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Perspectives from Hmong American Women about the First--Generation College Student Experience

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Perspectives from Hmong American Women about the
First-Generation College Student Experience

by

Lacey J. Reiersen, B.A., LSW

MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the
School of Social Work
St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas
St. Paul, Minnesota
in Partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Social Work

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Sandra Traudt, MSW

The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

Abstract

First-generation college students' (FGCS) experience in college is unique. Hmong Americans are pursuing higher education in increasing numbers, and their experience in higher education is examined in this study. Previous research regarding Hmong American FGCS indicates that gender, folk theories of achievement, social and family support, mental health status, acculturation tension, institutional practices, and larger systems all contribute to FGCS' experience in the United States education system. Limited research has been conducted regarding Hmong American women's experience. This study explored the perspectives of female Hmong American FGCS and how gender influences the Hmong American college student experience. Six Hmong American women were interviewed regarding their perspectives and personal experiences in the United States education system. Their responses were coded using the grounded theory method. The findings show that Hmong American women have unique expectations placed on them, they experience a culture clash in college, and the view of higher education is changing for Hmong American women. Implications for social work practice and further research are discussed, including the need to explore how institutional practices affect Hmong American students and to track changing views in the Hmong American community.

Keywords: Hmong, first-generation college students, higher education

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Perspectives from Hmong American Women about the
First-Generation College Student Experience

Students whose parents did not graduate from college face a number of challenges that make it difficult to earn a college degree. In the National Education Longitudinal Study, the United States Department of Education found that first-generation college students are more likely to drop out of college and less likely to earn a degree (Pell Institute, 2006). The National Education Longitudinal Study also found that 43% of first-generation college students drop out of college before completing their degree compared with only 20% of students whose parents had a bachelor's degree or higher (Chen & Carroll, 2005). People who earn a college degree gain many benefits including a higher earning potential, more job opportunities, greater job benefits, job satisfaction, and job stability (The Benefits of Earning a College Degree, n.d.). For the purpose of this research, first-generation college students (FGCS) will be defined as students whose parents did not obtain a college degree.

This paper will focus specifically on female Hmong American FGCS. Many Hmong originally migrated from China to Laos, Thailand, and northern Vietnam between 1790 and 1860 (Lee & Pfeifer, 2012). The Hmong fought with the United States during the Vietnam War and the U.S. Secret Army in Laos from 1963 through 1975. According to Vang and Bogenschutz (2014), the Hmong assisted Americans in the "Secret War" against communism in the Lao People's Democratic Republic during the Vietnam War. After the United States had withdrawn from the war, the Hmong faced political persecution for what the Lao and Vietnamese governments viewed as a betrayal of their communist government. In 1976, the United States first recognized the Hmong as former

CIA employees in the fight against communism during the Vietnam War and Hmong people began arriving in the United States as refugees. The final refugee camp in Thailand was closed in 2004.

The 2008 American Community Survey indicates the median age of Hmong Americans living in the United States is 19.1 years old and 47% of Hmong Americans are younger than 18 years old (as cited in Vang & Bogenschutz, 2014). The 2010 U.S. Census Bureau notes that Minnesota has the second largest Hmong population in the United States and Minneapolis/St. Paul has the largest concentration of Hmong (64,422 people) of any metropolitan area in the United States. Fresno, California has the second largest concentration of Hmong (31,771 people), less than half of the population found in Minneapolis/St. Paul (Lee & Pfeifer, 2012).

Asian Americans are often viewed as a model minority, yet the Southeast Asian American experience (including Vietnamese Americans, Hmong Americans, Cambodian Americans, and Lao Americans) greatly contrasts with Asian Americans as a whole. Southeast Asian Americans have received contrasting labels of “high achievers” and “high school dropouts, gangsters, and welfare dependents” (Ngo & Lee, 2007, p. 416). Additionally, statistical studies that span across multiple Asian ethnic groups do not show the major differences of achievement and attainment between them (Ngo & Lee, 2007). Many Hmong American students today are often the first in their family to attend college. Many Hmong who emigrated from Laos were rural farmers and had no formal education (Swartz, Lee, & Mortimer, 2003). According to 2006-2010 American Community Survey, only 14.4% of Hmong Americans over the age of 25 had completed a bachelor’s degree compared with 27.9% of the general population and 50.2% of Asian Americans as

a whole (Ogunwole, Drewery, & Rios-Gargas, 2012). Between 2001 and 2010, the percent of Hmong Americans attending college increased from 13.2% to 26.7% (Xiong, 2013). Additionally, Hmong American women were more likely to attend college than Hmong American men, 29.9% and 23.4% respectively (Xiong, 2013).

Previous studies have explored several factors impacting FGCS including: folk theories of achievement (Lee, 1997; Lee, 2001; Ngo & Lee, 2007), social and family support (Jenkins, Belanger, Connally, Boals, & Durón, 2013; Orbe, 2004; Orbe, 2008; Swartz et al., 2003; Tierney, 2013), mental health status (Ho & Lau, 2011; Jenkins et al., 2013; Stebleton & Soria, 2012), acculturation (Lee, Jung, Su, Tran, & Bahrassa, 2009; Lee, 2001; Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011; Orbe, 2008; Vang, 2013; Woosley & Shepler, 2011), gender (Lee et al., 2009; Lee, 2001; Lee, 1997; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Swartz et al., 2003; Vang & Bogenschutz, 2014), institutional practices (Jehangir, Williams, & Jeske, 2012; Lee, 2001; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Stebleton & Soria, 2012; Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012), and larger systems (Ngo & Lee, 2007; Petty, 2014). Few studies, however, have explored the systemic and educational factors that contribute to successful outcomes for FGCS (Ngo & Lee, 2007). Some studies focused on FGCS, but not specifically on immigrant FGCS (Jenkins et al., 2013; Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011; Orbe, 2004; Orbe 2008; Petty, 2014; Stebleton & Soria, 2012; Stephens et al, 2012; Woosley & Shepler, 2011). As an immigrant culture, the acculturation level of Hmong American students and their families provides a unique experience compared to non-immigrant FGCS.

Social work is one of the few professions that incorporates institutional factors by spanning micro and macro practice. Social workers can create lasting change for FGCS

on an individual level as well as work to create systemic changes to address the barriers faced by FGCS. Additionally, given the large concentration of Hmong in Minneapolis/St. Paul, social workers in the Twin Cities should understand how Hmong Americans uniquely experience barriers to college access. Given that most Hmong living in the United States are young, services to the young Hmong population should be a priority. The purpose of this paper is to explore female Hmong American FGCS perspectives of the Hmong American college experience and the impact of gender and acculturation on this experience.

Literature Review

Previous research about FGCS has explored many different facets of success in college. In general, gender, folk theories of achievement, social and family support, mental health, acculturation, institutional practices, and the structure of systems all contribute to FGCS success. Hmong American FGCS have a unique experience of the education system due to being a relatively new immigrant group. Women specifically are affected in the education system due to patterns of early marriage and childbearing within the Hmong culture.

Gender and Southeast Asian American First-Generation College Students

Researchers have found that Southeast Asian American women's experience of education differs from Southeast Asian American men. Vietnamese parents expect more from their daughters (Lee et al., 2009). More Vietnamese women are pursuing education to gain financial stability (Ngo & Lee, 2007). Similar to Vietnamese families, Lao American families also support educating girls. In contrast to practices in Laos, Lao American parents want their daughters, as well as their

sons, to obtain an education and support postponing marriage until after high school (Ngo & Lee, 2007). Of the 187 Lao American girls surveyed in St. Paul School District, Meschke (2003) found that 50% were married (as cited in Vang & Bogenschutz, 2014). In a longitudinal study that began with 105 Hmong American students in St. Paul Public Schools in 1988, 70% of Hmong girls had married during high school and more than 50% of Hmong girls reported having at least one child, compared with 0.7% of non-Hmong girls and 10% of non-Hmong girls, respectively (Swartz et al., 2003). Attrition impacted the results of this study, however, and it is also important to note that most of the Hmong youth included in the study were not born in the United States.

Various factors affect the marriage experience for Hmong American FGCS women. Hmong American parents may encourage early marriage to combat assimilation and girls may marry sooner due to community pressure (Lee, 2001). Additionally, in-laws determine whether their daughter-in-law will pursue higher education after a Hmong girl marries into the family. According to Chung (2001), Hmong American girls have more conflict with family over dating and marriage than boys (as cited in Lee et al., 2009).

