimilated boys reported having high parental conflict. Similarly, 27% of the less assimilated girls and 36% of the more assimilated girls reported having high parental conflict.

Table 4.1 Assimilation, Gender and Parental Conflict

Parental Conflict	Less Assim boys (n= 25)	More Assim boys (n= 17)	Less Assim girls (n= 33)	More Assim girls (n= 11)
Low	(17) 68%	(11) 65%	(24) 73%	(7) 64%
High	(8) 32%	(6) 35%	(9) 27%	(4) 36%

*Source:* Hmong Youth Adjustment Questionnaire (n= 86)

The parental conflict index scores seem to suggest that the majority of Hmong youth in this study experience little to no parental conflict with about two thirds or more from each group of the more and less assimilated boys and girls scoring a low parental conflict index score. The index scores also reveals that there is not much difference between the four groups, and that assimilation does not determine high parental conflict among Hmong youth.

However, looking more closely at each indicator question of parental conflict reveals more about the complexities of parental conflict among Hmong youth. For instance, the boys and girls reported a slight differences in their ability to get along well with their parents (see table 4.2). The less assimilated boys (48%) and the more assimilated boys (59%) said they get along better with their parents than the less assimilated girls (36%) and the more assimilated girls (36%). Regardless of the level of assimilation, more boys than girls reported that they get along well with their parents, while more than half of the girls reported that they got along only “somewhat well.” Table 4.2 indicates that gender is relevant to parental issues and conflict.

Table 4.2 Gender and Parental Relationships (Getting along with Parents)

Get along w/parents	Less Assim boys (n= 25)	More Assim boys (n= 17)	Less Assim girls (n= 33)	More Assim girls (n= 11)
Well	(12) 48%	(10) 59%	(12) 36%	(4) 36%
Somewhat well	(10) 40%	(6) 35%	(19) 58%	(6) 55%
Not at all	(3) 12%	(1) 6%	(2) 6%	(1) 9%

*Source:* Hmong Youth Adjustment Questionnaire (n= 86)

Hmong boys and girls have different experiences and issues in immigrant culture, demonstrating the significance of gender within immigrant culture. The indicator question about whether youth feel supported by their parents further highlights the role of gender among Hmong youth experiences in immigrant culture. For instance, table 4.3 shows that 72% of the less assimilated boys felt supported by their parents compared to 53% of the more assimilated boys and 61% of the less assimilated and 55% of the more assimilated girls. Additionally, 27% of the more assimilated girls compared to 9% of the less assimilated girls and 16% of the less assimilated and 6% of the more assimilated boys do not feel supported by their parents at all. Boys who are attached to the culture will feel the most support from their parents. Girls who are not attached to the culture will feel the least support from their parents. Assimilation and gender matters as to whether who feels supported by their parents, as the less assimilated boys receive the most parental support.

Table 4.3 Gender and Parental Relationships (Support of Parents)

Feel Support of parents	Less Assim boys (n= 25)	More Assim boys (n= 17)	Less Assim girls (n= 33)	More Assim girls (n= 11)
Yes	(18) 72%	(9) 53%	(20) 61%	(6) 55%
Somewhat	(3) 12%	(7) 41%	(10) 30%	(2) 18%
Not at all	(4) 16%	(1) 6%	(3) 9%	(3) 27%

*Source:* Hmong Youth Adjustment Questionnaire (n= 86)

The indicator question about whether the youth fight with their parents further highlights the relevance of gender and also indicates that assimilation plays a role in parental conflict among Hmong youth. For instance, table 4.4 shows little differences between the boys, as 48% of the less assimilated boys and 47% of the more assimilated boys do not fight with their parents. More than half of the boys in both groups reported that they either sometimes or often fight with their parents. Regardless of assimilation, the boys have similar experiences with fighting with their parents.

On the other hand, data from the girls reveal significant differences. For example, 73% of the less assimilated girls reported that they do not fight with their parents compared to only 36% of the more assimilated girls. Moreover, only 21% of the less assimilated girls compared to 46% of the more assimilated girls reported that they sometimes do fight with their parents. Additionally, 18% of the more assimilated girls, versus 6% of the less assimilated girls, often fight with their parents. Unlike the boys, in which assimilation did not matter much as to whether they fought with their parents, assimilation matters greatly for the girls as the more assimilated girls fight more with their parents than the less assimilated girls. Couple fighting with the feeling of less support from parents and it becomes clear that assimilation and gender does matter for understanding the parental relations with Hmong youth.

Table 4.4 Gender and Parental Relationships (Fights with Parents)

Fights w/parents	Less Assim boys (n= 25)	More Assim boys (n= 17)	Less Assim girls (n= 33)	More Assim girls (n= 11)
Not at all	(12) 48%	(8) 47%	(24) 73%	(4) 36%
Sometimes	(11) 44%	(8) 47%	(7) 21%	(5) 46%
Often	(2) 8%	(1) 6%	(2) 6%	(2) 18%

*Source:* Hmong Youth Adjustment Questionnaire (n= 86)

The survey data indicate that gender and assimilation is important and relevant to parental conflict among Hmong youth. Boys and girls face different experiences and issues in immigrant cultures. The boys, particularly the less assimilated, are more likely to get along with and feel supported by their parents compared to the girls. The survey data of Hmong youth show that the boys and girls have different experiences within immigrant culture.

### **The Cultural Boundaries that Bind**

Immigrant culture operates differently for Hmong boys than girls within the home life and the ethnic community. Different roles and expectations are assigned to the boys within the home and community according to the patriarchal values and rules that place a higher value on the sons, who are expected to integrate within the ethnic community as active members. The



expectation is that the sons will stay in the family to carry on the family name, whereas the daughters are believed to become a part of the family they marry into. Hmong culture enforces strict cultural rules and boundaries between the boys and girls to ensure that they carry out the roles and responsibilities that are expected of them, and also to help them maintain a good reputation and standing in the Hmong community. However, the cultural boundaries bind the boys and girls in different ways. The girls are much more bounded within the home and household responsibilities. Their social worlds are also much more restricted than the boys.

### *Cultural Expectations and Roles for Girls*

The girls are expected to fulfill their role as an obedient and dutiful daughter through their household chores and responsibilities. The girls are affected similarly by the cultural rules and boundaries of the patriarchal Hmong culture despite the degree of assimilation. Both the less assimilated and the more assimilated girls reported having chores and responsibilities in the home such as cooking, cleaning, and taking care of their younger siblings. One less assimilated girl, Nou, talked about having to do the chores around the house as the only girl left in the house:

“I have to do everything from scratch while the boys get everything done for them. For example, I have to cook from scratch to eat while the boys just come and eat. I have to clean the house. The boys just get to come home to a clean house. I’m the only girl left in the house and it is a lot for me. I mop the floors, sweep, wash dishes, and wash the stove. I do my chores about a couple of times a week. My brothers don’t get to do the chores. They just get to play games. Two out of three brothers don’t go to school. Only one does. The other two goes to work but after work, they get to come home, relax and play games.”

Stricter cultural rules and boundaries of appropriate behaviors are also enforced on the girls to ensure that they maintain a reputable status in the community. Yang, one of the less assimilated girls, talked about not being able to go out and date, or enjoy the same privileges as her brother:

“As we were growing up, my brother would always have more rights than me. He and I would always go out. When he came home they would not say anything to him but for me, my parents would always yell at me and get in trouble. I thought it was really unfair. My parents were really strict on me. If there was guy who wanted to see me, than the guy has to come and stay in the house. The guy could only come in the daytime and stay in the living room when my mom and dad were around. My parents treated me and my brother differently.”

The girls are expected to fulfill their role as obedient and dutiful daughters by completing their household chores and responsibilities. At the same time, they are also expected to maintain a reputable status in the community by staying within strict cultural rules and boundaries that determine how they behave in their social worlds with regards to dating and marriage choices. Marriage is one major way that girls are expected to uphold a reputable name and status since the person she marries also reflects on her reputation. Their traditional role as a good and obedient daughter includes marrying someone who has respect of the community and has a good reputation, which is established by his status and ability to economically support his family. Strict rules to marry within the culture and community give Hmong girls a difficult time within

their family and community when their choices to date or marry go beyond cultural boundaries. Hmong girls are constrained to marry within the Hmong community to protect and uphold a good and respectable reputation in the family and community. Chong, a less assimilated girl, described being pressured and restricted by her mother to marry for economic security, which conflicts with her desires to marry for happiness:

“My mom wants me to date and marry someone I don’t love because he has money and he can help my parents. I always get into fights with my mom because I don’t love him and I don’t care about money. I love someone else. I just want my happiness and for my mom to understand me.”

Hmong girls are restricted to marrying someone with status and wealth to uphold their reputations. Despite being ethnically attached, Chong’s choice to marry is influenced by American values and ideals about love and the freedom to choose whom to marry, which conflicts with her parents’ traditional beliefs about marrying for status, economic security, and the well-being of the entire family.

Although the boys and girls are both bounded by cultural rules and boundaries to uphold a reputable name and status in the immigrant family and community, the cultural boundaries are more flexible and provide more freedom of movement and association for the boys. As one of the Hmong male youth, Tong, explains, Hmong culture allows the boys to have more freedom of movement in their social worlds, “The parents are less strict on the guys than the girls. The guys go out more than the girls. The boys have more freedom to go out with their friends or just hang out than the girls.” When it comes to life in Hmong culture and with immigrant parents, gender is a stronger determinant of the girls’ experiences as they share a more difficult experience under cultural constraints in their home life than the boys.

Although the girls have a difficult experience within immigrant culture, their integration within the culture and community does provide protection for the girls from negative influences of peers and involvement with risky behaviors given the harsher restrictions and boundaries that are enforced on the girls. Hmong girls benefit from the strictness and protection of the Hmong culture and community as seen with their higher levels of educational achievement and more successful pathway than the boys. One of the more assimilated Hmong boys, Michael, explains:

“The boys get more involved with friends who do drugs, smoke or drink or do it themselves because the parents are less strict on the guys than the girls. The guys go out more than the girls. The boys have more freedom and more likely to do those things than the girls. The girls are more likely to go to college because the parents are stricter on them. They don’t let the girls go out that much or do bad in school. For the guys, the parents don’t really care what the guys do so the guys do whatever they want.”

However, being ethnically integrated also comes at a cost, as cultural restraints bind the girls in ways that make their experiences within the immigrant culture and community difficult, if not outright oppressive. The following stories of the girls illustrate the difficult experiences of the girls within immigrant culture and how they have responded.

### *Compliance and Staying within the Cultural Boundaries*

Hmong traditions enforce heavier rules and boundaries on the girls to ensure appropriate behaviors by limiting and restricting access to who they can associate with and how often. These rules and boundaries are enforced more harshly on the girls in ways that Hmong boys are not subjected, limiting the freedom of movement and association of the girls in their social worlds. Some girls comply with these cultural rules and boundaries and are willing to fulfill their roles and responsibilities within the home. Mai Ying, one of the less assimilated girls, explains how she can fulfill her roles and duties in the home while maintaining good academic standing:

“During the school days, I wake up at 5:30a.m. everyday to cook rice for my siblings before we go to school. Right now I’m the oldest one at home so I have to cook for my younger siblings. My mom is usually at work and my dad drives the kids to school and runs errands for everyone in the house. When I get home from school, I have to stay home and take care of my siblings. I also have to do my homework from 6-10pm because I have a lot of AP classes.”

Mai Ying describes how she has the responsibility to wake up really early every morning even during school days because she is expected to cook for her family before she goes to school. She is currently the oldest girl at home and is responsible for cooking for her younger siblings and caring for them. She also has schoolwork responsibilities, which she spends four hours on each day after she gets home from school. In addition to her responsibilities at home, she also has expectations to do well in school. However, she managed to keep up with her AP classes and graduated in the top of her class with a 4.07 GPA.

Another less assimilated girl, Pahoua, also shares her willingness to fulfill her role and responsibilities as a Hmong girl within the home despite its demands:

“As a Hmong girl, I’m told to clean the house. Even if my other brothers and sisters don’t clean the house, as the oldest girl I should take care of the household chores. My parents have taught me that I have responsibilities in the home so I know what they expect [of] me. If there is no rice in the rice cooker or food on the table then I know that I have to prepare food for the family. I’m responsible for making the food most of the time because I am the oldest. I’m expected to be home most of the time to fulfill my responsibilities like babysitting, house cleaning, and cooking. It can get stressful, but I believe it is possible to do my chores, especially when I’ve learned what to expect from my parents.”

One less assimilated girl, Youa, explains that fulfilling her role and responsibilities within the home is a way of showing respect and love for her parents:

“Growing up, I was always taught to listen to parents and others and to never talk back. If someone told us to do something, I should always listen and do what’s told of me. I’ve always been motivated by my dad. My dad is a very honest and patient person. He doesn’t yell at us or put us down. He only lectures us about how to be a good person and the meaning of his words. He makes it clear that we either choose to listen to his words or not.”

