

Txoj Kev Nsthiab: Understanding Hmong American Undergraduates' Educational Experience



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Abstract

This study investigated the psychosociocultural educational experiences of 103 Hmong American undergraduates at a predominantly White Midwestern university. Differences of coefficients revealed stronger relationships of Pan-Asian acculturation and self esteem with academic non-persistence decisions for males than females. Additionally female students reported greater perceptions of social support from family and friends, and greater cultural congruity within the university environment. Differences by class standing revealed that lower division students indicated having greater perceptions of social support from family, greater cultural congruity, and lower self-esteem than upper division students. Each of the dimensions uniquely and collectively predicted academic nonpersistence decisions, with the psychological construct most predictive. In particular, imposter syndrome (i.e., feelings of phoniness) was the most significant negative predictor of academic non-persistence decisions. Implications for institutions of higher education, limitations of the study, and areas for future research are discussed.

Brief Overview of Hmong History

- Ethnic group with origins in southern China, migrated to Southeast Asia (e.g., Laos and Thailand) in the late 1800's (Robequain, 1935).
 - Lived primarily in small clans and villages as farmers growing rice crops and raising livestock.
- In the 1960s, Hmong in Laos recruited by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency to assist in the "Secret War in Laos" (Hamilton-Merritt, 1992).
- Following U.S. withdrawal, Hmong relocated to Western countries (e.g., United States) (Lee and Pfeifer, 2007).
- Approximately 209,866 Hmong people live in the U.S. with the largest populations in Minnesota, California, Wisconsin (American Community Survey, 2006).
 - More than half of the Hmong American population is less than 18 years old (ACS, 2006; Pfeifer, 2001).
- Education primarily limited to those of higher economic means, despite education being highly valued (Faderman & Xiong, 1998; Tatman, 2004).

Hmong and Education

- Hmong Americans least educated Asian ethnic group in the U.S. (ACS, 2006; Pfeifer, 2006)
 - 39.7% hold less than a high school education
 - 10.4% hold bachelor's degrees
 - By gender, age 25 or older, 15.2% males and 10.1% females
 - 2.2% hold graduate or professional degrees
- Given unique history and current status in U.S., understanding Hmong cultural and familial values, as related to educational attainment warranted.

Psychosociocultural (PSC) Model of Academic Persistence

- Meta-model that integrates three interrelated dimensions of the psychological, social, and cultural aspects of educational experience within context of university environment (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000).
- Psychological Dimension (self-beliefs, college self-efficacy, and imposter syndrome)
 - Students' ability to complete school tasks (e.g., written reports) associated with academic persistence decisions for Asian American undergraduates (Gloria & Ho, 2003) and Hmong American undergraduates (Lin & Gloria, 2008).
 - Hmong American undergraduate's feelings of phoniness - most significant predictor of their academic non-persistence decisions (Lin & Gloria, 2008).
- Social Dimension (parental encouragement, familial/community expectations, and social support—family and friends)
 - Asian American students perceived family as both supportive and as pressure to excel (Osajima, 1991, 1995).
 - For Hmong American undergraduates, perceived social support from friends directly related to academic non-persistence decisions (Lin & Gloria, 2008).
- Cultural Dimension (university environment, cultural congruity, ethnic identity, and acculturation)
 - Experiencing longer exposure to potentially negative events, cultural congruity, (i.e., the fit between one's personal and environmental values) (Gloria & Robinson, 1996), is lower for Asian American (Gloria & Ho, 2003) and Hmong American students over time (Lin & Gloria, 2008).
 - Cultural connectedness and validation salient factor in student adjustment and well-being for racial and ethnic minority undergraduates (Gloria, Castellanos, & Orozco, 2005)

Purpose of the Study

- To provide an in-depth understanding of the psychosociocultural educational experiences of Hmong American undergraduates.
 - Hypotheses 1: Sex and class differences would emerge with differences in strengths of relationships.
 - Hypotheses 2: Psychological, social, and cultural dimensions would uniquely and collectively predict academic non-persistence decisions.

Settings and Procedures

- Participants from large, predominantly White Midwest campus from ethnic-affiliated student organizations, ethnic-specific language and culture courses, and a federally-funded student service program.
 - "Snowballing" method utilized
- IRB-approved, 30-40 minute survey paper-pencil survey with incentives (i.e., light snacks and beverages)

Study Participants

- 103 Hmong American undergraduates
 - 53 (51.5%) females
 - 50 (48.5%) males
- Ages ranged from 17 to 31 ($M = 20.58$, $SD = 2.05$), 87.3% between 18 and 22
- Class standing
 - Lower Division: 29 freshmen (27.9%), 18 sophomores (17.3%),
 - Upper Division: 20 juniors (19.2%), 23 seniors (22.1%), & 12 fifth-year (11.5%)
- Grade point averages ranged from 2.0 to 3.70 ($M = 2.97$, $SD = .36$)
- 68% members of Hmong-specific student organization
- Personal (77%) and academic (79%) support from their friends
 - Mostly Hmong friends at school (62%)
- All students indicated receiving financial aid, half used work study (53%)
- United States Residency
 - Average 21.89 years ($SD = 6.31$), most (91.3%) were U.S.-born
- Family Formal Educational Level
 - Mothers (56.3%) no formal education
 - Fathers (33.3%) no formal education
 - Sibling (23%) earned college degree