Previous research has yielded conflicting results regarding the effect of early marriage and childbearing on Hmong American women's academic achievement. On the one hand, Lee (1997) and Lee (2001) indicate that childbearing and early marriage make it difficult for Hmong American women to continue the pursuit of higher education. In a survey of 186 Hmong American women, Vang and Bogenschutz (2014) found that early marriage is associated with less educational

attainment and lower earnings. Both early marriage and childbearing have led to high dropout rates among teen girls. Yet despite these barriers, a significant portion of Hmong American women continue on the path to higher education to gain freedom and independence from their husbands (Lee, 1997) and to gain gender equality (Lee, 2001). Alternatively, Swartz et al.'s (2003) study found that childbearing did not negatively affect academic achievement for Hmong American high school girls, compared with non-Hmong American high school girls. This lack of impact was attributed, in part, to family and community support in raising children within the Hmong culture. Hutchinson and McNall (1994) also found that childbearing was not an obstacle to high school completion and Dunnigan, Olney, McNall, and Spring (1996) concluded that early marriage and childbearing did not affect Hmong women's pursuit of higher education (as cited in Ngo & Lee, 2007). Hence, it is unclear to what extent early marriage and childbearing affect educational attainment.

Folk Theories of Achievement in the Hmong Culture

Folk theories are common beliefs within a culture that can contribute to motivation for success. Folk theories of achievement play an important role in the Hmong culture and show how education is valued. Lee (2001) notes one such folk theory: education is the road to economic success. One can understand from this folk theory how Hmong parents may emphasize education and put pressure on their children to continue their education. Lee (1997) describes a similar folk theory: education provides financial security and social mobility. Consequently, Hmong Americans may believe that education automatically results in economic and social

success. McNall, Dunnigan, and Mortimer (1994) also illustrate a folk theory: one can achieve success in one's host country through education (as cited in Ngo & Lee, 2007). This study found that Hmong American students have greater resilience when facing cultural obstacles partially due to their positive view of education. This folk theory may support Hmong American women's pursuit of education.

Social and Family Support of First-Generation College Students

Researchers have found that social support and family support contribute to the success of FGCS. In conducting studies with FGCS, Lehmann (2009) and London (1989) found that many students had a desire to move from working-class status to middle-class status. This desire to obtain familial prestige can be a motivational factor for first-generation college students. FGCS' parents may therefore be supportive of their child escaping poverty via education (Orbe, 2008; Swartz et al., 2003; Tierney, 2013) and proud of their child's effort to create a better future through education. However, they may also be jealous that they did not have the opportunity to obtain an education themselves (Orbe, 2008). Thus, parents may be simultaneously supportive and unsupportive. Similarly, Jenkins et al. (2013) found that FGCS reported less friend and family support overall compared with their non-FGCS peers possibly due to "the scarcity of financial and other resources within their social networks" (p. 131). Beyond immediate relationships, Orbe (2004) found that FGCS often did not have support from other FGCS and experienced an absence of support from the larger community. This lack of support may uniquely affect Hmong American women because there may be no one available to care for their children when balancing higher education and raising children. Overall, previous

studies have found varying results regarding whether FGCS experience support from family and friends.

Mental Health Status of First-Generation College Students

Researchers who have examined mental health among FGCS present varying findings. Ho and Lau (2011) found that social anxiety is higher for foreign-born Asian Americans, especially for first-generation foreign-born Asian Americans who were found to have a higher level of interdependent self-construal, or adaptability of oneself to varying demands in different social contexts. Stebleton and Soria (2012) found that FGCS felt more stressed, depressed, and upset than non-FGS peers and discussed feeling potential stigma for seeking mental health services. They identified that the absence of a sense of belonging can develop from trying to bridge two cultures, thus leading to some of these mental health concerns. On the other hand, Jenkins et al. (2013) found that rates of depression were no different for FGCS than non-FGCS. They did, however, find that post-traumatic stress levels were high among FGCS in addition to lower levels of social support and less life satisfaction. Jenkins et al. (2013) noted that FGCS women, specifically, “were [perhaps] carrying additional stress burdens such as financial duress, employment, and/or family responsibilities” which may lead to higher stress levels (p. 139)

Acculturation Tension Among First-Generation College Students

Prior research indicates that FGCS often assimilate to the culture of academia but retain aspects of their culture. For the purpose of this research, assimilation will be defined as “adopting receiving-culture practices, values, and identifications and discarding those from the culture of origin” (Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, &

Szapocznik, 2010, p. 239). Student connection to campus is important for FGCS (Woosley & Shepler, 2011). First-generation college students desire to assimilate but also remain separate (Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011). Lee (2001) argues that FGCS are most successful when they learn how to acculturate and accommodate to the dominant culture without assimilating. Orbe (2008) expands upon this theory to describe a dialectical tension of wanting to be visible because it is an achievement to be a FGCS, yet also invisible due to the stigma associated with being a FGCS.

The literature suggests that family members often acculturate differently from one another. Lee et al. (2009) assert that children acculturate differently from their parents. Parents often selectively acculturate, whereas children acculturate less selectively. This difference in acculturation can cause distress within the family—high child acculturation and low parental acculturation coupled with low parental attachment can lead to increased alcohol use. Finally, Vang (2013) posits that acculturation is related to family and community life. Later generations of Hmong Americans are more acculturated, as demonstrated in their desire to have fewer children and be less likely to use the Hmong language. Vang (2013) also notes that Hmong Americans who are more acculturated are likely to lose some Hmong community support that acts as a buffer against racism. An integral part of a practitioner's work with Hmong Americans is to assess their level of acculturation. Hmong American women who are more acculturated may be less likely to live with their in-laws, and their in-laws may have less of an influence over their pursuit of higher education.

Institutional Practices Are Important

Much of the research regarding FGCS has focused on individual factors such as mental health or social and family support. For example, Vietnamese family lifestyle has been credited for academic achievement and its “achievement as a collective affair” (Ngo & Lee, 2007, p. 424). Researchers who have studied FGCS assert that institutional factors also affect academic achievement among FGCS.

Institutional discrimination. Many researchers agree that institutional practices influence the success of FGCS. Ngo and Lee (2007) argue that cultural factors prevail in research regarding barriers and successes for FGCS and few researchers have examined the influence of policy and practice. Lee (2001) supports this point and asserts, “The sole focus on cultural obstacles...has in effect ignored the existence of economic, racial, and other structural barriers to Hmong American women’s educational achievement and persistence. By relegating cultural and family issues to the ‘private’ sphere, the ‘public’ sphere is freed from any responsibility” (p. 804). Racism influences FGCS’ experience in the education system (Lee, 2001). Hmong American students born outside of the United States were more likely to overlook racism than their Hmong American peers who were born in the United States. Also within the Southeast Asian American community, Davis and McDaid (1992) found that most of the Vietnamese students in their study experienced prejudice from fellow students and teachers (as cited in Ngo & Lee, 2007).

School practices. While authors encourage educators to include FGCS in their schools, Ngo and Lee (2007) found that schools and teachers may not be

prepared or may be unwilling to address specific needs of Lao students to support their education. Research suggests that educators may not be aware of the obstacles faced by first-generation students including cultural dissonance and possibly weak English skills (Stebleton & Soria, 2012). It is possible that even White FGCS will experience cultural dissonance on college campuses due to the difference in cultures between their home and academia. Educators can involve FGCS on campus and in FGCS-specific support services (Stebleton & Soria, 2012) and make efforts to include Hmong American FGCS in the school community (Lee, 2001).

Previous research indicates that schools can support the success of FGCS through their practices. Swartz, Lee, and Mortimer (2003) encourage educators to provide services specific to underrepresented minorities. Jehangir et al. (2012) suggest that schools incorporate multicultural learning communities to increase self-authorship and provide space to make meaning of one's emotions. Researchers agree that the pedagogy should be culturally relevant to support multicultural learners (Jehangir et al., 2012; Lee, 2001). Additionally, universities often focus on the middle-class value of independence more than interdependence (Stephens et al., 2012), suggesting that specific efforts should be made to include FGCS whose culture may have a greater focus on interdependence. This may uniquely affect Hmong American college women because the Hmong American expectation of women's responsibility to family contrasts with the institutional value of independence.