Girls such as Mai Ying, Pahoua, and Youa are willing to fulfill their roles and duties within the home. Their ability to fulfill their roles allows them to remain attached to the immigrant culture and ethnic community.

### *Resenting the Rules*

Although some girls comply with the cultural rules and boundaries for girls, a majority of the girls, despite their degree of assimilation, spoke about their resentment toward the rules and boundaries that bind the girls more harshly than the boys. Earlier, Yang, one of the less assimilated girls, talked about not being able to go out and date with the same privileges as her brother. She also spoke about how she resented the fact that her parents kept a very tight leash on her by restricting her freedom of movement in her social world and restricting her within the home:

“I remember being really mad at my mom all the time because she was really strict about her rules and not leaving the house. At home, everything goes my parents’ way and I always have to do everything my parents say.”

Hmong culture provides more freedom for the boys to associate in their social worlds, for example, in going out with friends and dating. Many girls like Yang resented the fact that girls were more limited their freedom of movement and association in their social worlds while the boys enjoyed more flexibility and freedom.

Some girls also opposed the expectation for Hmong girls to date and marry within the culture and community. Cathy, one of the more assimilated girls, speaks about her resentment toward her mother’s objection against her dating outside the culture:

“A couple of years ago, I was dating a white guy and they were like constantly telling me to stop dating him. I told them that “we’re just dating and it’s not like we’re getting married”. They kept saying “dating leads to marriage.” My mom’s reason was that a white guy would not love you the same as a Hmong person and that we could get a divorce really easily. I liked him because he was a really nice guy and was really cool and cute. My parents never liked him from the start because he’s white.”

Boys and girls are also treated differently with regards to expectations around chores in the home, where girls are expected to have heavier household responsibilities. Amy, a less assimilated girl, shares how she and her brothers are treated differently at home, even when the brothers are old enough to help out. She discusses being opposed to her brothers having more rights than her and her sister:

“My brothers are still childish and only play games. My mom doesn’t say anything to them. She’s the main person who pays the bills and she should say something to my brothers because they are over eighteen. My brother is over eighteen and doesn’t work and just plays games. He goes to school but doesn’t take it seriously. Whenever me and my sister do something wrong or just wake up late, we get yelled at.”

Yer, a more assimilated girl, also shares her resentment about her parents favoring her brother when it comes to chores:

“I get so annoyed when my brother is sitting right there but my dad will tell me to go and do the dishes. I’m just like “he’s right there, he’s not doing anything, why can’t you ask him?” It would really annoy me but I guess since I’ve grown up as a girl, I’m expected to do the chores. I don’t think any of my brothers have ever done dishes. I guess it’s just our Hmong way that my parents expect me to do the dishes. Girls have to do everything around the house.”

The girls are strictly expected to fulfill their household chores and duties. Meng, a less assimilated boy, confirms how he is not treated as harshly as his sisters because he is given more leniency when it comes to household chores and responsibilities:

“In Hmong families, the girls are always told what to do in the house. The parents never say anything to the boys. In my house, all the girls do the chores in the house everyday like mopping, sweeping, cooking, and everything else. For me, I just sit on the computer, play games and have fun. Nobody notices me. If my sister is in the bedroom taking a nap and I’m sitting on the computer playing games, my parents would rather wake her up to do the dishes than ask me to do it. I’m not saying I want to do the dishes, but I’m just on the computer and they don’t say anything to me.”

The rules and practices of Hmong culture enforce the roles and responsibilities of the home more harshly on the girls. These cultural rules and boundaries also limit and restrict the girls in ways that the boys are not subjected to. Yang’s story attests to the difficult experience of the girls even when they comply with the rules and boundaries for Hmong girls:

“I’ve babysat for my parents and stayed home with my younger siblings. I’ve helped cook for the kids. I’ve done a lot of housework. I haven’t done anything to ruin my parents’ reputation. I go to school and come back home. I don’t go around sleeping with guys or sleeping from houses to houses. I don’t argue with my parents. My brother is the son of the house and no matter what he does, he will always be favored. My parents will always accept him no matter what. My brother screwed up his life when he got married but my parents still love him. I’ve been so used to my parents saying that guys are better than girls. But, I feel that even though I’m a daughter but I can do as much or more than my brothers for my parents and this gets me really offended.”

Although Yang complies with the rules and boundaries for girls, she is not treated equally as her brother, which makes her resentful. Even though the girls abide by cultural rules and boundaries, the patriarchal rules of the Hmong culture values the sons over the daughters, and allow the boys more freedom and preferential treatment in ways that can result in the girls being treated oppressively.

Nou, a less assimilated girl, speaks about being opposed to her parents treating the boys more favorably when both the girls and boys do something wrong:

“Well you know in Hmong culture, the parents always look at their sons more worthy than their daughters because they think that one day the girls will be somebody else’s daughters, so the parents don’t care for the daughters as much. My parents always favored the boys more than the girls. For the boys, they can get whatever and do whatever they want, just as long as they stay out of trouble. Whatever the boys do wrong,

my parents try to fix it. But, whatever the girls do wrong, our parents yell at us and threaten to kick us out of the house.”

Cultural rules and boundaries allow the boys more flexibility, freedom of movement, and association in the social worlds compared to the girls. The boys also have more lenient expectations when it comes to household chores and responsibilities. The limitations and restrictions of their social worlds combined with the harsher enforcement of household chores and responsibilities on the girls contribute to their difficult experience in the immigrant culture and home. Additionally, the patriarchal rules of the Hmong culture place a higher value of the sons over the daughters and give preferential treatment for the boys in ways that treat the girls outright oppressively, even when the girls comply with the stricter rules and boundaries placed on them. The cultural rules and boundaries treat the girls in ways that the boys are not subjected to, which explains why most girls spoke about resenting and opposing the rules and boundaries for girls. A handful of girls I interviewed spoke about how they were pushed to rebel and at times have engaged in risky behavior as a result of their difficulties in the immigrant culture and home.

### *Challenging Group Boundaries*

The cultural rules and boundaries for girls push some girls toward rebellious, and at times, risky, behaviors as a way to challenge and mediate their difficult experiences in the immigrant culture and home. At times, some Hmong girls submit to complete rebellion such as dating out of the culture and community, running away from home, skipping out on school, and failing their classes. Vicki, one of the more assimilated girls, described how the cultural restraints placed on her as a Hmong girl pushed her to resist and engage in some risky behaviors:

“I started dating a black guy and I would take off of home for a couple of days. I would always leave home and I didn’t care what my parents felt about me dating out of race. I just wanted to do what I wanted. I met the black guy through my friend because she had a black boyfriend too. I was running away from home and I was always lying to my parents. I would lie about who[m] I was with, what I was doing, and where I was going or where I’m at. If I was with my black boyfriend, I would lie that I was with my friends somewhere else. The reason I did what I did was because my parents wouldn’t let me do anything with him. It made me want to do those things even more and I just didn’t care. I just did whatever I wanted and felt it was my life. That’s the reason I dated the black guy because I felt that it was my life and I should do whatever I wanted.”

Hmong girls negotiate the cultural restraints placed on girls through rebellion such as dating another race, running away from home, and lying to their parents when they find that cultural rules and boundaries do not allow them to freely engage in their social worlds. Vicki explains how her resistance was a response to the restrictions from her parents and Hmong culture that prohibited her from going out and dating someone outside her race. Her rebellion against cultural restraints resulted in her engaging in risky behaviors such as running away from home and having relations with boys who are outside the ethnic culture and community. When the girls are prevented from doing things related to the coming of age such as dating and developing their social worlds with their friends, some girls resist and rebel against these cultural boundaries.

Earlier, Yang, a less assimilated girl, spoke about how her parents were stricter with her than her brother in issues like going out with friends and her dating choices. The unequal power relations between boys and girls intensified her need to resist and rebel to obtain the freedom of association and movement in her social world. Like Vicki, she also pushed the cultural boundaries with rebellious behaviors in an attempt to live out her freedom:

“Being with my friends was pulling me from home. I remember that when I was hanging out with my friends, I felt really good that I was away from home. At the time, it made me feel relieved and relax[ed] and that someone is not always on my back and restricting me. When I was with my friends, I could do whatever I wanted.”

Similarly, Nou, a less assimilated girl, rebels and resists cultural bounds by staying out late and failing her classes:

“I never liked to go home after school. I would just hang out with my friends in the parks nearby after school from 2:30pm until 8pm. We would just talk and gossip. When I got home, it was too late to do homework. I don’t get along with my brothers because my parents spoil the boys more than the girls. The boys think they can do whatever they want to me because my parents aren’t going to say anything. That’s why they like to torture me because they know my parents won’t say anything. My brothers and I argue a lot, almost every day. They make it hard for me to stay at home. Home was the main reason I didn’t do so well in school. Throughout my high school years, my GPA was only a 2.0. In my freshman and sophomore year, I was slacking a lot and had mostly C’s and D’s. I was working harder in my junior year, so I had more B’s. In my senior year, I started off with all F’s in my first quarter. I ended the school year with a C average.”

Nou became rebellious and refused to go home after school because of how she was treated as though she was beneath her brothers. Her parents favored and granted more power to her brothers, resulting in her being treated badly by them. The unequal power relations between the boys and girls created an unwelcoming and uncomfortable environment for her in which she felt forced to avoid by engaging in rebellious behavior such as being delinquent at school. She even attributed her poor academic performance to being treated badly at home because of the cultural norms and practices that place a higher value on the boys than girls, which can create an unbearable and even oppressive living situation at home.

Nou also pushed the cultural boundaries by dating outside the culture and explained the difficulty and punishment she faced:

“My sister and I date out of race. My boyfriend is not Hmong and that makes it hard. My brothers and parents think more traditionally and told my sister to get out of the house and go live with her boyfriend so that’s why she took off. Since I’m the only daughter left, I get bullied around all the time by my brothers. My mom and dad don’t even see that I’m here. I feel alone. Some days, I just stay over at my boyfriend’s house because I don’t want to go home. It’s hard to go home because I get tortured and yelled at.”

Hmong girls are bounded by cultural rules and values to uphold a good and respectable reputation by dating and marrying within the Hmong culture and community. At times, the girls do not always comply with these boundaries and go beyond them to move more freely in their

social worlds to gain love and happiness. Nou and her sister's decision to date outside the Hmong culture resulted in the difficulties they faced at home such as being treated and judged harshly by their traditional brothers and being told to leave the home. Nou and her sister also experienced an oppressive state of being bullied and yelled at to a point where it was unbearable to stay at home. The stories of Vicki, Yang, and Nou show that despite being more traditional or assimilated, the cultural rules and boundaries for the girls restrict them in the same ways and much more harshly than the boys, pushing them more toward resistance and rebellion.

### *School as Escape*

While some girls like Vicki, Yang, and Nou respond to the cultural boundaries that restrict and bound them with rebellion and at times engage in risky behaviors, other girls negotiate these boundaries through education. For instance, many of the girls see education as an agent for freedom and a way to break through the barriers of the Hmong culture. Chong, a less assimilated girl, is motivated to excel in school to escape the cultural restraints at home:

“I’m really into my future and my education. My motivation to do well in school comes from having to fight for my happiness. It’s my future and my education that will get me my happiness and allow me to love who I want. I tell my mom that when I turn eighteen I will get a job and be out of the house. I will work and go to school to help myself because right now I’m suffocating from having to live with my parents. I’ll just keep going and fighting. When I turn eighteen, I will take control of my own life.”

Girls like Chong see education as one avenue to escape the cultural restraints placed on Hmong girls. These girls respond to cultural boundaries and restrictions with educational achievement in order to achieve greater gender equality and to live out their freedom. The survey data in Chapter 3 also indicated the girls had higher levels of academic achievement and were more likely to attend college than the boys. Education is therefore used as a form of resistance or negotiation by some Hmong girls to escape the cultural restraints at home.

The expectation of the girls to maintain a reputable name and status within the community is so strong that the enforcement of cultural boundaries on the girls extends beyond the home. Mai Lee explains how her actions at school are limited to academics due to her mom's fear that Mai Lee may cross certain cultural boundaries:

“Although my mom does support me and my education she gets pissed off when I stay after school all the time. She thinks I’m just playing around but I’m staying for my clubs.”

In chapter 3, the survey findings also pointed to gender differences regarding ethnic organizational membership at school, as there was a higher tendency of the less assimilated girls to join ethnic organizations and a higher likelihood that the less assimilated boys did not have any organizational membership. Shoua, a less assimilated girl, explains that she is involved in the Hmong club at her school because it helps her with her problems at home:

“My friends in Hmong club really love and support me. I have a lot of family problems at home and Hmong club listens to me and provides me with advice. They also did a surprise birthday party for me this year because they know I’ve had a tough time this



year. It was the first time in life that I was happy on my birthday. They bought me presents and a cake. All my friends were there and I was so happy.”

