

Kawm Ntawv Qib Siab: Experiences of Hmong American Undergraduates

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the lived educational experiences of 13 Hmong American undergraduates attending a predominantly White university. Conducting four semi-structured focus groups framed within a Psychosociocultural approach, 6 males and 7 females shared their educational narratives for approximately 90 minutes. Student narratives were analyzed for emergent themes using a multi-step approach in which inductive and deductive procedures were implemented. Ten emergent themes were identified. Psychological emergent themes included college self-efficacy, feelings of phoniness, perceptions of discrimination and racism, and cognitive flexibility in making sense of the unwelcoming environment. For the social dimension, themes included different types of support from established university resources, college peers, and parents. Finally, three themes emerged for the cultural dimension: “familial duality,” changing parent-child relationships, and negotiation of university environment. Consistent with the qualitative approach used, two composite profiles were developed from the emergent themes for a male and female Hmong undergraduate, with their narratives reflective of different approaches to their academic and social interactions. Implications for student service personnel and directions for future research regarding Hmong American undergraduates are also included.

OVERVIEW OF HMONG AND EDUCATION

- ❖ Least-educated Asian ethnic group in U.S. (ACS, 2006)
 - Bimodal distribution with Southeast Asians having low achievement and high dropout rate (Fuertes, Sedlacek, & Liu, 1994; Lee, 2000)

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- ❖ Attainment low across educational pipeline (ACS, 2006; Yang & Pfeifer, 2004)
 - High school or equivalent = 27.2%
 - Bachelor's degree = 10.4%
 - Graduate degree = >2%
- ❖ Higher educational attainment varies by sex (ACS, 2006; Yang & Pfeifer, 2004)
 - 15.2% males; 10.1% females
- ❖ High educational expectations and social support from family (Swartz, Lee, & Mortimer, 2003)
- ❖ Considered an educationally “at-risk” population (Su et al., 2005; Swartz et al., 2003)
 - Often first in family to attend U.S. college
- ❖ Equivocal findings
 - Higher levels of retention and educational attainment, surpasses other racial groups (Hutchinson, 1997; Swartz et al., 2003)

PSYCHOSOCIOCULTURAL FRAMEWORK

- ❖ Meta-model, integrates three salient dimensions of students' educational experience within university context to address the “whole” student (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000; Castellanos & Gloria, 2007)
- ❖ Model empirically-validated with Hmong American undergraduates (Lin & Gloria, 2009; Sengkhammee, Gloria, Her, Lin, Thao, Cabinte, & Aroonsavath, 2009)

PURPOSE OF STUDY

To explore and understand holistically the educational experiences of Hmong American undergraduates within a psychological, social, and cultural context.

SETTING AND PROCEDURES

- ❖ IRB-approved study conducted at a mid-sized, predominantly White Midwest University
- ❖ Conducted simultaneous to a separately-conceptualized study
- ❖ Participants recruited through Hmong-affiliated student organization, advising office, language classes, and other campus offices
- ❖ Researchers contacted participants assigning him/her to one of four groups
- ❖ 1.5 to 2 hour sessions held in a private conference room
- ❖ Food and beverages provided
- ❖ Each group facilitated by two student researchers
- ❖ Groups audio-recorded

TEAM MEMBER DESCRIPTIVES

- ❖ 6 Hmong American member research team, ranged from undergraduates to doctoral students
- ❖ Represented diverse areas of study (i.e. Nursing, Counseling, Education, and Family Studies)
 - 5 females, 1 male
- ❖ Generational status:
 - Hmong American: Two 1.5-generation , three 2nd-generation, one 4th-generation
 - College attendance: Five 1st-generation, one 2nd –generation

13 UNDERGRADUATE PARTICIPANTS

- ❖ 7 females, 6 males
- ❖ 4 Focus groups: 2 all female (3 in each), 1 male (n = 3), 1 mixed-sex (1 female, 3 males)
- ❖ Class standing: 6 freshmen, 1 sophomore, 6 seniors
 - Inverse class standing representation
 - more female freshmen representation (5 freshmen, 1 sophomore, 1 senior)
 - more male senior representation (1 freshmen, 5 seniors)

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL AND ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

- ❖ Interview questions included:
 - Who or what factors influence your educational experience?
- ❖ Stages of analyses:
 - 1) Reviewed extant literature on Hmong American education creating theoretical protocol using PSC framework
 - 2) Line by line analyses of transcripts to identify emergent themes within groups
 - 3) Application of coding protocol to build consensus to clarify themes within dimensions
 - 4) Determine emergent themes between groups within dimensions
 - 5) Development of student composites from final emergent themes