Larger Systems Influencing the First-Generation College Student Experience

Much of the literature points to individual and cultural factors influencing the success of FGCS (Ho & Lau, 2011; Lee, 1997; Lee, 2001; Orbe, 2008; Stebleton &

Soria, 2012; Tierney, 2013). Current research findings indicate that larger systems, such as the American education system and post-secondary institutions, cannot be ignored (Ngo & Lee, 2007; Petty, 2014). Petty (2014) refers to the concept of individual blame. Ngo and Lee (2007) describe this phenomenon with eloquence:

Although the research on the role of culture has done a great deal to illuminate the salience of culture in the education of Southeast Asian American students, an exclusive focus on culture fails to capture the significance of the structural opportunities on student responses to education. In cases of academic underachievement, a sole focus on culture serves to blame the victims. (p. 440)

Ngo and Lee (2007) did not provide specific details regarding structural opportunities, but they stressed the need for expanding the understanding of FGCS' successes and setbacks to include systemic impacts rather than simply FGCS' culture. Therefore, this research will explore the system's impact on FGCS in college. Specifically, this paper will explore the experience of female Hmong American FGCS and their perspectives on how gender influences their experience. The research will explore the following research question: what are the perspectives of female Hmong American FGCS on how gender influences the Hmong American college student experience?

Conceptual Framework

Feminist Social Work Theory

In order to better understand women's unique experience in higher education, *feminist social work theory* will be utilized in this research. Dominelli

(2002) describes feminist social work as connecting the private life to public life, valuing the role women play as caregivers, and the impact that this role has on women's ability to work. Liberal feminism, specifically, has historically "focused on women becoming free by gaining access to the same opportunities as men" (Dominelli, 2002, p. 24). While acknowledging the need for equal access and opportunity for women, recognizing the historic positioning of women as caregivers is important. One could argue that the caregiving role also has an impact on women's ability to pursue higher education opportunities, which will be a focus of this research. As mentioned previously, some Hmong American women marry and bear children before or during college. Thus, this research will focus on how this practice influences Hmong American women's experience of higher education.

Acculturation Theory

Acculturation theory denotes the relationship that refugees, immigrants, asylum seekers, or sojourners have with their receiving culture (Schwartz et al., 2010). Berry (1997) developed an acculturation framework that included four categories on two attitudinal dimensions of (1) whether the person maintains identity with one's heritage culture (yes or no) and (2) whether the person maintains identity with the receiving culture (yes or no): integration (maintaining both cultures), separation/segregation (maintaining ethnic culture but not home culture), assimilation (maintaining home culture but not ethnic culture), and marginalization (maintaining neither culture).

Schwartz et al. (2010) reason that Berry's model is too uni-dimensional. They also assert that people in the integration category, also known as bicultural,

have better psychosocial well-being than the other categories. Yet Schwartz et al. (2010) also note that it is more difficult for individuals from collectivist cultures to acculturate into the individualist American culture. Additionally, 1.5 generation immigrants (who immigrated to the United States as children) are more likely to maintain values of the receiving culture than people who immigrate in adolescence or adulthood. This research will seek to understand whether generational status and level of acculturation affect Hmong American FGCS experiences.

Institutional Racism, Color-Blind Racism, and Cultural Racism

Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman (2007) and Bonilla-Silva (2006) assert that United States institutions function in such a manner that racial minorities do not have the same opportunities as Whites, including access to educational opportunities. Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman (2007) define institutional racism as “discriminatory acts and policies against a racial group that pervade the major macro systems of society, including the legal, political, economic, and educational systems” (p. 198). The inaccurate tracking of immigrant students (e.g. Hmong Americans) to English Language Learner programs that sometimes occurs in public school systems (Lee, 2001) is one such example of institutional racism because it may prevent Hmong American students from having the opportunity to move out of the program and reach their full academic potential.

Bonilla-Silva (2006) describes an ideology that stems from institutional racism: color-blind racism. He asserts that this ideology emerged in a post-Jim Crow era to “defend the contemporary racial order” (p. 25). It includes victim-blaming or the “culture of poverty,” which Bonilla-Silva (2006) terms *cultural racism*. As a

framework within color-blind racism, *cultural racism* “is a frame that relies on culturally based arguments such as ‘Mexicans do not put much emphasis on education’ or ‘blacks have too many babies’ to explain the standing of minorities in society” (p. 28). Though Whites may not explicitly believe people of color to be inferior, they still “assail them for their presumed lack of hygiene, family disorganization, and lack of morality” (p. 40).

One such example of this is that the higher level of acculturation among Hmong American children, in comparison with their parents, causes conflict within families. The underlying argument is that parents should adapt more to the receiving American culture. However, this does not consider other factors such as the level of support provided by both the receiving American culture and the ethnic culture to Hmong American parents and children. This framework will influence the current research in that the researcher will examine both factors within the Hmong culture and institutional practices within the United States education system.

Methods

Research Design

The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of female Hmong American FGCS and their perspectives on how gender influences their experience. In order to explore this topic, qualitative semi-structured interviews were completed with six Hmong American women who have completed at least their freshmen year of college. Compared with a quantitative study, the qualitative nature of this study allowed for a fuller understanding of the female Hmong American college experience. Interview questions (see Appendix A) flowed from

general questions to assess attitudes within the Hmong culture to more specific questions related to participants' personal stories. The questions explored the participants' views of the Hmong American college experience, views about education in the Hmong American community, and personal experiences. The interview questions concluded with demographic data (i.e. gender, age, year in school, and generational status) and Anderson, Moeschberger, Chen, Kunn, and Wewers and Guthrie's (1993) *Acculturation Scale for Southeast Asians* to measure the level of acculturation (Appendix B, as cited in Davis & Engel, 2011).

Sample

This study's sample consisted of female Hmong FGCS who have completed at least their freshmen year of college. The study excluded Hmong American first-generation college freshmen and younger because the researcher wanted to learn about resiliency factors that have been helpful during the college experience. Participants had the opportunity to share their attitudes about the Hmong American FGCS experience as well as their experience as a female Hmong American FGCS.

The researcher recruited participants through a nonprobability snowball sampling method—the researcher sent an email (Appendix C) to potential participants via the researcher's friend who is from the Hmong community. The email included a brief overview of the study and the researcher's contact information to request additional information. When potential participants requested more information, the researcher emailed out an information sheet (Appendix D) that provided information regarding interview questions, confidentiality, and potential risks and benefits of participating in the study. The

information sheet also informed participants that the researcher would complete an audio recording of each interview.

In order to allow for maximum participation, the interviews were conducted at locations close to the participants' homes. Each participant chose a convenient location for the interview.

Protection of Human Participants

The St. Thomas Institutional Review Board reviewed the research proposal before the researcher collected any data. The person who referred the students for this research was neither a supervisor nor counselor to the students. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary, and they had the right to skip questions or stop the interview at any time. The researcher kept participants' information confidential and did not share the identity of participants with anyone. Following each interview, the researcher completed a short debrief with each participant to see how they were feeling and offered referral information to culturally appropriate counseling when necessary. Participants were provided with a consent form (Appendix E) that was reviewed with the researcher prior to participation in the study. Participants had the opportunity to ask the researcher questions about the study before choosing to participate. The researcher provided a \$10.00 Target gift card to each person who elected to participate in the study. Interview transcripts have been stored on a password-protected computer and participants were informed that the transcripts would be destroyed by May 31st, 2015.

Measures

As a part of each interview, Anderson et al.'s (1993) *Acculturation Scale for Southeast Asians* (Appendix B) was used (as cited in Davis & Engel, 2011). The assessment was chosen because it has shown to be reliable and valid for Southeast Asians (which includes Hmong). The assessment included 13 questions about language proficiency, language used in various social situations, ethnicity of close friends and nearby neighbors, and food preferences. Language proficiency was scored on a scale of 1 to 4, language used in various social situations was scored on a scale of 1 to 5, ethnicity of close friends and nearby neighbors was scored on a scale of 1 to 3, and food preferences was scored on a scale of 1 to 5.

Data Collection and Analysis

The researcher sent the audio recordings to a professional transcriber for transcription. The researcher reviewed the interview transcripts and engaged in the process of coding using the grounded theory method (Padgett, 1998). The researcher began with open coding by paragraph to find emerging themes, sometimes discovering multiple themes per paragraph. The researcher used Padgett's (1998) *constant comparative analysis* (a component of the grounded theory method), comparing responses to each interview question across interviews and coming back through all of the interviews to confirm themes until the research was saturated and no new themes emerged.

Findings

The intent of this research was to gain an understanding of Hmong American women's experiences as FGCS in the American education system. Six Hmong

American women participated in this study. The age of participants ranged from 20 years of age to 32 years of age, with a mean of 25 years of age. The age distribution is shown in *Figure 1*.