The Hmong club at Shoua’s school has been a resource and outlet for her to deal with problems at home. Shoua’s story may help to explain the higher tendency of the less assimilated girls to join ethnic organizations since ethnic org membership may an outlet to cope with and also be an escape from parental controls and cultural restraints at home. The higher levels of academic performance and higher membership of girls in ethnic organizations suggest that some girls find refuge from cultural restraints at home in education and at school. Education is one way that Hmong girls resist or negotiate cultural restraints.

Even when the girls do well in school, they are still not completely accepted and are scolded and judged negatively for not fulfilling their roles and responsibilities in the home. Michelle explains the negative treatment she receives from her family even when she excels in school and aspires to attend a good college:

“I’m trying to branch out and join clubs so I can get into a good college but I get criticized for it. My family has a lot of issues and whenever I’m not there and I ask about my family’s problems nobody wants to tell me. They say that I’m never home anyway and no one ever wants to tell me anything. I’m trying to be a good person and do something for my family but they just criticize me for not being there all the time and they never tell me what’s going on. When they do tell me about our family problems, I tell them my opinion and they say it doesn’t matter because I’m not home anyway.”

Hmong boys and girls are bounded by certain cultural rules and values to uphold a good and respectable reputation such as dating and marrying within the Hmong culture and community. The cultural roles and expectations for the boys and how they respond will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter. The boys and the girls do not always comply with these boundaries and go beyond them to move more freely in their social worlds to gain love and happiness rather than fulfill their roles to uphold their reputation and status in the Hmong culture and community. The girls who engage in these behaviors are judged and punished more harshly than the boys who rebel against cultural norms. The following section discusses the more severe, long lasting consequences for the girls who engage in complete rebellion against cultural norms and rules.

### **Judgment from the Hmong and Larger Community**

When either the boys or the girls go beyond cultural boundaries, they are met with opposition and objection by their parents and community members. However, Hmong culture enforces judgment and punishment differently between the boys and the girls. Cultural boundaries enforce harsher treatment of the girls in ways that make it difficult to live within the culture and community. When the girls try to resist and break away from the cultural rules and boundaries, their resistance is met with rejection and a lifetime label of being “forever bad” by the immigrant community.

The girls are punished and judged more severely than the boys when both push and go beyond the cultural boundaries such as dating outside the immigrant culture and community. For

instance, Hmong boys and girls are restrained to marry within the Hmong culture and community to protect and uphold a good and respectable reputation in the family and community. Earlier, Nou expressed the difficulty and punishment she faced with her choice to date outside the Hmong culture and community, such as being judged harshly by her brothers who were more traditional. She explained how they bullied her and her sister to a point where it was unbearable to stay at home. In contrast, Jerry, whose story will be shared in the following chapter, also dated outside the culture but he was only scolded and lectured. His parents even tried to get him to date a Hmong girl. However, once he broke up with his girlfriend, his parents and relatives simply let go of the fact that he had crossed certain cultural boundaries by dating outside the Hmong community and culture. The boundaries of marriage within the culture and community are so strict for the girls that any decision to go beyond those boundaries leads to a lasting, harsher judgment and punishment by the family and community.

Once Hmong girls start engaging in rebellious behaviors, they become marked and labeled as “bad” by the Hmong culture and community. Hmong culture does not forget or forgive their actions and provides no room for these girls to feel that they can turn back. One Hmong teacher shares a story about his student. She became labeled by her parents as a “gangster” for going out with her friends and cutting school:

*Teacher:* One of my students, a freshman and female, has a lot of trouble at home. She was tired of staying at home because her parents always ask her to cook and clean. She and a group of friends went out with some guys and the guys were trying to take advantage of them. I think she’s upset at the world because there’s a lot of pressure from parents, from friends and school and everything. So she’s upset and she blames it on her parents, her friends, and everything else. She’s not in my class anymore but I still see her and talk with her. She skips class once in a while because it’s tough for her at home. Her parents don’t want to deal with her anymore and she doesn’t want to deal with her parents either. Her parents think she’s into a girl gang thing. But to her, she’s like “I’m just tired at home. I hate school too.” It’s tough for her because there’s pressure from every angle. Her parents consider her to be in a gang but she doesn’t consider herself as that. Her friends are just friends. But a lot of people consider her to be in a gang.

*Interviewer:* So, even though she’s not in a gang, why do you think the parents label the girls that way?

*Teacher:* I think a lot of our Hmong parents don’t really understand the concept of what a gang is. The culture is fairly new for them. A lot of times when the parents don’t understand, they blame it on the kids. “It’s your fault, you shouldn’t be there. I told you not to do those stuff. The parents automatically think that being bad is like being a gangster”. So, a lot of these comments are typical for the parents. But the students or their child who’s growing up, they don’t need somebody who’s going to criticize them. They need somebody who’s going to understand them. I think a lot of our parents don’t really understand that yet.

When the girls become delinquent at school and go out with guys and their friends, Hmong culture and parents mark and label the girls as bad or “gangsters”. As the teacher describes, Hmong parents use the label “gangster” to describe all behaviors that are seen as bad or rebellious, even if the youth do not belong in gangs. Once the girls engage in risky behaviors

that push the boundaries and roles of the traditional, obedient Hmong girl, Hmong culture is unforgiving and constantly judges and labels these girls as failures. They are seen as unable to be integrated or accepted into Hmong society. The fear of the community is that these girls risk their chances for a “good marriage” and have ruined their family’s reputation.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the judgment from Hmong culture and society, dominant society is harsh and unforgiving once the girls turn “bad”. In her study with Hmong youth in Wisconsin, Lee (2002) found that Hmong girls who resisted school authorities and were cutting classes were labeled by teachers and school officials as “Americanizing in a bad way” or turning into “bad girls.” These girls were marked as “at risk” by school authorities. Girls who draw more on Americanized ideals that offer them greater freedom of movement and association in their youth social worlds are seen as “at risk” to dominant society, especially when the behaviors and orientation are more reflective of “bad Americanization” such as delinquency and the oppositional youth culture.<sup>2</sup>

Once the girls are marked and labeled as bad and rebellious, they face multiple levels of judgment. There is judgment from the Hmong culture and the dominant society, as well as the internal judgment of the girls in which they feel despair and failure. The judgment of culture and dominant society help to magnify the despair of girls who engage in rebellious behaviors by marking them as failures. Faced with multiple layers of judgment as “forever bad,” the girls are filled with despair, pain, and failure. The girls feel they cannot turn back and thus resist and rebel even further. For instance, Kaying, one of the more assimilated girls, expresses how the constant judgment and criticism of her father made her finally give up at school:

“I want to be good but when my dad yells at me, it just stresses me and makes me mad. It doesn’t make me want to listen to my dad because I don’t feel supported by him. When you have people caring and loving you, it makes you feel and do better. It would probably have made me do better in school. When my dad yells at me, it makes me not want to do my work or care as much about school. I want my dad to treat me with more respect especially because I’m older now. Sometimes I yell back and say why he treats me like I’m not his kid. This one time I was mad and just slammed the door and played the music really loud. Sometimes I just want to get out of the house. I can’t go anywhere so I just go to my room, close the door, listen to music and sometimes I cry.”

Kaying explains that she would have done better in school if her father stopped criticizing her, supported her, and even forgave her. Kaying was transferred to an alternative school near the end of her junior year in high school for cutting too many of her classes. She was facing multiple levels of judgment from her parents who continued to criticize her for being “bad” and failing at school, as well as judgment from the dominant society, who also labeled her as a failure by placing her in an alternative school. Faced with regular, multiple levels of judgment of failure and despair, Kaying decided to quit trying at school by cutting and failing her classes. The multiple levels of judgment from Hmong culture and dominant society amplify the internal judgment of the girls who turn “bad.” The internal judgment reflects the despair, pain, and failure the girls feel from the constant criticism and judgment they receive from Hmong culture, their parents, and the outside world, leading the girls who drift toward rebellion to engage in even more rebellious behaviors.

Some girls find themselves resisting and rebelling with behaviors that are defiant to Hmong culture and American society when the freedom to move and associate in their social worlds is denied or limited. Although the boys also draw more on Americanized ideals that offer them greater freedom of movement and association in their social worlds, the boys do not experience the same persistent restraint and judgment like the girls. The experiences of the boys show a more severe exclusionary treatment from dominant society, which are explored in more depth in the following chapter.

The girls are taught that they have to be good daughters at home by complying with the rules of appropriate behavior to maintain respect and their reputation. Additionally, they are expected to excel at school. However, when the girls comply at home, they can really only belong in the ethnic community by fulfilling their roles and maintaining their reputation. Even when they comply and fulfill their duties and responsibilities as well as achieve academic success, they are not fully accepted or integrated in Hmong culture and society in the same way as the boys. Mai Yia explains:

“In my family, no one actually finished college and I want to do that. Sometimes I think about why I should do that because I’m a girl. One time, I heard my parents agree with my uncle about how one of his daughters did get a college degree but it doesn’t mean much because she is only a girl. It made me feel sad that my parents really feel that way about girls.”

Although they are the obedient, traditional Hmong girl who achieves academic success, Hmong girls are still bounded by the patriarchal values and rules that girls can only belong in the Hmong community and families to serve and avoid shame. The messages are different for the boys who are seen as more valuable and capable of full integration and acceptance into Hmong society when they are able to fulfill their role as good sons who can financially provide for their families and participate as active members of the community.

## **Conclusion**

Chapter 3 showed that the more assimilated Hmong youth were attached to an American identity and had more of an affinity toward American tastes, interests, and values, the less assimilated Hmong youth were and more attached to their ethnic identity and values. The more assimilated girls identified mainly as Hmong-American, had less ability to speak their native language, preferred mainly American music, associated more with non-Hmong friends, were more likely to marry non-Hmong, and had more membership in non-ethnic organizations. The less assimilated girls had more attachment to their ethnic identity, had more ability to speak their native language, had more preference for Hmong music, associated mainly with Hmong friends, preferred to marry Hmong only, and had membership in ethnic organizations.

When it came to life in Hmong culture and with immigrant parents, gender was a stronger determinant of their experiences within immigrant culture as the girls shared a more difficult experience under cultural constraints in their home life than the boys. However, differences along degree of assimilation show some impact on parental relations. Previously, table 4.1 showed that the more assimilated girls (36%) had a slightly higher level of conflict with their parents than the less assimilated girls (27%). The more assimilated girls also reported that they did not feel supported by their parents and that they fought more with their parents compared to

the less assimilated girls (see tables 4.3 and 4.4). Parental conflict reveals that along the line of assimilation, girls who are attached to the culture will feel more support from their parents. Girls who are not attached to the culture will feel less support from their parents and tend to fight more with parents. Assimilation does matter for parental conflict among the girls. Differences along the lines of assimilation also point to how selective acculturation and dissonant acculturation matter for parental relations. This finding resonates with the explanation offered by segmented assimilation theory that second-generation youth who are less attached to their ethnic culture and identity will experience dissonant acculturation, or a rejection of parental culture and breakdown of communication across generations that may impact the family structure and parental relations. Segmented assimilation theorists warn of the likelihood of downward assimilation among youth who experience dissonant acculturation with poor economic backgrounds.

The stories of the girls may also shed light onto the different experiences of the girls along degree of assimilation. For instance, in my interviews with the girls, I observed that more of the less assimilated girls shared stories about complying with the rules and cultural boundaries. These girls talked about their willingness to fulfill their roles and responsibilities within the home despite the high demands of school. One girl even explained how her compliance was a way of showing respect and love for her parents. The ethnically attached girls seemed to express more compliance and willingness to fulfill their roles and responsibilities at home. Although some of the less assimilated girls were in compliance, there were some who expressed resentment toward the cultural rules and boundaries for girls and some even engaged in rebellious and risky behavior. Furthermore, education seemed to be the subtle form of resistance used by the less assimilated Hmong girls as indicated by their higher level of ethnic organizational membership, better academic performance, and higher aspirations toward college than the more assimilated girls (see chapter 3). One girl even explained how she utilized the ethnic organization at her school as a way to escape the cultural restraints at home. In contrast, the more assimilated girls were more likely to respond with resentment and rebellious behaviors against the cultural boundaries for girls. Differences along the line of assimilation do impact parental relations and reveal how the girls may respond differently according to the degree of assimilation.

Hmong girls have a much more difficult experience in the immigrant culture and ethnic community than the boys. The girls face cultural restraints that bind them more harshly to the culture and community and in ways that differ from the boys such as restrictions in their the freedom of movement and association in their social worlds, and treating the boys preferentially, to the point where it can become oppressive for the girls. Some girls completely rebel and at times engage in risky behavior to have more movement and association in their social worlds. These girls not only become detached from the ethnic community but are ostracized with a lasting label of being “forever bad” and a harsher punishment than the boys who push the cultural boundaries. For some girls, education and school are seen and used as an outlet to resist and negotiate cultural restraints. These girls find refuge in school and ethnic organizational memberships to cope with and escape from parental controls and cultural restraints at home. Other girls are willing and able to fulfill their roles as a Hmong daughter and thus remain attached to the ethnic community. The responses of the girls vary by degree of assimilation.