Instrumentation

- Demographic sheet included
- Psychological Variable Set
 - *College Self-efficacy Inventory (CSEI)*, 14 items, $\alpha = .92$ - examined students' confidence to complete college-related tasks (Solberg, O'Brien, Villareal, Kenner, & Davis, 1993).
 - *Imposter Syndrome Scale (ISS)*, 14 items, $\alpha = .82$ - measured the degree to which imposter feelings exist within an individual (Harvey, 1982).
 - *Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES)*, 10 items, $\alpha = .89$ - assessed feelings of acceptance and self-worth (Rosenberg, 1965)
- Social Variable Set
 - *Perceived Social Support Inventory (PSS-Fr/Fa)*, 40 items, PSS-Fr, $\alpha = .89$; PSS-Fa $\alpha = .95$ - two subscales measured perceptions of support, information, and feedback received from friends (PSS-Fr) and family (PSS-Fa) (Procidano & Heller, 1983).
 - *Parental Educational Encouragement Scale (PES)*, 14 items; $\alpha = .91$ - assessed parental support and encouragement regarding education (Gloria, 1999).
 - *Perceived Familial/Communal Educational Expectations Scale (PFCEES)*; 15 items; $\alpha = .90$ - researcher developed to assess students' perceived educational expectations from family and community (Gloria, Lin, & Senghammee, 2007).

- Cultural Variable Set
 - *Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM)*, 14 items; EI, $\alpha = .70$; OGO, $\alpha = .51$) - examined elements of ethnic identity and attitudes towards other groups (Phinney, 1992).
 - *Cultural Congruity Scale (CCS)*; 13 items; $\alpha = .82$) - measured fit of one's personal values and those of the university environment (Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 1996).
 - *University Environment Scale (UES)*, 14 items; $\alpha = .79$) - assessed students' perception of the university environment (Gloria & Robinson Kurpius, 1996).
 - *Asian American Multidimensional Acculturation Scale (AAMAS)*; 45 items; AAMAS-CO, $\alpha = .90$, AAMAS-AA, $\alpha = .92$, AAMAS-EA, $\alpha = .92$) - examined Asian Americans socialization and engagement in behavioral norms of 1) one's own Asian culture (AAMAS-CO), 2) other Asian American culture (AAMAS-AA), and 3) European American culture (AAMAS-EA) (Chung, Kim, & Abreu, 2004)
- *Persistence/Voluntary Dropout Decisions Scale (P/VDD)*, 34 items; $\alpha = .76$) - measured student's educational experiences and subsequent academic non-persistence decisions (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1980).

Results

- Adequate internal consistencies of study's variables (i.e., .70 to .95)
- Mean Group Differences by Sex and Class standing
 - Females reported higher PSS-Fa and PSS-Fr ($M = 4.01, SD = .75$; $M = 3.81, SD = .61$) than did males ($M = 3.60, SD = .72$; $M = 3.58, SD = .52$).
 - Females reported higher CCS ($M = 5.06, SD = .98$) than did males ($M = 4.55, SD = .89$).
 - Lower division reported higher PSS-Fa and CCS ($M = 3.97, SD = .69$; $M = 5.04, SD = .91$) than upper division students ($M = 3.66, SD = .78$; $M = 4.64, SD = .99$).
 - Lower division reported lower RSES ($M = 3.11, SD = .60$) than upper division students ($M = 3.38, SD = .45$).
- Relationship of Variables
 - All variables except four (PES, PFCEES, AAMAS-CO, AAMAS-AA) were significantly correlated with the criterion variable (P/VDD)
 - Psychological dimension, RSES ($r = .23, p \leq .05$), CSEI ($r = .40, p \leq .001$) and ISS ($r = -.47, p \leq .001$) were significantly correlated with criterion variable.
 - Increased perceived self esteem, greater sense of one's ability to complete academic tasks, and decreased feelings of intellectual phoniness were related to fewer academic non-persistence decisions.
 - Social dimension, PSS-Fr ($r = .50, p \leq .001$) and PSS-Fa ($r = .36, p \leq .001$) were positively correlated to the criterion variable
 - Greater perceptions of support from friends and family were related to fewer academic non-persistence decisions.
 - Cultural dimension, EI ($r = .20, p \leq .05$), CC ($r = .25, p \leq .01$), UES ($r = .24, p \leq .05$), and AAMAS-EA ($r = .24, p \leq .05$) were significantly and positively correlated with the P/VDD.
 - More positive ethnic identity, greater acculturation to European culture, higher cultural congruity, and more positive perceptions of the university environment were related to fewer academic non-persistence decisions.
- Differences in Strengths of Coefficients
 - Used to determine whether differences in the strength of the correlations were significantly different by sex and class standing
 - Fisher's r to z transformations
 - Stronger associations between RSES and P/VDD for males ($r = .42$) as compared to females ($r = .03$) ($z = 2.03, p \leq .05$).