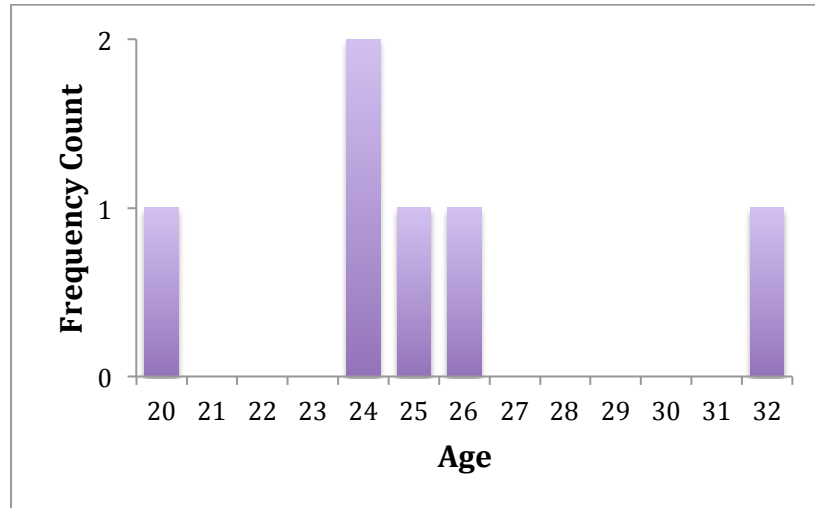


Figure 1. Participant age.

Of the participants, 66% were second-generation immigrants (born in the United States) and 33% were 1.5-generation immigrants (immigrated to the United States as children). Of the two participants who immigrated to the United States as children, both of them were born in Thailand. None of the participants were first-generation immigrants. One hundred percent of the participants' parents were born in Laos. Five participants' grandparents were born in Laos, and one participant was uncertain of where her grandparents were born, but she indicated that they were likely born in Laos. The participants also completed an acculturation assessment to which the researcher assigned a score between 13 (low level of acculturation) and 54 (high level of acculturation). Of the five participants who fully completed the acculturation assessment, the mean score on the acculturation assessment was 38.

Figure 2 shows the relationship between participants' level of acculturation and

language used. Language used was calculated using a sum of questions 8, 9, and 10 of the Anderson et al.'s *Acculturation Scale for Southeast Asians* (Appendix B). Low scores represent “only origin” language used and high scores represent “only English” language used. Only five responses are included in *Figure 2*'s scatterplot due to one participant not fully completing the acculturation scale.

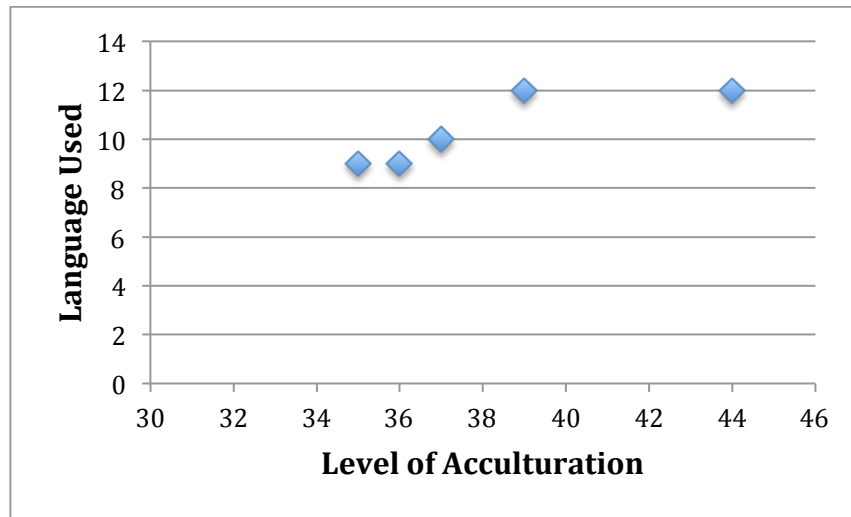


Figure 2. Acculturation level and language used.

Regarding education completion of the participants and their parents, one participant was pursuing her undergraduate degree at a four-year institution, three participants graduated at a bachelor's level, one participant was currently in graduate school, and one participant had completed a graduate degree. Five participants' mothers had less than a junior high education, and one participant was uncertain of her mother's education level. Two participants' fathers had less than a junior high education, one participant's father was a high school graduate, two participants' fathers had completed some college, and one participant was uncertain of her father's education level.

In order to find themes within the research, the researcher utilized the grounded theory method of coding. Five themes emerged including unique expectations for Hmong American women, collective culture, culture clash, motivation and support, and changing view of higher education. The first theme, unique expectations for Hmong American women, details two ideas that Hmong American women are expected to be high achieving and that they need to protect themselves from the outside world. The second theme, collective culture, refers to the emphasis on the community over the individual and also Hmong American women's sense of responsibility to their family. The third theme, culture clash, illustrates the feeling of living in two cultures that participants experienced throughout their experience in the American education system. The fourth theme, motivation and support, refers to the internal and external motivation for participants in pursuing higher education as well as the supports that were beneficial in their pursuit. The final theme, the changing view of higher education, describes how the Hmong American view of higher education has been changing as the years pass since the Hmong first immigrated to the United States and they become more acculturated.

Unique Expectations for Hmong American Women

Higher expectations for daughters. Participants agreed that Hmong American women are pushed further than Hmong American men, especially in regard to taking care of the household. One participant stated, *[M]y sisters, they had to cook and clean, they had to do all these things. They had so many responsibilities*

while my brothers, they could just exist. Another participant described how her parents' expectations of her were different because she was a girl:

[F]or example, when I was choosing colleges, I wanted to, like I said I was really interested in journalism. And my parents were like no, no, be a doctor. And I'm like telling them this vision that I wanted for my future. I wanted to travel, I wanted to write, I wanted to show the world how beautiful different cultures are through my writing and through my art. And my parents were like no, no, you can't do that because you're a daughter...So it's always, like well why was I exposed to education in the first place? Why was I exposed to that, all those different abilities, and skills, and visions and goals, why was I exposed to all that but then when I come home I can't practice it, because I have all these duties at home to attend to.

One participant shared,

A lot of times in general, I feel like no matter what, parents would want all their kids to go to college but then their upbringing for their sons compared to women because they're more lenient towards their sons in terms of like home household tasks or any sort like that.

From what these participants shared, it is apparent that Hmong American parents expect their daughters to fulfill their duties at home, but they do not place the same expectation on their sons.

Hmong American women should avoid exposure to outside world.

Although this was not an idea mentioned by multiple participants, it is significant to note that one woman frequently described this idea of Hmong parents sheltering

their daughters from the outside world. She described how Hmong people believe that girls lose their pureness with too much exposure:

[M]y parents always say to me, as a guy, they can... even though they do lecture their boys the same... they don't [want] them [to have] too much exposure to bad things in the world. They say even though the boys are exposed to that, it's okay because they're boys. They don't lose that um, their dignity or their virtue or pureness. But for a girl, if you were to go out there and you were to lose that pureness, you would, that's it. No one would ever view you as a person that's worthy of marriage or that's worthy of welcoming to their family.

She also shared her mother's experience growing up and what was passed on to her through her mother:

But then my mom, she being one of the older daughters...she did have to play that role as the oldest and being the daughter you know she wasn't able to go to school. Um it was always, she was not encouraged to go to school. She was not allowed to go. And they said that you know girls who go to school are just going to, excuse my language, to whore around. That was what they always told my mom. And she was always...she didn't use that on me. She told me that she was always afraid of me going to school and being too exposed because of what she was taught. That, you know, girls who go to school and do that they just go and whore around. So she would always lecture me not to do that. And if education is truly that important to me to then to just focus on the education and not do other stuff. But you know I always told her I'm not out doing bad stuff. I'm out exposing myself to different opportunities.

This participant scored the second lowest on the acculturation assessment, and her family's view of education may be more traditional than that of the other participants. This may be why she was the only participant to refer to this idea of exposure to the outside world.

Collective Culture

One theme woven throughout the interviews was the idea of Hmong people having a collective culture. A couple of participants referred to the idea of shame and avoiding shame for one's family, which is a component of collective cultures (Yeh & Huang, 1996). Many of the participants also spoke of their responsibility to their family.

Shame. One third of participants identified family shame as an aspect of their experience of higher education in the United States. One participant with an acculturation score of 44 noted shame as a motivation for success. When asked what she drew on when college felt overwhelming, she stated,

I would say, you didn't want to bring shame among your family. And that's a big thing, I think to bring shame among your family. It's like if you don't, if I didn't complete this, if I didn't finish this to the best of my ability, then all of my relatives were going to know about it.