The experiences of the girls are not unique to the Hmong culture or community but characteristic of a patriarchal culture organized around a patrilineal clan system, where men

dominate in power relationships and are given more prominence in family and community affairs, maintain unity, and govern family, social relations, and positions. Studies on second generation Vietnamese youth and their families have also expressed the difficulties girls face within their immigrant culture, a similar cultural belief system to the Hmong.<sup>3</sup> Discussions of gender within studies of segmented assimilation emphasize immigrant culture as particularly useful for the girls because it offers protection from outside influences such as involvement in risky behaviors and a path toward downward assimilation.<sup>4</sup> The better academic performance and higher college aspirations of the ethnically attached girls resonate with the claims of segmented assimilation theory that ethnic attachment leads to positive outcomes. However, their positive outcomes come at a cost of a harsh lived experience within a patriarchal culture.

## Chapter 5

### **Hmong Boys: Downward Assimilation despite Ethnic Attachment**

The experiences of the boys within immigrant culture and home life differ from the girls. Cultural restraints bind the boys to the immigrant culture and community to ensure that the boys will carry out the family name and participate as active members of the ethnic community. Some boys are able to fulfill their roles as a Hmong son and thus remain attached to the ethnic community. Others evade their roles and responsibilities, thus becoming less attached to the ethnic community and experiencing conflict with parents. However, unlike the girls, the problems of the boys are much more about their experiences within a dominant society. Within dominant society, Hmong boys face discrimination and gender subordination from more dominant groups in ways that challenge and deny the masculinity and ethnicity of Hmong young men. In response, some Hmong young men engage in physical aggression and risky behaviors to demonstrate masculinity and ethnic pride. At times, some boys become involved with gangs for protection and survival. Furthermore, the boys face police harassment in their neighborhoods and schools that treat and punish the racial and gender identifiers of the boys (Asian, Hmong, and male) as criminal and violent. Their experiences with police harassment and discrimination at the hands of more dominant groups make the boys more susceptible to a downward assimilation pathway. Despite attachment to the ethnic community, Hmong boys are not blanketed from racial discrimination and gender subordination. The stories of the boys demonstrate that the protection and resources of the ethnic community do not shield the boys from having racialized and gendered experiences in dominant society and a pathway toward downward assimilation. Gender and racialization are central to the story of second generation male youth that help explain the less successful integration pathway of the boys.

#### **Bounded to the Ethnic Community and Being the “Good Son”**

The patriarchal lineages and values of the Hmong culture present higher expectations and pressure for the boys to be fully integrated in Hmong families and the clan, as active members of the community and the collective life of the clan in order to carry out the family name and reputation. Thus, the boys are expected to maintain their ties and loyalty with their family and clan.

#### *Cultural Expectations and Roles for Boys*

The role and reputation of a “good son” implies being integrated and participating as an active member of their family and community, as Andrew explains, “Growing up, my dad wanted us to follow the Hmong traditions like Hmong rituals and celebrations.” The boys are also expected to carry on the family name by having their own family and preferably bearing sons. Marriage within the Hmong culture and community is to ensure that the status and reputation of the clan name will be carried on with the son and his family. Pheng, one of the more assimilated boys, talks about his parents’ expectation of him to get a good education and career and be able to support his own family in the future:

“I’m the youngest of seven kids (3 brothers and 3 sisters). My parents have always forced school onto us. My parents were strict and didn’t really let us go out that much. In school,

they always wanted us to get a 4.0 GPA. They want me to go to college so I can support my family.”

Hmong boys are also expected to be the man of the house, for example in being able to take care of the family financially and to carry on cultural traditions. As the sons, they are expected to prepare for their future to financially support their parents, especially when they are the youngest. Teng explains his obligations to help his parents as the youngest son:

“I’m the youngest son and my parents depend on me to help them with money. I have an older brother but he’s married and is only able to support his family. He only finished high school and never went to college because he got married young. My parents want me to provide them with money, pay for their car insurance, and pay [for] the house. Right now, I’m trying to find a job to help them pay for the house so they don’t have so many worries. I know I will have to work hard because I will have to work as soon as I get off school every day. I feel a lot of pressure because there is no one that is older than me to help so I’m the only one left that my parents can depend on.”

As the youngest son, Teng has even greater pressure because he is the only one left that his parents can depend on, and it is expected that he will support and take care of them. Teng makes an effort to fulfill his role as the good son by entering the work force to help the immediate financial needs of his family. In the context of the Hmong community and family life, Hmong boys are expected to fulfill their duties as good sons which entail being able to support their parents and families financially. Providing immediate and direct material support for the family and extended family or clan is highly valued and reflects the success of the boys in the family and community. Hmong boys are expected to live out their role as the good sons and contribute to their families financially.

The cultural expectation of Hmong boys to provide financially combined with the financial needs of the family create greater pressures for the boys to enter the workforce during and after high school to help their family’s immediate financial needs. This explains why many of the Hmong boys may not see a need for post-secondary education. Pheng explains:

“Some guys feel sympathy to help their parents who work too hard, by working instead of going to college. They feel that they should make some of the income to support their family. With all my family members, they got a job when they were 15 or 16 years old. They also pushed me to get a job too. I feel a little bit of pressure to go to college to help my family financially. My mom wants the sons to be successful, and [to] buy a big house so my dad and mom can live with us.”

Financial need and the cultural pressure to help the family are so strong for the boys that some boys sacrifice the opportunity to attend a four year university to help their families. This may explain why more boys do not pursue a higher education compared to the girls.

### *Being the “Good Son”*

The majority of Hmong boys expressed a willingness to fulfill the expectations of their parents and the ethnic community. Seng, a less assimilated boy, expressed his willingness to fulfill his role as a Hmong son to help his family financially:



“My GPA now is a 3.8. I think I’m doing well in school because of my parents. Every day, they tell us to do our homework so we will have a better life. My parents don’t have an education because they just came straight to the U.S. from Thailand and Laos after the Secret War. They came over here and don’t know much. They both work long hours. It makes me sad to see them work so hard because they are working so hard just for us. I want to help them so they can at least get some rest. I would like to finish college and find a really good paying job to help my parents pay for the house and their bills so they won’t have to use so much of their money.”

Bee, one of the less assimilated boys, explains that his preference to marry within the culture is to carry on his family’s name and show his respect for his parents, community, and culture:

“It is important for me to marry a Hmong person because it shows respect to my family, culture, and traditions. No one in our family like my cousins and relatives has ever married a different nationality. This has influenced me to keep the Hmong culture going by marrying within the culture.”

### *Evading their Roles*

Most Hmong boys are like Seng and Bee who choose to fulfill their roles as dutiful sons and remain attached to the Hmong culture and community. However, a handful of boys spoke about rejecting and evading their roles and responsibilities. Cultural boundaries for Hmong boys ensure that the boys carry out their roles as dutiful sons and uphold their family name. The pressures to succeed and meet the expectations of a “good son” can be overwhelming for the boys. In response, some boys orient their lives and behaviors toward American ideals of freedom of choice and independence. With the pressures to become the man of the house by excelling in school and getting a job to support his family, Kong, one of the less assimilated boys, succumbs to the greater freedom offered by the American ideal that “trying hard and doing your best” is enough:

“Being a son is pretty hard because there are a lot of expectations of you. You’re supposed to be the man of the house. Due to my parents’ expectations of me and to get A’s only, that put a lot of pressure on me to do well. If I don’t, it would be like I wasn’t pushing myself hard enough when I already was. Due to stress and my parents’ expectations of me, my GPA went down from a 4.0 in freshman year to a 2.3 in senior year. I had some problems and arguments with parents so it put a lot of stress on me. For me, I was a 4.0 student so my parents expected me to always succeed. In sophomore year, I came home with a B and my dad told me I could have done better, but I told him that it was my best. That took a toll on me because what if I got a C, then my dad would have thought I was not a good son. This discouraged me to do well and made me lose interest in school. Just because I got a lower grade didn’t mean I didn’t try my best. I think my parents’ expectations of me are too high.”

Hmong boys are expected to prepare for their future and become the man of the house, which means excelling at school and getting a well-paying job to support their parents and family. The pressure to be a good son overwhelms Kong, and he decides to evade fulfilling his role as the traditional good son. Instead, he orients his attitude and behavior about school toward an

American ideal of “trying hard and your best” which becomes good enough for him. Although he draws on the greater freedom offered by American ideals, his behaviors are met with objection by his parents because his responsibility and loyalty to his family and parents come first in the eyes of his parents.

Similar to Kong, Jerry, a more assimilated boy, avoids his father’s expectations of him and decides to direct his goals, behaviors and attitudes toward more American ideals of freedom, happiness and independence. Jerry received a GPA of a 2.5 in his junior year:

“My dad wants me to be a doctor, a PhD or doctor, all the Hmong dreams. He basically wants to control my life because he never got the chance to live that kind of life for himself. He has a lot of pride because he used to be the smartest in his whole family. People in his family went to college and finished their degrees but he couldn’t because he got injured. It’s hard to please my father. Nothing can please. I just ignore what he wants me to do. I’d rather do things I want to do.”

In addition to Jerry’s choice of a career and future aspirations to fulfill his interests and happiness, he also chooses to date outside the culture, and his choices are met with objection by his parents and relatives:

“I dated a Mexican girl and well, my parents were really against it. They demanded that I break up with her, and they even spread a rumor around. My dad objected to me going out with another race. My grandmother would lecture me non-stop and that I should only go out with a Hmong girl. My mom and dad were also desperately trying to hook me up with a Hmong girl. Overall, they were very hateful about it, and they really wanted to control who I chose to date and marry. They only wanted their way and they were unwilling to accept any other way. It’s like you’re getting shunned just for wanting to do what you want, kinda like they wanted to disown you in a way. Once I broke up with her, everyone kinda just let it go.”

Tommy, a more assimilated Hmong boy, expressed his rejection against the expectations of his dad and community because he preferred American values and practices within his family and home:

“When my parents got divorced it was rough on me. In Hmong culture, the boys go with the dad and the girls go with the mom. I didn’t want to go with my dad because I wanted to stay with my mom. If I stayed with my mom, I felt that I would have more freedom. My mom is more Americanized because she celebrates holidays and goes out with her friends. She also allows me to do the things that I like. If I stayed with my dad, he is kinda strict and I would have to be home at a certain time and do things he wanted me to do like help him during the weekends with his shaman rituals. In Hmong culture, your reputation matters a lot and my aunts and uncles would say that if I left my dad, then my reputation would be ruined. The Hmong community put a lot of pressure on me because every one of my relatives wanted me to stay with my dad. Their pressuring made me really stressed and angry. I don’t really believe in it or like it so I didn’t want to go with him.”

In the context of the Hmong community and family life, Hmong boys are restrained by cultural pressures and expectations to protect their reputation as good sons by following the rules and traditions of the culture. Despite separation and divorce, Tommy is expected to maintain ties and loyalty to his immediate family, which reflects his reputation as a good son. However, Tommy prefers American values and ideals for his family and parents and dislikes the rules and roles that Hmong culture imposes on him as a son.

Tommy also chooses to evade his role of participating and being integrated with the Hmong community:

“You know how Hmong culture is; you do what the elders want you to do and not what you want to do. Nobody supports me because I have a different opinion. I want to do things differently. Because of this, I don’t have much interest in it and I really don’t like the way they do things in the Hmong culture.”

The Hmong cultural reputation acts as a cultural restraint for Hmong boys to bind them within Hmong community and family life. Tommy has the pressures to be a good son in the Hmong community, but reacts in opposition to the demands of the Hmong culture because he wants more freedom. For Tommy, his adoption of American values and beliefs collides with the traditional beliefs and customs of the Hmong culture that expect him to be the good son and to do as he is told, leading him to feel pressured, stressed, conflicted and ultimately distant and isolated from the Hmong community and culture. Tommy holds strongly to the values and beliefs of the American culture and rejects the restraints he feels from the Hmong culture. In doing so, Tommy keeps himself distant and is less interested in participating in Hmong cultural beliefs and consequently becomes less integrated in Hmong culture and society.

Although it is not the norm, some Hmong boys completely elude the ideas or expectations their parents have of them to be the good and successful son. They perceive American ideals of individualism and freedom of choice as offering them more happiness than reputation and economic security. The lives of Hmong boys are strongly influenced by the roles and expectations to be a good son that bind them within Hmong culture and the ethnic community. However, the pressure to meet these expectations drives some boys to respond with greater affinity toward Americanized ideas that provide them greater freedom of movement. Consequently, their behaviors lead to detachment from the Hmong culture and community.