EMERGENT THEMES

Psychological	Social	Cultural
Self-efficacy: “I can do it”	University Resources: “I’m networked”	Familial Duality: Responsibility and Pressure – “My family is counting on me”
Imposter Syndrome: “I feel phony in the educational environment”	College Peers: “I need to be around other Hmong people”	Shifting Dynamics of Parent-Child Relationship: “My parents, we talk more!”
Perceiving Discrimination and Racism: “I’m just as smart as you are, I belong here too”	Family: “Rau siab kawm ntawv” (Work hard in school)	University Environment enables and impacts: Cultural insensitivity in the classroom
Cognitive Flexibility: Making sense of the University environment – “Accept it and keep going”		

COMPOSITE PROFILES

Chue is a senior, first-generation Hmong American student attending a predominantly White university. Away from home for the first time, he is living with siblings who are also attending college, from whom he receives social connections and mentorship. Although not having attended college themselves, Chue's parents value education by pushing him to excel in his academics and to learn the norms of society. Chue's parents call him to ask how he is doing and remind him to take care of himself. He perceives his parents as supportive yet feels substantial pressure to do well academically as he feels his family and clan are "looking up" to him to succeed and set an example for everyone. Recognizing and taking on these responsibilities to advance his community and family, Chue also questions if he will be able to meet these and other expected challenges and responsibilities as a student. For instance, he often feels he is "looked down upon" and academically-discredited by his non-Hmong classmates who often perceive him as filling a quota. Coupled with discriminatory and other negative experiences that he has encountered on campus lends support to his thinking that the environment is an unwelcoming and offensive learning place for him as a Hmong male. Often the only Hmong student in his major courses, Chue intentionally takes Asian American Studies' courses and is affiliated with a Hmong student organization to ease his sense of isolation. Similarly, as a participant of a federally-funded student support services program, Chue is socially connected with even more Hmong students and has built a family-like environment for himself. In addition, Chue makes good use of the programs' academic services and feels confident to be just as competitive as other students.

Sheng is a freshmen, first-generation Hmong American student attending a predominantly White university. Living outside of the family home for the first time in a student residential hall, she finds her experience positive as it provides her a social network and a venue to learn about and access campus resources and activities. The university environment offers Sheng more opportunities than her home setting, as she is free from cultural gender scripts of her role as a Hmong daughter. As a function of being a college student, Sheng's relationship with her parents has shifted as they engage her in conversations about Hmong history and culture in a way that they had not previously. To Sheng, the increased scope of conversation signifies her parents' recognition of her "adult status" and maturity. Sheng is pleased by her new conversations with her parents as she desires more knowledge about her culture and traditions as a way to strengthen "cultural connections" with her history and identity. As a first-generation college student, Sheng's parents express high expectations for her to succeed in school. As a result she feels pressure to not disappoint her parents and perform up to their expectations as they have encouraged her throughout her schooling. Although having a focused-determination to achieve and succeed, Sheng sometimes wonders whether her presence is fulfilling a campus' minority initiative and if she is as intelligent as her White student counterparts. Despite occasional self-questioning, Sheng makes confident intentional choices about her academics and is self-determined that she will succeed. For example, her choice of college peers reflects her ambition as she relies on them for motivation and academic support.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENT SERVICE PERSONNEL

- ❖ Dimensions of psychological, social, and cultural are salient to understanding the educational experience of Hmong Americans and warrant exploration to provide appropriate academic and educational support to persistence and graduation
- ❖ Need to attend to role and influence of negative messages on students' personal and academic self-beliefs
 - Offer a range of culturally-responsive student services (from informal psychoeducational support to formal structured-programming) to help Hmong students address concerns of self-beliefs and internalized challenges of discrimination and racism
- ❖ Connection to other Hmong college peers critical to comfort, belonging, and continuation in educational setting

- Commit with accountable consequences to provide spaces and venues for Hmong students to develop social and academic networks to succeed
- ❖ University promotes an artificial academic divide for students and their families; however, for Hmong American students' family plays a central and salient role in relationships and expectations regarding academics
 - Provide resources (financial and personnel) for students to facilitate conversations and talking groups for Hmong parents and students to develop and strengthen connections to the higher education experience

LIMITATIONS ~ FUTURE RESEARCH

- ❖ Representation of participants' class standing were primarily freshmen and senior ~ Implement stratified sampling measures to ensure adequate representation of developmental experiences
- ❖ Participants may have limited their self-disclosure of experiences given group setting ~ Conduct in-depth individual interviews to secure extended educational narratives addressing specific needs and concerns
- ❖ Ethnic-match between researchers and participants may have influenced desirability of responses given small Hmong student community ~ Develop "diary" study in which students can describe anonymously daily educational experiences for extended time (e.g., 1 week)