Another participant who did not fully complete the acculturation assessment indicated that she avoided familial shame that she was expected to feel:

...my transition from like the majors more um, it made me happy. Cause I'm like yeah, I'm glad to switch over and so I didn't have a lot of regret, or shame or guilt that my family, my parents wanted me to feel.

She also shared, *[N]obody ever asked me for what my dreams and passions were.*

Some of these participants also mentioned how shame impacts Hmong American mothers' pursuit of higher education. One woman with an acculturation score of 44 noted, *[I]t's just kind of shameful if you're a woman and you're not living with your husband. And so I think that's why [my friend] decided just to live on campus with him but not be enrolled.*

Hmong American mothers pursuing higher education may, however, also avoid the shame that may be expected with childbearing while pursuing higher education. One participant who did not fully complete the acculturation assessment described this as possible with a combination of positive attitude and help from family members:

When um you do have a child and you're trying to go through college, it's super tough. But for my Hmong friend in particular, she had the most positive energy ever. And she had a baby, and she had a lot of support around her actually like her husband and her husband's family. And nobody shamed her for having a baby. Our culture, her culture was like open to that.

When reflecting upon the idea of shame in the Hmong culture, it can be understood as a motivating factor for the pursuit of and success in higher education, so as not to embarrass one's family. However, shame may not be related to having children as an undergraduate student, unlike European Americans. In this example, the young Hmong American woman had the support of her husband and her family.

Childbearing comprises part of the next collective theme of family responsibility.

Family responsibility. Another component of collectivism in the Hmong culture is family responsibility. Participants mentioned two main family responsibilities: (a) paying bills and (b) cooking and cleaning. These responsibilities may pull away Hmong American women from their pursuit of higher education. While people from individualistic cultures may not feel responsible to support family members financially, people from collectivist cultures may be more likely to feel this responsibility. For example, one participant with an acculturation score of 44 shared the story of her father:

[M]y father is disabled and he retired early. And I had to think about things that I would need to do if I was willing to give up like delaying my education, master's program...because I would have to pay for my dad's living expenses too. So these are things that I think prevent Hmong women sometimes from furthering their education or going forward because they have to think about what's best for the family.

Another participant with an acculturation score of 37 described how the responsibility to support the family financially prevented her older sister from pursuing a higher education. She stated,

So I go to school on a full-ride but [my sister] doesn't, you know, so and but not only that but because she was the oldest person and there is no father figure in our family, money is really tight. And so she would be, she split herself between being a sister and being a father—working to provide for the family.

In addition to supporting the family financially, multiple participants mentioned a responsibility to one's family of cooking and cleaning in addition to

paying the bills. One participant, with an acculturation score of 35, who lived at home with her family for the first two years of college described her experience living at home and the Hmong culture's expectations of her:

[I]n our culture, it's been the norm of "Oh you're a female, you shouldn't obtain a higher education. You should just you know be a housewife. Get married, have kids and raise your family." You know, so I feel like most families are always pushing you to go to college, but at the same time they expect you to be their wonderful daughter. Who's always there to you know lend a hand. Who wakes up at 5 in the morning to cook for your family and stuff like that. It's like living in two completely different worlds in one. So, it's just complicating. It's complicating honestly. I've had days where I come home and I'm like I have to do homework, I need to study. And my parents are nagging at me like you need to come cook, you need to do this, you need to clean. Why aren't you doing this? You're lazy, da,da,da,da. And you're just kind of like "I have a billion other things to do with school and you're stressing me out with this too" ...It's just like well you want me to go to college, well then why are you telling me to do this if I have this to do with school?

Another participant with an acculturation score of 36 shared how her family would not allow her to participate in extracurricular activities because she needed to be home cooking and cleaning:

Cause you know my parents always say to me, that they know I'm a good person and that I wouldn't and that I'm not, I wouldn't be out there in gangs or doing drugs or doing some other bad stuff. But they were still like no you're

grounded, you need to come home right after school. You need to do your homework, but there's things at home that you need to do. Cook and clean and take care of your younger siblings. So it was always a struggle between well I want to stay after school and do all this other stuff and then having to explain to them that it's not, those extracurricular activities aren't bad things. And if I was to do those after-school activities, they had to tie in with my academics. And so, if they didn't think that it was really related to academics then I wasn't allowed to do it. Like I was in garden club cause I loved gardening at that time. They didn't think that was related to schoolwork and so they didn't want me to be in garden club. And so that was a struggle to explain to them you know how that was going to apply to my studies. And you know, I didn't see it as a thing to tie to my studies but it was something that, a hobby that, something that I wanted to connect with other students who like gardening too. And even though we were making all these, building all these vegetable gardens, all these beautiful gardens around school, around the neighborhood, and helping younger kids at a nearby elementary school build gardens too, our parents didn't see that as a good thing.

Her parents did not understand the need for non-academic activities and were fearful of exposure to the outside world. This may reinforce the idea of a woman's responsibility to her family. Another participant with an acculturation score of 37 described this sense of family responsibility as not only relating to their birth family, but also to their in-laws and being a good daughter-in-law as the ultimate goal:

[S]omething that Hmong women go through is this expectation that you not only have to be successful in school and be someone who has a good reputation, but that you are trained to be a daughter-in-law. So you have to learn how to cook and clean for the family that you're going to be marrying into; you have to be able to provide for them. And to nurture them but also provide for them financially. So it's this pressure that you have to be the perfect daughter-in-law because if you're not, nothing else matters in your life. Because ultimately that is your goal.

Often when a Hmong woman marries a Hmong man, the couple moves in to live with the husband's family. One participant with an acculturation score of 39 shared that when growing up at home, her parents' expectations were different than that of her friends:

[M]y parents were very supportive, and so I never had to help in the home at all. I never cook, I never clean, my mom and dad did all of that...a lot of girls I know, they did struggle. Because when they came back, they would go to school during the day, come back at night, and they would still be expected to cook and to clean and to do all the roles that they were supposed to fulfill.

This same participant explained that the daughter-in-law's role in the home is dependent on the husband's family and their expectations:

I think it really depends on your husband and your husband's family. Cause it just depends, it's case by case, because I know my brother and my sister-in-law got married two years ago. And she's still in college and um they got married and my parents they really value education, so they told my sister-in-law, you

don't have to cook, you don't have to clean, you don't have to help out, just focus on your education and focus on your future. And so my sister-in-law, she had the opportunity to go to school. And then when they had their daughter, my mom said, we'll take care of her, we'll help you so that you don't have to pay for childcare or whatever. Just focus on school and you know we will take care of everything so you don't have to worry about it. My parents are very supportive of my sister-in-law...But my in-laws are not supportive of me because they want me to work. And because they want me to start helping out with bills. And they expect me to cook and clean every day. And then they expect me to give them money as well on top of paying for bills. And then I know, cause right now I'm pregnant, and I know for sure that they're not going to help me with childcare. And then so, if my parents can't help me then I will probably have to find a daycare and have to pay for that. And so, it depends on what family that you marry into.

Not all Hmong American families are similar in their adherence to traditional female roles. Another participant who did not fully complete the acculturation assessment described her thoughts about family responsibilities in the Hmong culture:

[W]hat I came to realize [in 2012] was...a lot of the Hmong people around me were still like traditional. Like stuck within their ideas of the gender roles and the gender binary we were raised up to believe. Which is men are the best and women, they're just there to cook and clean and stay in the kitchen really. Which isn't, Americans used to think that too.

Every participant mentioned either bills or cooking and cleaning as a responsibility or expectation of the Hmong culture for women. Eighty-three percent of participants mentioned cooking and cleaning and 33% of participants mentioned bill paying. Participants also mentioned various other family responsibilities including childbearing, childcare, taking care of one's husband, supporting siblings with homework, and providing emotional support for one's parents. These responsibilities were less common, and none were mentioned by more than one participant. One can conclude that the collectivist Hmong culture affects the Hmong American education experience, and the dynamic nature of culture interplays with expectations in a new homeland.

Culture Clash

Participants described various barriers to their education, but a central theme within these was the idea of culture clash. Participants described how their peers had a wealthier upbringing, how their home life and school life collided, how institutional practices affected their education, how their parents were unable to help, and experiences of cultural racism. One participant who did not fully complete the acculturation assessment described the importance of preparing for the culture clash at college when she stated:

College Possible always talked about, "Oh you're gonna get into this culture clash when you get into college. Oh, you're gonna deal with some things." But they never dug deep into it. You know, what am I going to get into? And so, I was suffering and I had no idea I was suffering, you know.