In chapter 4, I illustrated with the stories of the girls and the survey data on parental relations that the girls experienced a more difficult lived experience in immigrant culture and home life than the boys despite degree of assimilation. However, the survey data on parental relations also revealed an important finding along the lines of assimilation among the boys. Particularly, the less assimilated boys were more likely to feel supported by their parents than the more assimilated boys. For instance, 72% of the less assimilated boys said they felt supported by their parents compared to 53% of the more assimilated boys. Furthermore, 12% of the less assimilated boys said they felt somewhat supported by their parents compared to 41% of the more assimilated boys. In my interviews with the boys, I observed that the less assimilated boys spoke more about complying with their roles and responsibilities as the good son within the home while the more assimilated boys such as Jerry and Tommy spoke more directly and openly about evading and rejecting their roles and responsibilities in order to seek greater independence and happiness. The stories of the boys and the survey data on parental relations point to how

assimilation is also relevant to the boys' experiences at home and in the ethnic community. The ethnically attached boys seem to have a less difficult experience with parents and within the culture because they adhere to the cultural rules and expectations for boys. Differences along the line of assimilation do impact parental relations among the boys and how they respond to the cultural boundaries that bind them to the ethnic culture and community. However, their experiences within the ethnic culture and community still differ greatly from the girls.

### **Problems in Dominant Society**

The stories of the boys show that they are still very much a part of the ethnic community and are expected to participate as active members of the community to carry out their roles as good sons. However, many of the boys in my study also spoke about having experiences with discrimination from other groups and harassment by the police in their neighborhoods and schools. Despite being attached to their immigrant culture and community the boys were not blanketed from experiencing overt hostility and discrimination in mainstream society. Race and gender form the core of the experiences of Hmong boys outside the immigrant culture and community which make the boys more susceptible toward a less successful integration pathway.

### *Where Hmong Youth Grow Up*

Scholars of segmented assimilation theory warn that downward assimilation is more susceptible among racially diverse immigrant youth with little human capital and who reside within a poor, urban "ghetto" culture. For Hmong youth, particularly the boys, their life chances under these circumstances seem dim given the persistent poverty among members of the Sacramento Hmong community. Chapter 2 illustrated that the Hmong community of Sacramento is faced with high poverty rates, concentrate in poor neighborhoods and schools, and have limited support and services from the larger community. Additionally, the Hmong also reside within racially diverse communities. Hmong youth are growing up in a context of poor and unsafe neighborhoods and schools with other poor minorities and whites.

The survey data of the Hmong youth revealed that 39% felt safe in their neighborhood only some of the time. One coordinator of a program for Hmong youth explains gangs as a potential cause:

"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 car 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.

### *Discrimination from Other Groups*

In Sacramento, I found that Hmong boys were being victimized with name-calling, bullying, harassment, and at times, physical threats and attacks in their schools and neighborhood by more dominant groups such as whites and other racial minorities. For instance, Vang, one of the less assimilated boys, described being harassed and beat up since he was 5 years old:

“In my neighborhood, being Hmong and just walking down the street, I got picked on by African American kids. You can’t walk around by yourself. They would pick on you, push you, hit you or try to beat you up. If you walk on the street and you’re by yourself, they will come up to you and try to mess with you. I was only like 5 or 6 years old. They beat me up and pushed me on the ground. It happened a lot when I was young, like every other weekend when we went out to hang out in the park.”

In their neighborhoods and in their schools, Hmong boys report being victimized by whites and other minority youth through name-calling, bullying, and physical violence. Even when they try to insulate themselves from the harassment, Hmong boys are often still subject to abuse as Mong, another less assimilated boy, describes:

“Back in the day, whites were calling Asians “chinks”, so everybody looked up to me because I was the tallest. I was always getting into a fight. In the sixth grade, we would fight as a team to protect ourselves. When they went into the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade, they started getting guns and joining the older gang members. The white kids were bullying us at school and calling us “chinks” and saying that our mom’s Chinese. When we got into fights, the teacher would rather believe the white kids. We said those kids were messing with us and calling us Chinese but the teachers would not believe us cause we’re Asian.”

Like Mong, many of the boys I interviewed spoke about having experiences with discrimination and harassment at the hands of more dominant groups in their neighborhoods and schools. Mong describes how white students in his school called him and his friends, “chinks”, a derogatory word that assumes all Asians are Chinese. Out of anger and for their protection, Mong and his friends respond with violent and aggressive behavior such as fighting. His actions are further exacerbated by the lack of support from his teacher. Hmong boys have an understanding of their identity as Hmong, and not “chink.” When whites and others use this slur along with bullying to intimidate Hmong boys, it not only insults their ethnic identity but calls on them to reinforce their identity through physical aggression.

After being subjected to constant abuse, especially from a young age, the Hmong boys began to fight back. Meng, a more assimilated boy, expresses his desire to prove the status and dignity of his racial and ethnic identity through physical aggression:

*Interviewer:* Do you and your friends get picked on a lot by other people who are not Hmong?

*Meng:* Yeah.

*Interviewer:* What do they do or say?

*Meng:* A lot of stuff like “stupid Asian” and “Asians ain’t smart.”

*Interviewer:* So when people make those kinds of remarks, how do you and your friends feel towards that?

*Meng:* We want revenge. Prove our race is strong. We'll start fighting those people.

Racial discrimination against Hmong youth is not only limited to the name-calling of “chink,” but includes meanings and signifiers attached to one’s race. In this case, Meng explains how words that degrades one’s status such as stupidity being associated with race, which angers Meng and pushes him to consider physical aggression to prove the higher status and pride of his race. Hmong boys are forced to engage in physical aggression to lay claim to an ethnic pride that is denied them.

In his study with Cambodian youth in Oakland, California, Jeung (2002) discusses how Cambodian youth also reported being called “Chink” because whites and other minorities only know Chink. To them, everyone who is Asian is a Chink. Jeung explains that this kind of disrespect combined with the realization of their rank at the bottom of the racial order forces Southeast Asian youth whom he engaged in the communities of East Oakland to respond with violence to the discrimination and abuse which they encountered such as by forming a Cambodian gang. These acts of resistance are reported by Jeung to support developing an ethnic pride and identity that distinguishes them from those who exclude them. Southeast Asian males are pushed into physical violence to protect their pride and dignity as a response to discrimination.

Physical aggression among Hmong young men are also a response to being abused as males and is often used to enforce or perform masculinity in the streets.<sup>1</sup> In his study with Southeast Asian young men, Chong (2008) found that violence is guided by codes of masculinity that invoke notions of power and respect. For instance, the codes of masculinity enforce whether men are powerful and deserving of respect, or “sissy and punks” who become targets for harassment. Young Southeast Asian men thus engage in violent acts to command respect and power from more dominant groups to prove their manhood “by an extension of power, whether physical or not, over another.” They then engage in violence as a way to lay claim to a masculinity that is denied them as Chong states, “To do violence is to do masculinity.”

The social positioning of Hmong young men below other minority males enforces a code of masculinity that says they can either be abused and victimized, or be strong and powerful, amplifying the need for Hmong boys to engage in physical aggression for survival and to prove their power and respect as a man. One Hmong boy expresses, “Whenever they want to fight us, we will fight them back. We won’t let them push us around.” For this Hmong youth, he does not want to get pushed around or “punked” so he is willing to fight back and get physically violent. His actions are guided by the codes of masculinity that punish and victimize those who are seen as weak, soft, or can get punked around.

In a setting or context in which Hmong boys find themselves subject to the subordination at the hands of more dominant male groups, Hmong boys engage in acts of physical aggression to assert their masculinity and to gain an image as one who is tough, powerful, and commanding of respect. For instance, Fong, a less assimilated boy, asserts his masculinity by being tough and being able to protect his friends:

“I fought a lot in high school because no one messes with my homeboys. If someone messes with my homeboys then they also mess with me.”

Outside the home, Hmong boys interact with more dominant groups through codes of masculinity. The code of the street forces young men to assert their masculinity, such as proving that they are powerful and deserving of respect through violence in order to survive on the streets. Therefore, Fong engages with violence to be tough, powerful, respected, and for survival.

Hmong boys are also forced into gang involvement for survival and respect. Anderson (1999) discusses in his ethnographic study of inner-city life that violence is regulated through a “code of the street,” which provides a framework for negotiating respect through the use of violence. Respect, defined as being treated “right” and granted one’s proper due, will constantly be guarded and protected as it becomes a valuable social capital when other forms of social capital such as economic and cultural resources are limited or denied. More specifically, the code of the street is a response to a failing economy that exudes poverty, racial discrimination, a drug culture, and social isolation and despair. Consequently, violence becomes a negotiation of space to command and maintain the value and power of survival and respect.

Hmong boys organize and form gangs to guard against racial violence and marginalization. At the risk of being victimized by more dominant groups, Hmong boys are occasionally forced into gang involvement to mediate an abusive environment. Feng, one of the more assimilated boys, discusses how he got involved with fighting and gangs for protection:

“I think Hmong gangs formed because of the harassment and bullying [from] other races, like African Americans in their neighborhood. Our friends and cousins started gangs for protection. I got involved in the Hmong gangs because in the place where we live, you want to be a part of them so they won’t mess up your life by trying to fight with you every day, trying to do stuff to you and your family. A lot of the Hmong kids joined to protect themselves and their families.”

In an earlier chapter, findings from my survey data pointed to gender differences in peer association. Regardless of the degree of assimilation, the girls were more likely to have non-Hmong friends than the boys. The boys associated mainly with ethnic peers. The stories of Hmong boys about their experiences with discrimination and harassment may help explain the association of Hmong boys with mainly ethnic friends. As their stories suggest, the boys bound together for protection in the face of exclusion and abuse. When they are marginalized by Blacks and other groups, Hmong boys develop a collective response to maintain survival, power, and respect. Andrew, one of the less assimilated Hmong boys, explains his preference for mainly Hmong friends:

“I tend to have more Hmong friends because it’s more comfortable and easier to adapt to. If I speak to like a black kid, I would feel more uncomfortable because they are a different race. In our school, Hmong kids usually hang out with the Hmong kids. The black kids are with the black kids and the Mexicans are with the Mexicans.”

Hmong boys mobilize along ethnic lines in response to being marginalized as a minority group within the context of poverty, violence, and power struggles. Their lives, attitudes, behaviors,

and identities such as peer association are thus organized according to the rules of their environment.

The everyday choices and lives of Hmong youth reflect adaptations to an environment that demands these youth to be tough, physically aggressive, and powerful for survival. Like other Southeast Asian youth, Hmong youth are positioned below more dominant male groups and their engagement with aggressive behaviors is their response and chosen form of resistance to the abuse and victimization that come from their social position in the racial order. The stories of the boys show how they respond to messages about race and gender within dominant society.

### *Police Harassment*

The racialized and gendered experiences of Hmong boys in mainstream society include discrimination at the hands of more dominant groups as well as police harassment. Hmong young men have been subjected to discriminatory practices from law enforcement and school personnel in the form of constant policing and surveillance that target and treat them as delinquent, menacing, criminal, and violent. For instance, police harassment for the purpose of identifying and affiliating youth in gangs is a common experience shared by the Hmong boys. Cheng, one of the less assimilated boys, discusses how he, like other Hmong male youth, experience regular police harassment in their neighborhoods:

“For me, I be getting pulled over by the police cuz I’m Hmong. I say, “Why you pull me over?” The police say, “Cuz you’re Hmong, you might be a gang member.” They ask me if I’m a gang member. “Do you bang? Are you a crib or blood? Do you know gang members where you live at?” They ask me all that. I’ve been pulled over like five times already just because they think I’m in a gang.”

The terms criminal, violent, and gang member have racialized and gendered meanings that are equated with being Hmong and male. For instance, the police stops Cheng and assume that he might be a gang member because “he is Hmong.” The way the policeman treats and interrogates him also suggests that Cheng is already gang affiliated without any evidence as he is asked specifically if “he bangs” or if he knows where other gang members might be. The racial and ethnic identity and gender of Hmong boys are treated as criminal and violent and this is reinforced through the active discrimination of institutions such as the police.

Tou, one of the less assimilated boys, shares how his experience of being harassed and policed is linked to his racial identity of ‘Asian’.

“One day my brother came to school to pick me up and the campus police pulled us over. He searched my brother’s record and the cop said, “It says here you’re HNS”.<sup>2</sup> Then, he turned to me and asked for my name to search for my record. I was already put in the system as gang affiliated by the police because they arrested me for ditching school and labeled me as gang affiliated. The cop found my record and said, “It’s says here that you’re HNS too. You guys two brothers? So you’re HNS family huh?” Then the cop told us to step out of the car and we asked what we did wrong. He said it was a routine stop. Then we asked if it was really a routine stop or if we did something wrong. He was looking around our car and said that we couldn’t hang air refreshers on our rear view mirror because it’s a distraction. Then he let us go. My brother and I talked about it after



and thought the cop stopped us cause of “DWA” or driving while I’m Asian. The cop didn’t even arrest us. I think the whole attempt was just to put us in gang affiliation.”