- Stronger associations between RSES and ISS for males ($r = .74$) as compared to females ($r = .48$) ($z = -2.1, p \leq .05$)
 - Stronger associations between AAMAS-AA and P/VDD for males ($r = .32$) as compared to females ($r = -.15$) ($z = 2.32, p \leq .05$)
 - No significant differences in strengths of relationships by class standing
- 4-step Hierarchical Regression – 43% of variance of academic non-persistence decision accounted
 - Step 1
 - Sex and class standing controlled ($\Delta r^2 = .02, \Delta F = 1.03, p \geq .05$)
 - Step 2
 - Psychological dimension (i.e., CSEI, RSES, and ISS)
 - 21% of variance accounted, $\Delta F(3, 93) = 8.45, p \leq .001$
 - ISS only significant negative predictor ($\beta = -.37, t = -2.80, p \leq .01$)
 - Step 3
 - Social dimension (i.e., PES, PFCEES, PSS-Fa, and PSS-Fr)
 - 12% of variance accounted, $\Delta F(4, 89) = 4.15, p \leq .01$
 - PSS-Fr only positive predictor ($\beta = .32, t = 3.05, p \leq .01$)
 - Step 4
 - Cultural dimension (i.e., UES, AAMAS-CO/AA/EA, CC, and EI)
 - 8% of variance accounted, $\Delta F(4, 85) = 3.11, p \leq .05$
 - UES only significant and positive predictor ($\beta = .30, t = 3.16, p \leq .01$)

Discussion

- Psychological, social, and cultural dimensions uniquely and collectively predicted academic nonpersistence decisions for Hmong American undergraduates, with the psychological dimensions being most predictive.
 - Consistent with previous findings (Lin & Gloria, 2008), imposter syndrome, social support friends, and university environment were the most significant predictors of academic non-persistence decisions
 - Shaped by such factors as the university environment, Hmong American undergraduates' internalized processes have a greater influence on their academic non-persistence decisions.
- First study to reveal significant sex differences for Hmong undergraduates for academic persistence decisions
 - Strength of relationship of Pan-Asian acculturation to academic non-persistence decisions stronger for males than females
 - Males engage in Pan-Asian behaviors to self-protect, negotiate identity, and gain greater connection to community to avoid feeling numerically underrepresented and stereotyped.
 - Males indicated a lower sense of cultural congruity and their relationship of self-esteem being more strongly related to their sense of phoniness and to their academic non-persistence decisions.
 - Males may experience displacement of status on campus given traditional Hmong gender roles which provide males with higher status and greater privilege than females
 - Females reported higher perceived support from family and friends
 - Females as emotional providers (i.e., creating and maintaining family structure) may rely on greater support from family and friends
- Differences revealed by class standing
 - Lower sense of cultural congruity for upper division students than lower division students
 - More aware and attune to discrimination and inequitable events accumulated over time
 - Upper division students indicated higher self-esteem and lower perceived social support from family than lower division students
 - As students progress in the university environment gaining academic self confidence, less support from families may be needed.

Limitations

- Restrictions of Acculturation Scale
 - Emphasized behavioral rather than values acculturation
 - Measured language and cultural knowledge, only recently established and shared in Hmong culture
- Recruitment and sample bias limited generalizability
 - Focused on ethnic-specific support organizations and traditional students
- Ethnic-match between researcher and participant may have affected participation and social desirable responding
- Local and university events of racism against Hmong community/students during study recruitment

Future Research

- Explore how cultural and gender roles at home impact internalization and socialization in educational experience
 - Further understand gender-specific support needed to academically persist
- Elucidate how ethnic student organizations provide academic and personal support
- Investigate cultural congruity and bi-cultural identity, more specifically coping strategies used to negotiate the university environment

Implications

- Importance of providing welcoming and culturally congruent university environment
 - Ethnic-specific spaces for support to mitigate negative interactions
- Recruitment and retention of Hmong students and faculty
 - Inform and connect incoming Hmong students with resources and opportunities to meet educational needs
 - Provide Hmong-focused curriculum beyond language classes
- Promote and fund programs and initiatives to connect Hmong peers for support
 - Address feeling of imposter and impact of negative educational aspects on psychological health and well-being of students.
- Redress curriculum to reflect issues, concerns, and experiences of Hmong history and community given growing representation within U.S. and educational systems.

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