Peers have a wealthier upbringing. Thirty-three percent of participants described experiences when they felt different from their peers who were raised in higher-income families. One participant who did not fully complete the acculturation assessment stated,

But for me I felt like wow, they speak like this at home with their parents you know, and this is normal to them and I was blown away once again with the whole, like when I found out in my first year [accelerated science] course, that a lot of those students, their parents were doctors.

She also shared,

[A] lot of the students in my classroom, they had parents who were doctors and physicians. And I was like, "Whoa!" this blew my mind because I felt like I am so far behind and like my classmates are so far ahead of me, and I just felt so pressured to catch up to them and like oh my god how am I going to catch up to them? And so I didn't know this but it was destroying my thinking and my pursuit of knowledge. Cause after class, I would try to open my textbook and read, but then I didn't know my mind was so caught up in "Oh what's the point of learning now?" You know, "I'm already so far behind, I'll never catch up." And so, I just like closed the book after reading a page or two and then I would just like give up.

She also described her experience of not fitting in with her wealthy peers,

And just the clothing items, like North Face, Ugg boots that are \$300 each. I would just look down as I walked to another building for my classes and during winter I'd see all these Ugg boots and I'm like what is this? I looked it up, and

I'm like oh my god, this is like \$400 a pair!? Like that could feed my family for a whole month. You know like that's insane, and then I found other like designer boots for \$1,000 and stuff...Because you could unpack the clothing items people wore there. The North Face you know, the, what people wear you know not to stereotype, but to stereotype. The tight black legging with the Ugg boots and I was just like wow, this has so much to do, like if you were to unpack it, it was just like capitalism and so many things going on there and just privilege. Um, so, like, education it's not, it wasn't just about education it was like this culture clash.

Another participant with an acculturation score of 44 described how she felt a clash with her peers at a private high school:

Because a lot of them are the middle- to like upper-class families. I remember my senior year, saying like your words, sometimes your words do hurt, like things that you guys say. Everyone's not privileged like you guys are, and you take things for granted. And so being in that like closed environment and being...one of three Hmong students at that school. I was the only female student there. And...when I graduated, I think I was the only Hmong person in that entire high school. So it's, I mean it's difficult to try to come back with the students and yeah, because a lot of times they didn't understand like why I couldn't hang out, why I couldn't do things with them. It's cause like well I go to school and then I work all weekend and then I'm back at school. Because [it's] a private school and at that time it cost \$14,000 to go each year. I was fortunate enough to get a scholarship where I didn't have to pay much. I paid

like a fraction of the cost. But um, my parents helped me for the first year, but then every year after that I paid for the tuition that I was responsible for and all the books because...So in that sense it was difficult cause they didn't understand the struggle that I had to go to, where they're handed this and their school's all paid for by their parents, they don't have to worry about things.

Both of these students described a sense of not fitting in with their non-Hmong peers.

Home life collides with school life. Half of the participants expressed that their life at home was very different from the outside world. One participant with an acculturation score of 36 described it this way: *[B]alancing that culture act at school and then having to come home and then sometimes that culture at home, it contradicts each other.* Another participant with an acculturation score of 44 described her experience of the Hmong community and the non-Hmong community in general: *I don't feel connected to any community. There's um, I don't know. You've probably heard like the struggle between two worlds, culture clashes, like...I just never felt like I was part of either.* A third participant who did not fully complete the acculturation assessment shared a story that illustrates this culture clash:

[M]y brother, he drove to [my college] 45 minutes over there to pick me up and then I was in the car ride home with him for 45 minutes. And then I was talking to him about a lot of things like political science stuff and um I was like, "Wow yeah, so basically we all have this, you know like we're Asian, we're Hmong, but we carry an American bias. I mean look at the way we think about the Arab world and how they're all terrorists"...And then he was just so disturbed like "I

can't even like listen to you right now cause I need to have like a dictionary with me or something. Cause you're using all these big words that I don't know" and like he was so offended by me. And...I was like, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean that but you don't understand that I've actually just, it's been ten times harder for me at this college cause I've had to submerge myself in this purely academic world where it's like everyone speaks fancy, and your professor speaks fancier you know." So he was like "Oh, okay." So after a year or two he was like "Oh, I'm sorry like, I didn't know you were going through a lot too." So, we've made peace.

One can posit that the experiences these participants voiced of the non-Hmong culture at school compared to their home culture created tension within themselves of straddling two worlds. Participants sometimes felt a lack of belonging to any group.

Institution experience. Half of the participants discussed how institutions impacted their education. One participant who did not fully complete the acculturation assessment remembered her experience learning about culture clash in College Possible,

[I]t was the culture clash College Possible was trying to prepare me for but nobody had the words or the, they didn't know it was going to impact us this hard. But if I were to create my own College Possible program it would be to definitely talk about these things too.

Another participant with an acculturation score of 44 shared how the lack of daycare at a rural college for her Hmong friend who was a mother pursuing higher

education, *There [wasn't] a support system. There's no daycare services like at the actual school.* A third participant with an acculturation score of 35 shared how her college and professor could have supported her differently:

[M]y professor, if she'd seen that she could've emailed me or you know, pulled me aside to talk to me and see what we could've done. But at the same time, it's me as well because, if I knew I wasn't doing too well, I should've seek help or tutoring...I'm very talkative, very outgoing but when it comes to seeking help it's just kind of like, I don't know if I want to.

The participant who did not fully complete the acculturation assessment also described how the curriculum at her college was biased:

And I think education it has a lot of that White privilege American bias...your text and books and stuff are written by White people, and it's from this White history...cause some are requirements like we needed a general requirement in history, but it had subtle phrases of it must be American, like White history kind of stuff you know. So that was interesting to see too.

All three of the participants who mentioned their experience with institutions shared how it could have been different, how the education system could have better supported Hmong people to succeed academically. The education system failed the participants in this study by not preparing them for the culture clash at college, not providing daycare, not reaching out to students who are struggling academically, and using curriculum that tells history from a White perspective.

Parents unable to help. One hundred percent of participants shared that their parents were not able to provide support in school. One participant who did

not fully complete the acculturation assessment described it this way, *[I]t's really hard for [Hmong people] cause...our parents don't know anything, we come home with calculus homework, nobody's there to help us. You know what I mean?* Another participant with an acculturation score of 36 shared that her parents did not fully understand the education system in the United States:

But what our parents know from the education system in Laos and Thailand is just that you go to school and what you learn from the classroom and that's it. And so, getting that from your parents and then having to go at school and it's different. And I've seen like for me, for example, I've got that from my dad. So the early part of my education was just going to school, don't have a lot of friends, don't really, no relationship with people. But as I got older, it's like I'm lacking something. I may be getting A's in class, but then that's not really helping me outside of school or helping me getting internships.

A third participant with an acculturation score of 44 explained,

[M]y parents didn't really speak great English. They didn't really know what financial forms to fill out and so...it was difficult for me because I didn't have the resources that other American students had where their parents would be able to fill out the FAFSA form with them or help them with their college application or the whole college process...after I accepted going to [my college]...they kept sending me this form back. And they said, "You need to have your parents sign them." And I was like "Well they signed off on it." And then finally she was like, "A notary, we have to send someone to stamp the actual

thing.” And I didn’t know what that was because I had never, my parents never used notary before.

Another participant with an acculturation score of 35 shared how not having family members with a formal education contributed to her poor academics. She thought to herself:

[O]h my gosh, none of my siblings went to college and no one can help me...the first semester in college I just struggled. Well the first year in college, I actually flunked two courses...I just wasted a lot of money for two classes that I just failed. I was like “What am I gonna do now?” I spent a lot of money and I was on academic probation and they were like, “You need to get your grades up, if you’re not, you’re gonna get kicked out of school”...In high school, I was an A and B student and all of a sudden I’m getting F’s and I’m like this is not possible you know? Like how is this happening?

Another participant with an acculturation score of 39 shared her experience of being a FGCS:

[M]y parents never went to college. And so, a lot of my cousins and relatives didn’t go either. And so, I was kind of like one of the first ones to go, and I didn’t know anything...I was the guinea pig. So then [my siblings] all applied so much easier because I knew how to apply, and so I walked them through the process. But I think that’s one thing, if you come from a family that’s never gone to college before then, that’s the biggest challenge. And finding scholarships and grants and just learning different programs.