Tou and his brother interpret the policeman’s routine stop being conducted on them because of “DWA” or driving while Asian, highlighting the racial and gendered implications for being stopped since they are Asian and male, and not because they actually broke the law. Although the policeman did not arrest them, Tou and his brother were initially treated by him as if they were gang members or criminals since he searched their records to find out if they were gang affiliated before even telling them why he had stopped them. His questioning of, “So you’re HNS family huh?” further suggests that he sees them as criminals. After finding that they have records of being gang affiliated, the policeman asks them to step out of the car even though they have not done anything “criminal”. He only decides to let them go because he could not find anything that Tou and his brother did wrong, only that they hung air refreshers on their rear view mirror and “it’s a distraction.” The story of Tou and his brother illustrates that the ethnic, racial, and gender identities of Hmong and/or Asian and male initiates an institutional response from the police such as harassment and criminalization because the identities of Hmong or Southeast Asian male are equated with criminal and violence.

Other Hmong male youth share their experiences about being harassed on the school campus because of their racialized and gendered identities. Jessie, one of the more assimilated boys, describes being harassed by the campus police:

“A few years ago, the Hmong kids would get harassed everyday on campus. The Hmong kids are usually just hanging out during lunch time in a certain area and talking about our day. If the police see a bunch of Hmong kids hanging together, they would go over and harass them. The next day, if the police see another group of Hmong kids, they would harass them too. They usually harass just the boys. I guess they just see us all as gang members.”

Jessie explains how the campus police target the Hmong boys specifically because they see them as “all gang members.” Although the Hmong boys are just hanging out in a group at school during lunch, they get harassed by the police.

Meng, one of the less assimilated boys, talks explicitly about how the police treat all the Hmong boys like criminals, despite academic achievement:

“I remember my friend, the most innocent one of us all and a 4.0 student. That day he had on a blue Rocawear t-shirt. The police pulled up while he was walking to class and pushed him onto their hood and yelled, “You a crip? You HNS?” The cops kept yelling, “You HNS huh? You got a blue shirt. You’re HNS.” My friend was hella scared and said he doesn’t bang. The cops just come up to you and tell you to get on the hood. If you don’t get on the hood, they slam you on the hood, handcuff you and search you down. This happens a lot to the Hmong guys and the Mexicans, but not as much to the black kids. The cop is Black and is cool with the black kids.”

Meng’s friend, although a 4.0 student, is seen as a criminal and “potentially violent” for wearing a blue t-shirt. The police treat the race, ethnicity, and gender of this male youth as more important and threatening despite his academic achievement. Meng’s story shows that

assimilation, such as school achievement, does not insulate Hmong boys from institutional discrimination. Their racialized and gendered identities as Hmong boys are a stronger force in determining their treatment by institutions such as the school and police. Meng also suggests that there is a racial and power dynamic between authority and the students as he explains that the Hmong and Mexican kids at his school receive a harsher treatment than the black kids since “the cop is Black and is cool with the black kids.” When Hmong boys experience institutional discrimination, their position as minority males below other ethnic and racial groups is reinforced and realized.

At school, Hmong boys are also treated as criminals and gang members because they are male, Hmong, and/or Asian. Jessie shares in more detail what the police do and how they target the Hmong boys for the purpose of affiliating the boys with a gang:

“There were a group of Hmong kids who were stopped by the police for wearing blue. They stopped them and put everybody on the wall. They pat[ted] everyone down for weapons but they singled out the kids who have the most blue on. They said those kids were gang members, took their picture, and said they were part of a gang. The police told us that if we should ever do something, then everything we do will be gang related. This gets carried with us forever. I’ve been harassed and patted down by the police twice already. For other kids, the police don’t harass them unless they have done something wrong or gotten into trouble. I think the police pick on Hmong kids because they think of us as really bad.”

As Jessie discusses, the campus police targets the Hmong boys specifically because they think all Hmong boys “are really bad.” The police treats them like criminals by “placing the Hmong boys on the walls and patting them down for weapons” just for wearing blue. Even though there is no evidence that these boys have started any trouble on campus or broken any laws, the police assume that all Hmong boys are gang members or criminals and treat them as such. The Hmong boys get policed for the purpose of getting affiliated with a gang as the police “take their pictures and suggest that the boys are part of a gang” even if the boys are not.

## **Conclusion**

The process of integration for boys is mainly about their racialized and gendered experiences in mainstream society. The boys’ problems really lie at the intersection of race and gender, and are oppressive in a way that “culture” can do little to help them, making the boys more susceptible to downward assimilation. The survey data I discussed in Chapter 3 showed that both the more and less assimilated boys engaged in “risky behavior.” The stories of the boys show that despite their degree of assimilation, they are similarly affected by racialization in dominant society. Assimilation does not determine whether the boys are more susceptible to downward assimilation, with lower levels of academic achievement and higher levels of involvement with risky behaviors. One vice-principal at the school with a large student Hmong population also attests to the boys’ higher chance of downward assimilation:

“For the last four years since I have been at this high school, the top 10% has been 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 when they come to school 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 question of assimilation has become irrelevant for understanding the downward pathway of the boys. The stories of the boys show that immigrant culture cannot protect them from racialization in dominant society and a pathway toward downward assimilation. Despite attachment to the ethnic community, Hmong boys are not blanketed from racial discrimination and gender subordination. The protection and resources of the ethnic community cannot shield the boys from having racialized and gendered experiences in dominant society, such as discrimination, police harassment, and surveillance. Their racialized and gendered experiences in dominant society are greater oppressive forces that make the boys more susceptible to downward assimilation. The higher level of involvement with risky behaviors among the boys despite degree of assimilation shows that gender is a stronger predictor of downward assimilation. For instance, being ethnically attached does provide Hmong boys with an “immigrant advantage” toward upward assimilation because less assimilated Hmong boys also have high levels of involvement with risky behaviors.

The lives of Hmong boys emphasize the need to challenge culture as the focus and explanation for immigrant success by centralizing the role of gender and race in the lives of immigrant youth, as they are stronger predictors of immigrant behavior and integration pathways, particularly for boys. In the face of racial exclusion and gender subordination, Hmong boys respond and resist through physical aggression, and at times gang involvement, to mediate the abuse they face. In addition, regular police harassment and surveillance of the boys in their neighborhoods and on school grounds make the boys more susceptible to a pathway of downward assimilation. Ethnicity or being integrated within the immigrant community does not protect or shield second-generation males from abuse and engagement in physical aggression and risky behaviors and a downward pathway of the boys.

## Chapter 6

### Conclusion: Reconsidering the Second Generation Story

The second generation story is not only a story of ethnicity, but also about gender. My findings show differences along degree of assimilation and gender that extend the research on the second generation to show how gender and ethnicity matter for second generation incorporation. Differences along the degree of assimilation support the segmented assimilation story that the ethnically attached youth have better outcomes, such as higher levels of academic achievement. My findings showed a correlation between the less assimilated Hmong youth and greater school success and higher academic aspirations. Gender differences also point to different integration pathways for boys and girls, with the girls having a more promising pathway with higher levels of academic achievement and lower levels of involvement with risky behaviors than the boys. The boys and girls also have different experiences in immigrant culture, with slight variations along degrees of assimilation as the more assimilated youth reported having higher conflict with parents than the ethnically attached youth. Additionally, there is no correlation between assimilation and the downward assimilation of Hmong boys. Gender and racialization are stronger determinants of their pathway toward downward assimilation.

Although the girls have positive outcomes, achieving those outcomes comes at the cost of a difficult experience in immigrant culture and home life. Cultural boundaries and restrictions bind them in stricter and harsher ways, with the more assimilated girls having a more difficult time with their parents. The protection of the ethnic community and culture benefits the girls in areas such as educational achievement, but the girls struggle in the process. The problems of Hmong boys are outside the immigrant community and within larger society. Even when the boys obtain academic achievement or receive the protection and resources of the ethnic community, they are not sheltered from victimization. Discrimination from the receiving society force the Hmong boys to engage in physical aggression, and at times gang involvement, for survival and respect. Their response to the abusive environment in which they grow up is to resist and mediate the victimization they face from the more dominant groups and institutions like the police and schools. The role of discrimination is such a strong force in shaping the social realities of Hmong boys that “culture” can do little to help them. Therefore, even when the boys are ethnically attached to their immigrant community, they are not shielded from having experiences of racial discrimination and gender subordination in dominant society and a pathway toward downward assimilation.

### Gender and Ethnicity as Strategy

The debates on second-generation incorporation miss a gendered account of the second-generation story. Furthermore, the various approaches to how ethnicity matters in second generation incorporation whether as strategy (ethnic attachment or the best of both worlds) or whether it is to assimilate into a multicultural mainstream need reconsideration because they downplay the tension girls experience within immigrant culture and also simplify the forces of racialization that make the boys more susceptible to downward assimilation. The story of the second-generation that is told as a success story through assimilation into mainstream or ethnic attachment provides a simple and even problematic account of second-generation incorporation.

For instance, segmented assimilation theory emphasizes ethnic distinctiveness as an advantage for second-generation mobility particularly for youth of low human capital and who experience a negative mode of incorporation such as racism. These youth benefit from the immigrant advantages of their parents, such as strong ties to the ethnic culture and community that offer networks and values for second generation mobility. More specifically, the ethnic community and immigrant culture are a resource to help protect the second generation from an “oppositional” urban youth culture and steer them toward a successful integration pathway. The youth who are not integrated in their immigrant community cannot be helped or protected and thus end up on the downward path to assimilation. For segmented assimilation theorists, assimilation predicts risky behaviors and delinquency among immigrant youth. While ethnic attachment helps mobility, assimilation into black urban youth culture leads youth toward a downward path. However, the story of Hmong youth challenges the premise that assimilation, or those more assimilated to an underclass urban youth culture, determine risky behaviors and a downward integration pathway. Evidently, gender is more prominent in determining the risky behaviors of Hmong youth as the boys, despite degree of assimilation, have more involvement with risky behaviors than the girls. Segmented assimilation theory tells the second generation story as one about ethnicity, but my study with Hmong youth points to a story about gender as well. Differences along degree of assimilation with academic performance of Hmong youth support the claims of segmented assimilation theorists that the ethnically attached youth have better outcomes, but it comes at a cost of a difficult lived experience for the girls.

Segmented assimilation theory argues that ethnic attachment leads to positive outcomes. In contrast, Alba and Nee (2003) and Kasinitiz and his associates (2011) suggest that assimilation into a multicultural mainstream or utilizing the best of both worlds provides the greatest chance for mobility among the second generation. However, Alba and Nee (2003) and Kasinitiz and his associates (2011) offer a similar story about ethnicity and how to employ it as strategy or to assimilate into a multicultural mainstream. My study of Hmong youth in northern California extends the research on the second-generation that has centered mainly on class and ethnicity as determinants of second-generation incorporation. Gender is important for determining the different outcomes for boys and girls and how the girls struggle to achieve their positive outcomes. Ethnicity matters less so as strategy for the boys, as their downward assimilation has less to do with how the boys employ their ethnicity and more to do with the forces of racialization.

Scholars of the segmented assimilation theory and future research of the second generation should reconsider the applicability of ethnicity, as well as consider gender and its central role in determining the assimilation pathways of the second generation. My research indicates gendered pathways of second generation incorporation that are attributed to the different experiences of the boys and girls within their home life and in dominant society. More specifically, there should be less emphasis and reliance on culture, particularly immigrant culture, in predicting mobility as culture does not do much positive, either because the positive comes at such a cost for second generation girls, or because racism and gender subordination are so strong that culture does little to help the mobility of second generation boys.

A recent review of segmented assimilation theory suggests that there is significant downward assimilation of the second generation, particularly among the most disadvantaged groups such as the Mexicans, Caribbean, Laotians and Cambodians.<sup>1</sup> Haller, Portes, and Lynch

(2011) argue that downward assimilation is concentrated mainly among the second generation from groups with low human capital and less favorable modes of incorporation or a negative context of reception. Using arrest and incarceration rates, school abandonment, poverty, unemployment, and early childbearing as measures of downward assimilation, Haller, Portes, and Lynch (2011) found that second-generation Mexican and West Indian males were being incarcerated at 21%, rates that were close to that of black males ages 18 to 30 in the year 2000. Childbearing among the girls were also higher in these particular groups compared to other immigrant groups in their study. The authors warn that the failures of the second generation among these groups are of concern, as they will remain as poor as their parents.

The views of Haller, Portes and Lynch contrast those of Alba and Nee (2003) who found economic mobility among non-white contemporary immigrants who are joining the mainstream with educational attainment and residence in America's suburbs. The authors offer evidence of higher educational attainment than native-born whites among the children of non-white contemporary immigrants, particularly the human-capital or highly skilled and educated immigrants. Alba and Nee argue that given the salience of racism in America, it is mainly the higher achieving Asians and lighter skin Latinos who have achieved access to live among native-born whites. Although educational attainment is lower among the children of traditional labor migrants who have low human capital, Alba and Nee argue that these children have achieved higher education, hold better jobs, and are still doing relatively better than their parents.