Finally, one participant with an acculturation score of 37 shared that lack of parental knowledge is common for all FGCS, but the experience as a refugee is even more challenging:

I think [minority students] experience unique educational challenges because their parents have no knowledge, like Hmong parents have no knowledge on what the American system is, especially if they are refugees or immigrants and did not grow up in this society...So for first-generation Hmong students I feel like we experience challenges in educational system because there's no one there to help us if we need it. No one to help us with homework, we don't have very many resources.

When describing an extensive scholarship application that she completed, she shared,

[N]ot having any like help from my family, because no one really knew what to do was also really challenging...applying for this scholarship, that was so tedious, it was like eight essays, and a 13-tab application. So it was just really hard, I think I broke down like three or four times within the three weeks that I was trying to get it done.

One can infer that a lack of formal parental education can be a barrier to academic success for Hmong American FGCS. Hmong American parents with a lack of formal education may not see the value in building relationships outside the classroom. They also may not be able to help with homework or assist with scholarship applications.

Cultural racism. One third of participants shared experiences of racism that they encountered in the American education system. One participant who did not fully complete the acculturation assessment illustrated her experiences of cultural racism:

I was failing Genetics. Not because I wasn't smart. It was never because I was...incapable of learning that stuff. It was just uh, I dealt with a lot of racism in my classrooms. Actually, umm, but it was like a subtle hidden form of racism. It wasn't in your face. They weren't calling me chink. They weren't calling me Asian or anything. But it was a lot of subtle things like my swimming class I had. My coach, he would, so all the swimmers we'd all sit at the edge of the swimming pool and then he'll take attendance, and I remember us being at the end. And he went through a lot of the students, he's like okay, "Jessica, Clark, Mark, Jennifer" you know? And they were all like "Here, "Here," "Here," "Here," right? And then when it got to me, he didn't say anything and I was...just sitting there waiting. And I said, "Hey Coach...did you get my name?" And then as all the swimmers stepped into the pool he walked towards and he kneeled down, and he's like, "Why yes I did, you're the only oriental one in here." And I was like, "Oh okay then," with a big smile. I was just like, "Oh okay." I was really oblivious to that stuff. But later those little instances they piled on top of me for those first two years of college. And there was another one where in my Genetics lab I sat at a table with three other women. And they were White women and they were very nice, humorous, like good personalities. But there were so many instances like this where they were like, "Oh where are you going

for spring break?"...And one of them was like, "Oh, I'm gonna go up to the woods and the cabin, like my mother owns one." And then another one was like, "Well my family's taking a trip to Bahamas this year."...And they're all excited and talking to each other and I was looking at the lab manual but then I put it aside, and I leaned in, smiled at them and like, there was no eye contact towards me. And, I was like "Oh what's going on?" Um, like no one's looking at me, and this is so weird. And after they were all like, "Oh yeah, spring break I can't wait." Then they kinda, there was a silent pause like dead silent and they kind of were staring and looked over at me and they were like "What are you doing for spring break?" And I was like, "Well, um I'm gonna go home and babysit" you know so, it was really it was the key moment, like when I felt like that was a big racist thing. Cause they were basically othering me. And at the end they were like oh, don't forget to ask the Asian girl next to us, you know...just ask her.

Another participant with an acculturation score of 44 shared how *sometimes it felt like [she] was always on display or [she] had to explain [her] culture or explain things all the time.* She also shared an experience of cultural racism:

I mean I thought it was funny...I was passing around candy canes for like during Christmas, and someone turned to me and said, "You celebrate Christmas?" I was like are you kidding me, I was like, "Yes, I am a Christian, I celebrate Christmas" and even if I was not a Christian, I'm an American, I also celebrate Christmas.

One participant who did not fully complete the acculturation assessment also shared her experience of being placed in English as a Second Language (ESL) even when she knew English well,

[W]hen I was younger, I always thought it was really strange that I was put into ESL right away because like I spoke English pretty fluently and I didn't have any problems really but, and then when they put me in ESL it was really easy for me cause I was learning like cat, hat, dog when I was like in seventh grade and I was like are you serious?

It can be noted that Hmong American FGCS face implicit and explicit cultural racism. It is both individual, leading to exclusion from larger group acknowledgment (i.e. the participant's coach), and systemic, leading to exclusion from mainstream opportunities (i.e. being placed in ESL).

Motivation and Support

All participants described their pursuit of higher education as motivated internally and externally. Participants also often mentioned outside supports that encouraged their success.

External motivation. External motivational factors stemmed from participants' parents as well as the greater Hmong community. Externally motivated factors include the promise of gaining success, prestige, degrees in law or medicine, and a better life.

Half of the participants interviewed described education as a means to success. One participant stated, *I would just have to say from my parents' family, my dad's clan, or just my parents in general, they would highly encourage higher*

education. Because they think that, that is the key to open the door to success.

Another participant stated, *Parents who push for higher education "see it as the key to you know more opportunities."* A third participant indicated that education is *something that [Hmong parents have] learned to understand you need in order to be successful here in America.* It can be noted that many Hmong students may be motivated to pursue higher education due to the success it is expected to bring.

Fifty percent of participants described a second external factor of desire for prestige. One participant said, *I wanted my parents to be proud of me, for them to know that I accomplished something. And I don't know, just to make my community proud of me.* Another participant also described this desire for prestige and indicated why she persisted in her education: *Me personally, I did it for my parents. Just so that they're like "yeah, my daughter did this, I'm really proud of her", just so that they can have bragging rights.* A final participant described this prestige as a status within the Hmong community:

[W]ith all the friends that I've encountered and talked to, their parents have pushed them to continue with school even if it's not their thing, because having a degree and being educated is a means to have status in the community. So it's important for Hmong people to build a reputation for themselves and for other people in the community to understand that about them too.

Although not specifically named as such, 33% of participants described how a folk theory of becoming a doctor and having a large salary contributes to motivation for higher education. This reflects the research on folk theories. The Hmong community urges Hmong people to pursue higher education in order to

become a doctor or a lawyer and save one's family from poverty. One participant described this,

I'm like wow all this work I've paid off like all the hard work I did it's paying off now cause I can finish sooner and like I could get my doctor degree now. And I could save my family from poverty and help them cause they've sacrificed so much for me. Like my brothers that canceled their college careers...to work to build the house and stuff so I don't see them as just like mere, like oh they don't want to study too hard but it was also like oh, they couldn't, you know.

A second participant's narrative also supports this idea: *But, there's that "Oh I want you to be a doctor or a lawyer." And we all know the majority of us are not doctors or lawyers.* Both participants acknowledged a folk theory of becoming a doctor, but the second participant's statement shows that the Hmong American view may be changing; not everyone will become a doctor or lawyer.

Thirty-three percent of participants described a final external motivational factor of a desire for a better life. One participant described this yearn for a better life: *Everyone's like on survival mode and so they want their kids to...pursue higher education...to have a better job, career, to not only help themselves but help the family and then the community as a whole.* She also described this external idea of avoiding suffering:

How I should always do better so I wouldn't suffer. Hmong people talk about suffering a lot. Sometimes it's kind of like really annoying, but then you see. They just don't want you to suffer like they did. And they want you to have the things that they didn't have and um so they always ingrained that into me and

always told me that you needed to get an education in order to live the better life. And I guess that might've been something that would kind of also helped me move forward. Knowing that if I, although it might be difficult at this time I can do it and there will be better opportunities for me in the end if I complete it.

Another participant noted that Hmong parents *don't want their children to suffer financially as they have, and they see education as a way for their children to have a better life.* She also remembered, *I wanted a better life than my parents.* This idea of a better life is an external factor, but for the second participant it was also an internal factor for pursuing higher education.

Internal motivation. Participants interviewed had many internal motivational factors that contributed to their pursuit of higher education. Internal motivational factors included: sacrifice of others, paving the path, proving others wrong, and motivational self-talk.

Sacrifice of others. Fifty percent of participants described the sacrifice that others had made for them that enabled them to pursue a college degree as a motivating factor. One participant stated, *And just watching [my parents] and how hard they have to work in order to provide. That was my motivation to go to school.* Another participant explained how her parents sacrificed for her, and she wanted to prove that the sacrifice was worth it:

I had this pressure where like now that you've started this you better finish. So it's like, you, you fought us through all this stuff and now you moved away from home and you're trying to pursue this, you better make it worth it. [Pressure]

from my parents, and from my aunts and uncles, cousins, you know extended family.