Similarly, Kasinitz and his associates (2011) believe downward assimilation among the second generation is much more minor. Kasinitz and his associates believe that the second generation is doing well overall and that only a minority of members from this group are dropping out of high school, unemployed, and/or involved in risky behaviors such as gangs and drugs. On average, the second generation lies between an economic and social level of native minorities and native whites.<sup>2</sup> More important to Kasinitz and his associates is that the second generation has made significant progress compared to their parents, which is a greater indicator that the second generation is not downward assimilating. Kasinitz and his associates argue that the claims of Haller, Portes, and Lynch are based upon an upper-middle-class bias that views downward assimilation as working to lower-middle class status, early childbearing, and incarceration. For instance, Kasinitz and his associates argue that early childbearing is seen as a cultural norm in these cultures and should not be used as a measure of downward assimilation.

Kasinitz and his associates (2011) believe the second generation is doing better than their minority counterparts, as well as their parents and proclaim that there is more of a "second generation advantage" than downward assimilation among the second generation. The second generation is doing well overall and that only a minority of members from this group are dropping out of high school, unemployed, and/or involved in risky behaviors such as gangs and drugs. On average, the second generation lies between an economic and social level of native minorities and native whites.<sup>3</sup> They maintain that this position does not indicate a widespread downward assimilation as scholars of segmented assimilation claim. More important to Kasinitz and his associates is that the second generation has made significant progress compared to their parents, which is a greater indicator that the second generation is not downward assimilating.

Kasinitz and his associates also believe a more appropriate reference group to measure upward mobility for the second generation should be the parents of the second generation and

native groups of the same racial background. They argue that the assumptions of scholars of segmented assimilation about the widespread downward assimilation among the second generation are based on a middle-class bias that uses an upper-middle class mainstream as the reference group. Therefore, those who are outside this frame are deemed as an “underclass.” In this view, downward assimilation is measured as working to lower-middle class status, early childbearing, and incarceration. Kasinitz and his associates caution that early childbearing is seen as a cultural norm in these cultures and should not be used as a measure of downward assimilation.

In response to Kasinitz and his associates, Haller, Portes, and Lynch (2011) argue against the second generation advantage and claim that second generation males among certain groups display downward assimilation. They critique Kasinitz and his associates for not studying the second generation from their adolescence and that a cross-sectional survey in adulthood dismisses those who were incarcerated and dropped out of normal, civilian adulthood. Therefore, their study misses the possibility of a downward assimilation among the second generation and suggests that most if not all second generation following a uniform pathway. They caution that using a mainstream assimilation perspective masks a significant downward assimilation among certain groups of the second generation, such as those who experience a negative mode of incorporation such as racism, have no immigrant advantage, and who have parents with low human capital. Additionally, Haller, Portes, and Lynch argue that the parents of the second generation are not a good reference point for determining upward mobility because the educational and occupational backgrounds of the parents are low enough that the second generation cannot go any lower. Also, Haller, Portes, and Lynch argue that downward assimilation is concentrated among similar groups that reside in places of poverty and with limited resources and assistance.

Scholars of segmented assimilation theory are also much less optimistic about the future of the second generation. They claim there is evidence of a second generation decline or downward assimilation into a “rainbow underclass”. In contrast, Alba and Nee (2003) and Kasinitz and his associates (2011) believe upward mobility is more common among the second generation than suggested by scholars of segmented assimilation theory. Although each study offers important insight about the possibilities of the second generation, downward assimilation among Hmong boys particularly may be more applicable in understanding Hmong youth assimilation. Hmong refugees arrived in this country with low human capital due to their parents’ lack of formal education in their sending country and they have not been able to achieve economic mobility compared to other groups. Furthermore, the study by Kasinitz and his associates was situated in New York, and they were unable to capture Mexicans in their study. Their results may be due to a regional phenomenon. The Hmong have more in common with the Mexicans, who have a larger proportion of low human capital immigrants compared to other immigrant groups.

### **Community Response and Policy Implications**

The response from the Hmong community to address the problems of Hmong youth such as gang violence and poor academic performance has been to try to instill stronger Hmong values among the youth. In contrast, the larger American community’s response has been to

attempt to offer interventions such as placement into English learning classes for poor academic performance and increasing manpower in the Police Department's gang task force to tackle gang violence. For instance, teachers and administrators at one school with a high Hmong student population believe the struggles of Hmong youth with academic achievement has to do with English as their second language, even among those students who are born and raised in the United States. One vice principal explains:

“The community we live here in South Sacramento is an immigrant enclave. We have a large Latino and Hmong English learner student population. Even though they are second generation, they could be speaking Hmong or Spanish as their primary language. If these languages are spoken in the home as their dominant language, this makes them an English learner. The students are tested annually for English proficiency on a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being a beginner and 10 an advanced. If they score above this, they are designated as English proficient. If they score anywhere between a 1 and 10 they are labeled as an English learner.”<sup>4</sup>

At this school, 45% are English learners, with 21% who speak Hmong as their second language. Although a large percentage of the English learners at this school are Hmong, these English learners are not necessarily immigrants since many are second generation and American-born. They are classified as an English learner at school because they lack the reading, writing, and critical thinking skills to be proficient at English, which affects their academic performance. The vice principal explains that the major reason for the lack of English proficiency among these students is that they speak another language other than English at home, primarily because they have immigrant parents.

The mainstream wants the Hmong to culturally assimilate and employ mainstream measures and resources to resolve problems of Hmong youth. 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. Even among members of the Hmong and larger community, there is disagreement as to the most effective solution to resolve and prevent problems among Hmong youth. Resources offered by the mainstream are not effective for members of the Hmong community because community members believe these issues should be first addressed and discussed within the community.

Based on the interventions from the larger American community, it suggests that the gang and academic problems of Hmong youth can be resolved if the individual assimilated quicker and learned English, or if stronger enforcement was 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. 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.”<sup>5</sup>

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 among Hmong youth is not a pathology that stems from the Hmong culture, as the mainstream media would like to portray. Poor academic performance also cannot be resolved through rapid assimilation and acquisition of the English language. Rather, these youths are calling out for help in ways that are not being heard or understood by their own community and the larger community.

Assimilation into mainstream or attachment to Hmong culture is not the solution to the problems and needs of Hmong youth. My findings imply that the Hmong community and mainstream could do better in addressing the needs and problems of Hmong youth, which are different for boys and girls. Schools, community organizations, the police force, and the Hmong community have to understand that the problems and issues of Hmong youth stem from their different struggles and experiences as boys and girls within the Hmong community and in dominant society. The focus should not be on trying to assimilate Hmong youth into mainstream or maintain their ethnic distinctiveness through cultural preservation and education. Rather, these social organizations will be more successful at helping and alleviating the problems of Hmong youth by recognizing the gendered nature of their experiences that contribute to their ability to integrate socially and economically into American society.

Schools can also address issues of Hmong youth by not being complicit in the aggressive and violent behaviors of Hmong boys. For instance, when schools fail to support and address the discrimination and victimization of Hmong boys, and instead redirect the blame onto the victims. One Hmong boy reported to school officials about him being victimized, but the boy and his friends were blamed while the perpetrators went unpunished. This pushed the Hmong boys toward acts of physical violence to gain the power and respect they felt they deserved. When Hmong boys receive limited or no support from institutions such as the schools and police while subject to insult and abuse, they are further motivated to respond as a group in the form of violence for protection. Tang, one of the less assimilated boys, spoke about telling his teacher about being bullied by white students, but the teacher did nothing to support him, “When we get into fights, the teacher would rather believe the white kids. We got picked on because we’re Asian and the teachers don’t help us cause we’re Asian.”

Institutions such as the schools and police have failed to address the abuse of Hmong boys in their schools and neighborhood largely because the schools and police view Hmong boys as perpetrators and not as victims. The actions they have taken toward Hmong male youth reflect their preconceived notions of the boys as gangsters and delinquents. Tang talked about not being supported by school authorities because they see Hmong boys as “Asian,” and that school authorities do not believe or help him and his friends because they are Asian. The institutional response uses the Tang’s racial identifier to mark him as untrustworthy and a troublemaker, and Tang and his friends are refused help and support from school authorities as a result. Institutional responses to the abuse of Hmong boys have largely failed, further marginalizing the boys and amplifying their need to engage in violence as a form of resilience. Without support from institutions such as the schools and police, the abused and victimized Hmong boys are forced to negotiate an abusive environment through violent acts and behaviors.

The experiences of Hmong youth may be similar to other second-generation youth as other studies are finding that gender is an issue of the second-generation experience, and that ethnicity does little to help overcome racial discrimination.<sup>6</sup> My study with the Hmong youth

offers some suggestions to have a more central focus on gender and to reconsider ethnicity as a strategy when addressing issues of the second generation. Programs aimed at helping second-generation youth would benefit from addressing the different needs of boys and girls.

### **Future Outlook and Research**

The different pathways of the boys and girls indicate that more girls will economically assimilate and will likely enter the mainstream with higher levels of educational attainment and middle-class status. The boys will be more likely to have lower levels of education and be of poorer economic backgrounds. Zhou and Bankston (1998) suggest in their study with the Vietnamese community and youth of New Orleans that the ethnic boundaries of this community will become more flexible and accommodating of non-Vietnamese people as more members of the community assimilate, marry, and have offspring with non-Vietnamese people. In contrast, the story of the Hmong youth in this study suggest that the Hmong community is more reluctant to assimilate and the likelihood that the ethnic boundaries of the Hmong community will be flexible and accommodating of those outside the community is less than that of the Vietnamese community. This is demonstrated in how the girls conveyed their inability to go beyond the cultural boundaries that restrain them entirely within the Hmong community. In order to maintain cultural values and traditions, the community and parents enforce such strong rules and boundaries on the girls in ways that are oppressive and make it difficult to live within the culture and community. When the girls try to resist and break away from the cultural rules and boundaries, their resistance is met with rejection and a lifetime label of being “forever bad” by the immigrant community.

My study has shown that the incorporation of the second generation into American society lays heavily on the gendered experiences of second generation youth. The boys and girls follow different assimilation pathways. Rather than focus solely on ethnicity as an advantage for second generation mobility, more attention and focus is needed on gender as a determinant of mobility. Although ethnicity may benefit second generation youth, particularly for the girls, the advantage of ethnicity comes at a cost. With the boys, ethnicity does little to shield them from experiences racial discrimination and gender subordination in mainstream. Second generation incorporation is not only a story of ethnicity, but also of gender.

My study with Hmong youth has implications for the study of the second generation. I have maintained that gender is central to the story of second generation youth and must be told as part of that story. My study is also important for studies on race and gender, culture and education, and youth. Many times these fields of study engage in the same academic discussion yet are often limited in their ability to connect these factors. The lives and experiences of Hmong youth demonstrate that gender may be at the core of their experiences, and that gender is very much connected to issues of race and culture, educational achievement, and risky behaviors. The study of youth, particularly youth from immigrant backgrounds is an issue of gender connected with other variables.

The youth in my study were able to talk about their experiences, which allowed me to make some conclusions about the situation of second generation Hmong youth. My study is able to shed light onto Hmong youth assimilation, highlighting different experiences and outcomes for boys and girls. The findings from this research help present some of the major problems and successes of Hmong youth and offer an explanation. Although my study was able to tap mainly

into a student cohort of higher achieving youth, which may not accurately represent the whole Hmong youth community, I can still draw some important theoretical conclusions from the data. I found that even among the more successful students, tension and conflict existed for girls at home, while the boys experienced overt discrimination by the police and other racial groups in their neighborhoods and schools. If these problems exist among the higher achieving Hmong youth, it is an even stronger indicator that these problems are also being experienced by the less successful youth. Future studies on Hmong youth can explore the extent of these problems among at-risk youth.

Continued research should address further issues of gender and examine the experiences of the boys and girls that contribute to their different outcomes. Future research could address whether the girls will continue to choose ethnic attachment, given its costs and benefits. More specifically, what will the ethnic or cultural distinctiveness of the girls look like in the years to come? Will ethnicity matter for their economic mobility in the future? How will the racial and gender barriers continue to limit the opportunities of the boys? How will the boys continue to choose and respond to their ethnicity, given their racialized and gendered experiences in dominant society? How will the immigrant culture and community continue to affect the boys and girls differently in the future and with the next generation? These questions will continue our understanding of the complexity of the second generation experience as a gendered one and to reconsider the reliance on ethnic culture and its influence on second generation outcomes. The second generation is becoming an integral part of American society and future studies are required and necessary to better understand their gendered experiences and ability to integrate successfully into American society.

## Notes

### Chapter 1 Introduction: Gender and Ethnicity among the Second Generation

1. Smith and Edmonston, *The New American*, p. 95.
2. Portes and Rumbaut, *Legacies*; Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco, *Children of Immigration*; Zhou and Bankston, *Growing Up American*.
3. Pfaff, *Hmong in America*; Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*; Koltyk, *New Pioneers in the Heartland*.
4. Caplan et al., *Children of the Boat People*; Rutledge, *The Vietnamese experience in America*; Kibria, *Family Tightrope*; Zhou and Bankston, *Growing Up American*; Ong, *Buddha is Hiding*; Chan, *Survivors*; Chan, *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation*; Needham and Quintiliani, *Cambodians in Long Beach*.
5. Caplan et al., *Children of the Boat People*; Rutledge, *The Vietnamese Experience in America*; Mitrsonwang, *Family values and behaviors*.
6. Caplan et al., *Children of the Boat People*; Rutledge, *The Vietnamese Experience in America*; Kibria, *Family Tightrope*; Fong, *The Contemporary Asian American Experience*.
7. Portes and Rumbaut, *Legacies*, p. 44; Bean and Stevens, *America's Newcomers and the Dynamics of Diversity*, pp. 94-95.
8. Human capital is defined as the skills that immigrants bring along with them in the form of education, job experience, and language knowledge. Among the different theories of assimilation, there is general agreement that human capital is important for successful economic integration. See Park, *Race and Culture*; Warner and Srole, *The Social Systems of American Ethnic Groups*; Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life*; Zhou and Bankston, *Growing Up American*; Portes and Rumbaut, *Legacies*; Waters, *Black Identities*; Kasinitz et al., *Inheriting the City*; Alba and Nee, *Remaking the American mainstream*.
9. Park, *Race and Culture*; Warner and Srole, *The Social Systems of American Ethnic Groups*; Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life*.
10. Zhou and Bankston, *Growing Up American*; Portes and Rumbaut, *Legacies*; Waters, *Black Identities*.
11. Ibid.
12. Portes and Rumbaut, *Legacies*; Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco, *Children of Immigration*; Zhou and Bankston, *Growing Up American*; Waters, *Black Identities*; Kasinitz et al., *Inheriting the City*; Gibson, *Accommodation Without Assimilation*; Olsen, *Made in America*.
13. Blumer, "Race Prejudice as a Sense of Group Position."
14. Messerschmidt, *Masculinities and Crime*; Messerschmidt, *Nine Lives*.
15. Lopez, *Hopeful Girls, Troubled Boys*; Lee, *Up Against Whiteness*; Waters, "Growing Up West Indian and African American"; Pinderhughes, *Race in the Hood*; Anderson, *Code of the Street*; Bourgois, *In Search of Respect*; Jeung, "Southeast Asians in the House"; Chong et al., "Toward an intersectional understanding of violence and resilience"; Rios, *Punished*.
16. Waters, "Growing Up West Indian and African American"; Waters, "Ethnic and Racial Identities"; Lopez, *Hopeful Girls, Troubled Boys*; Fine and Weis, *The Unknown City*; MacLeod, *Ain't No Makin' It*.

17. Lopez, *Hopeful Girls, Troubled Boys*; Lee, *Up Against Whiteness*.
18. U.S. Census Bureau, 2007-2009 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates.
19. Stodghill and Bower, "Welcome to America's Most Diverse City".

Chapter 2      *The Hmong in the United States: Migration, Resettlement, and Integration*

1. Chan, *Hmong Means Free*; Faderman, *I Begin My Life All Over Again*; Mote, *Hmong and American*.
2. World politics and power in which the Japanese and the French sought after Indochina (Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia), led the Hmong into war and politics with the Western world. Japanese occupation and French colonial rule of Indochina set the stage for Hmong involvement in the second Indochina War, which officially took place in Vietnam (where the Vietnam War gets its name), but the Hmong were engaged in a "Secret War" as U.S. allies in Laos against the communist Pathet Lao forces. See Chan, *Hmong Means Free*; Quincy, *Harvesting Pa Chay's Wheat*; Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*; Pfaff, *Hmong in America*; Faderman, *I Begin My Life All Over Again*; Morrison, *Sky is Falling*; Vang, *A History of the Hmong*; Hillmer, *A People's History of the Hmong*.
3. Strand and Jones, *Indochinese Refugees in America*, p.33; Loescher and Scanlan, *Calculated Kindness*, p.111 and p. 125; U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement, *Report to the Congress*, table 1, p.19; Reder, "The Hmong Resettlement Study," p.180; Literacy and Language Program, *The Hmong Resettlement Study*.
4. Reder, "The Hmong Resettlement Study," p.180; U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement, *Report to the Congress*, p.2-5; U.S. Department of Homeland Security and Office of Immigration Statistics, *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*, table 13; Literacy and Language Program, *The Hmong Resettlement Study*; Loescher and Scanlan, *Calculated Kindness*.
5. The 1965 Immigration Act (Hart-Celler Act) abolished the National Origins Act of 1924. The 1965 Act admitted immigrants based on skill or for family reunification. More specifically, immigrants are accepted according to following preferences: unmarried adults whose parents are American citizens, spouses and offspring of permanent residents, gifted professionals, scientists, and artists; The exact numbers of Hmong refugees admitted to the United States during this time period is unknown because they were categorized as refugees from "Laos", which included other ethnic groups from Laos such as the lowland Lao and Mien. The most recent count of the Hmong in the United States has been through the U.S. Census which has counted 186, 310 as of the year 2000. See U.S. Department of Homeland Security and Office of Immigration Statistics, *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*; Reder, "The Hmong Resettlement Study," p.180; Vang, *Hmong in Minnesota*, p.10.
6. Scholars have estimated that approximately 130,000 Hmong refugees have entered the United States since 1976, which does not include the 15,000 recent Hmong refugees entering between 2004 and 2005. There are about 2,000 Hmong currently residing in Australia. In France, there are an estimated 15,000 Hmong. Furthermore, approximately 2,100 live in French Guiana, close to 1,000 reside in Canada, and about 100 live in Argentina and Germany. After communist takeover of Laos, France decided to accept many of the Hmong and other Southeast Asian refugees of the Vietnam War. The Hmong, along with other Southeast Asian refugees received

- special attention from the French government and were passed through the OFPRA (French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Apartheids) The French had established themselves in Indochina by 1863, taking control of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. The French participated in the growing opium drug trade to reap high profits and taxing the locals to exert their power and control over the people of Indochina. Furthermore, the French recruited the Hmong to fight alongside them against Japanese occupation and the Vietnamese who had risen against French colonial rule after World War II. When French control of Indochina collapsed at Dien Bien Phu, Vietnam in 1954, the French pulled out of Indochina. The gap they left behind was almost immediately filled by the United States who feared that a rise of communism in Vietnam would produce a domino effect, causing all the countries around it to fall victim to it as well. See Chan, *Hmong Means Free*; Faderman, *I Begin My Life All Over*, p.10; Tapp and Lee, *The Hmong of Australia*, p.11; Yang, “Hmong Diaspora of the Post-War Period”, p.227; Pfaff, *Hmong in America*, p.25; Quincy, *Harvesting Pa Chay’s Wheat*, p.169; Xiong, “Hmong in France,” p.1.
7. Literacy and Language Program, *The Hmong Resettlement Study*, pp.37, 42; U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement, *Report to the Congress*, p.1.
  8. Strand and Jones, *Indochinese Refugees in America*, pp. 46, 50, 53.
  9. Literacy and Language Program, *The Hmong Resettlement Study*, p.47; Strand and Jones, *Indochinese Refugees in America*, p.46.
  10. Strand and Jones, *Indochinese Refugees in America*, p.51; Literacy and Language Program, *The Hmong Resettlement Study*, p.51; Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, *The Hmong resettlement study: Site Report Fresno, CA*, pp.20-21; U.S. Census Bureau, *American Community Survey 2010*.
  11. U.S. Census Bureau, *American Community Survey 2010*.
  12. More than 60% of the 15,000 new refugees who came between 2004 and 2005 are under the age of 18. See U.S. Census Bureau, *American Community Survey 2010*.
  13. The Hmong community in Fresno lags behind the Hmong community in Minneapolis-St. Paul on all measures of socioeconomic status. The low level of homeownership, the higher rates of poverty and unemployment of California’s Hmong community show the discrepancies between the different Hmong populations in the country. Given that California has the largest Hmong population in the nation, it is important to understand the challenges facing the Hmong communities that are concentrated in the Central Valley of California. See U.S. Census Bureau, *American Community Survey 2010*.
  14. U.S. Census Bureau, *American Community Survey 2010*.
  15. Chan, *Survivors*, p.135.
  16. Vang and Lewis, *Grandmother’s Path and Grandfather’s Way*, pp. 12-13; Thao, *The Mong Oral Tradition*, p.31; Vang, *Hmong in Minnesota*; Faderman, *I Begin My Life All Over*; Lee and Tapp, *Culture and Customs of the Hmong*.
  17. Vang, *Hmong America*, pp. 18-19.
  18. Kibria, *Family Tightrope*; Zhou and Bankson, *Growing Up American*; Caplan et al., *Children of the Boat People*; Rutledge, *The Vietnamese Experience in America*.
  19. Lee and Tapp, *Culture and Customs of the Hmong*, p. 23.
  20. Chan, *Hmong Means Free*; Donnelly, *Changing Lives of Refugee Hmong Women*; Faderman, *I Begin My Life All Over*; Mote, *Hmong and American*.

21. Faderman, *I Begin My Life All Over*, pp. 164, 168.
22. Kibria, *Family Tightrope*.
23. Since the study took place between 2007 and 2009, data from the 2007-2009 American Community Survey 3-year estimates was used to provide an economic profile of the Hmong population in Sacramento, CA. U.S. Census Bureau, 2007-2009 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates.
24. U.S. Census Bureau, 2007-2009 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates.
25. Ibid.
26. Sacramento groups its neighborhoods into four areas: North, South, East, and the Downtown areas. East Sacramento is east of Downtown and includes the California State University of Sacramento. The Downtown area includes the State Capitol, Old Sacramento and Midtown. South Sacramento is relatively large and divided into Southwestern and Southeastern Sacramento. Southwestern Sacramento includes Greenhaven, Curtis Park, Land Park, Sacramento City College, Meadowview, and Valley Hi/North Laguna. Southeastern Sacramento includes Florin, Fruitridge Manor, Glen Elder, Glenbrook, the UC Davis Medical Center, Oak Park and Tahoe Park. The fourth neighborhood, or north Sacramento, is north of the American River and includes Natomas, Strawberry Manor, Hagginwood, Del Paso Heights, and Robla.
27. U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Census.
28. Lee, Cheenou. 2008. Personal Interview. May 25.
29. Fang, Zhang. 2008. Personal Interview. September 30.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Yang, Shane. 2008. Personal Interview. September 22.

### Chapter 3      *Hmong Youth Assimilation*

1. Park, *Race and Culture*; Warner and Srole, *The Social Systems of American Ethnic Groups*; Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life*; Gans, "Second-Generation Decline"; Alba and Nee, *Remaking the American mainstream*.
2. I adopted similar questions from the "Youth Adaptation and Growth Questionnaire (II)" from the longitudinal study of Portes and Rumbaut. This questionnaire can be found in their appendix. See Portes and Rumbaut, *Legacies*, Appendix.
3. These grade point averages (GPAs) only reflect the Hmong girls and boys from the high school chosen for this study. These GPAs do not represent those youth who attended the Hmong youth issues conference. A list of the Hmong students at this school was generated by home language. Only the GPAs of the students in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade are highlighted because students from this high school who participated in the study were in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade levels.
4. Vang, Patrick. 2008. Personal Interview. June 13.
5. *Hmong 2000 Census Publication*.
6. Young, Xavier. 2008. Personal Interview. May 9.
7. Zhou and Bankston, *Growing Up American*; Waters, *Black Identities*; Portes and Rumbaut, *Legacies*; Kasinitz et al., *Inheriting the City*; Alba and Nee, *Remaking the American mainstream*.

Chapter 4 *Hmong Girls: Upward Assimilation at a Cost*

1. Ngo, "Contesting 'culture'."
2. Zhou and Bankston, *Growing Up American*; Portes and Rumbaut, *Legacies*.
3. Kibria, *Family Tightrope*; Zhou and Bankston, *Growing Up American*.
4. Zhou and Bankston, *Growing Up American*; Gibson, *Accommodation Without Assimilation*; Olsen, *Made in America*.

Chapter 5 *Hmong Boys: Downward Assimilation despite Ethnic Attachment*

1. Rios, *Punished*; Chong et al., "Toward an intersectional understanding of violence and resilience"; Anderson, *Code of the Street*; Messerschmidt, *Masculinities and Crime*; Messerschmidt, *Nine Lives*.
2. "HNS" stands for the name of the Hmong gang, Hmong National Society, in the north side of Sacramento, which was formed in the 1990s by the first waves of Hmong youth to settle in the area.

Chapter 6 *Conclusion: A Gendered Second Generation Story*

1. Haller, Portes, and Lynch, "Dreams Fulfilled, Dreams Shattered."
2. Alba, Kasinitz, and Waters, "The Kids Are (Mostly) Alright," p.766.
3. Ibid.
4. Lee, Mai Xi. 2008. Personal Interview. June 9.
5. Fang, Zhang. 2008. Personal Interview. September 30.
6. Louie, *Compelled to Excel*; Lopez, *Hopeful Girls, Troubled Boys*; Lee, *Up Against Whiteness*; Waters, "Growing Up West Indian and African American"; Rios, *Punished*; Jeung, "Southeast Asians in the House"; Chong et al., "Toward an intersectional understanding of violence and resilience".



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