Finally, a participant similarly described how her parents sacrificed for her:

I'm the youngest of eight and like everyone had already been sacrificing their years, their youth to work in um you know get us a house and so here I was just you know um hoping to fulfill their dreams that they wanted you know.

She also said,

[M]y parents found out I didn't want to be a doctor anymore...and they were really upset because they felt that was one of the greatest disrespect done unto them and it was almost like a violence done unto them because they sacrificed their whole lives along with my siblings to get me to where I am today, in a way. So I was really careless at first but then I understood it as at the same time I was like "Wow, that's pretty deep you know, like I'm sorry I hurt you this way but honestly I've been dehumanized this whole time to be your moneymaker."

She illustrated an internal motivation of wanting to fulfill the dreams of her older family members who had sacrificed in order for her to obtain a higher education, but she also articulated a western philosophy of individualism and self-actualization.

Paving the path and passing along wisdom. In addition to the sacrifice of others, 67% of participants described this idea of passing along wisdom to others and paving the path for them to also pursue higher education as a motivational

factor for themselves. One participant helped others by joining a formal organization,

[After] college I actually joined a year of service at College Possible and so I was able to talk to...students of color about all these issues and what they should do about it and um, yeah, about this question, like “what do I do on campus, my community or like to help myself.” Because no matter what, it’s gonna be hard.

Another participant wanted to pave the path for her younger siblings to obtain a higher education,

I have ten younger siblings and to show them that it’s okay. That they can pursue an education. It may be hard, especially with parents with that kind of mindset but that you know I can do it and to pave that pathway and to make it easier for them.

She also wanted to share with her siblings the importance of building strong relationships with professors,

I always tell my younger siblings and I always tell people this—that I had a math class that I wouldn’t have passed it if I didn’t have a good relationship with my professor, where they understood what my struggles were and um why I couldn’t get a certain grade.

A third participant wanted other Hmong students at her college to learn from her mistakes,

[W]hen I was in college I was very connected to the Hmong students, the organization that were around Hmong students or Asian students. And I loved it, it was fun meeting different girls and you talking to them giving them you

know your perspective and giving them like advice. Like, don't do this, because I did it.

The final participant who shared this idea of passing along wisdom or paving the way shared how the things she learned from studying abroad can be passed on to her younger family members,

I have to sort of pave the path. It's this sense of like self-obligation. Yeah, it's this obligation to be able to do that for my family so that they don't have to experience the same challenges that I have to go through now. So for example, I just went to study abroad, and I had no idea what I was doing and there was no one I could really talk to because no one in my family had ever done that before. But now I hope that because I have gone to study abroad, I can apply those experiences or help with the process if anyone in my family who's younger than me wants to pursue it when they get to where I am now. And knowing that if I could learn something and ... the wisdom for them, that's what really matters. So they're honestly my prime motivation to keep up with school.

It can be seen that this idea of paving the path and sharing wisdom with others can inspire Hmong American women to persist in their education.

Proving others wrong. A third internal motivational factor is that of proving others wrong. Half of the participants who indicated that they were motivated to pursue higher education noted this motivation. One person wanted to demonstrate that women can succeed:

It was that, you know, that girls aren't allowed to do this, girls aren't allowed, girls can't do that. But I can, right? I'm not the oldest in my family, but I'm the

first to go to college, the first one to get a college education, right? And it's like well I can do it, and I'm gonna show you that I can do it. And I'm gonna show you that it's okay.

Another participant wanted to show that she was different than her older sisters who ran away from home:

[T]his is really sad to say, but I think what really motivated me to keep going was all the people who doubted me. So, I've had relatives who were just like oh you know "You're just gonna run away from home," or "You're gonna just go and get married or have kids." You know like they're just really negative about it. So I used that...negativity to turn it into positive energy and say you know, I'm gonna keep pushing just so that I can rub it in your face that I'm done, and I'm not the person that you thought I would be...And it was just like, I'm not gonna do what [my sisters] did. I'm not gonna get married, I'm not gonna have kids. I need to finish college first.

The final participant who described this motivational factor of proving others wrong noted that her mother is from a region of Laos that is stereotyped as lazy and her motivation to succeed was in proving her extended family members wrong who held this stereotype about her:

[S]o, one time my aunts they asked my mom, they said, "Well [participant] is done with high school so what is she going to do afterwards?" And my mom said I was going to college. And then so they're like, "Are you sure she's going to college or is she just gonna go and be a slut and get pregnant and whatever and not finish?" And so my mom was really upset, and she came home and she

*cried and she said, "Remember what they said. So go and when you go, finish."
And so that was one motivation as well.*

It can be concluded that proving others wrong (whether "others" is people who doubt women or people who expect you to live up to their negative expectations of you) is a motivational factor for Hmong American women in pursuing higher education.

Motivational self-talk. One interesting concept to note is that within this internal motivation, 67% of the participants shared messages they told themselves that motivated them to succeed. One participant told herself,

I'm gonna get done with high school and I'm gonna go to college. Like just let me go to college, you know?...I always have to live in the future in a way...And I see this pattern recurring again in college. When I had to think larger than life, that's what really help me.

Her self-talk was future-oriented. Another participant thought,

[E]ducation is my number one thing, and wherever education leads me, I'm gonna let it lead me there. Even if it takes me away from being a daughter or a good daughter-in-law or a good Hmong girl... I'm not doing a bad thing and one day [my dad will] see that it's not a bad thing... I can be obedient and I can tend to those responsibilities at the same time as pursuing my education. At the same time as going out there and building a career for myself... It's like yes, I'm just as capable. And that again, you know my role isn't to just be at home to cook and clean... maybe I can't do it, maybe they were right you know, that maybe girls can't do it. But then another voice in my head was saying, "No,

because of that you have to do it. Because of that you have to make it.” And you can do it, don’t use that as an excuse or reason to not do it. That again, you are just as capable as anybody.

She expressed a strong faith in education. A third participant’s mindset was:

I can’t just stop in the middle and be just like, okay, I’m not doing this anymore. And it’s just, my motto in college was kind of you know, when you start something don’t stop...I had sticky notes all over with that [motto], like it was in my planner. Yeah, it was a little crazy but you know it helped a lot.

Her motivation was to not be a quitter. Finally, one participant described a lens through which she saw the world,

I think my lens of gratitude comes from like my belief that everything that happens for a reason. And I can either allow it, it comes from a sense of like choice. I can either allow it to make me or break me. And I’ve chosen to help it make me, help me build my character.

She believes in a positive form of fate. In addition to these messages, two of the participants mentioned the idea that women have value and the importance of challenging the dominant culture. One participant’s mindset challenged the dominant culture’s belief that women and men have different responsibilities. She stated,

[A]ll of the struggles and challenges it ties together from that mindset that this is a girl’s responsibility and this is a guy’s responsibility. And so I think that’s what um at least for me, that’s what keeps the girl going and motivated to get

an education. And that that education and a career is something that helps them out of that role of that oppressive role that they have to challenge.

The other participant described this idea as women having value: *It's this sense that Hmong women matter, and I think that's why I'm drawn to it. Because I think that I also matter.* Inner strength and messages to self can strongly encourage academic success for Hmong American women pursuing higher education.

Supports for success. The participants of this research referred to three main supports for their success in education. These supports include family support, social support, and support from staff and faculty at high school and college.

Half of participants depicted family as a sense of support for Hmong American women in higher education. One woman described the experience of her friend who attended college with her husband away from extended family. The participant believed that her friend would have been able to continue her education at the same time as her husband had she lived closer to her extended family because she would have received their support:

I think maybe if she was living in the Cities with her family and support and with her husband and they were both going to school in the Cities then it probably might have panned out, where she would've been able to work it out. I mean she eventually did go back to school, but that was, she put it off until he was finished with school at [his college]. And then she decided to go back and finish her degree...

Another participant described the support she received from her parents in her education, *[M]y parents really valued education and so they really encouraged me and then so I never really had to fight my way to go to school.* The third participant who mentioned family support talked about the support from her mother:

But yeah, some of the people who have been very supportive of my education: my mom for sure. I come from seven children; it's just my mom. No father in the house. Or like multiple fathers that like come in and out of our lives. So not a stable father figure. And so my mom is very supportive for sure.

It would be accurate to say that the support from parents and extended family enables Hmong American women to achieve a higher education.

A second support of Hmong American women's pursuit of higher education is social. Thirty-three percent of participants mentioned this type of support. When asked what she drew on to keep going, one participant stated, *definitely my group of friends who were socially conscious.* Another student referred to the other Hmong women at her college as a support: *the support system that we have from other Hmong-American females...I think we were a support system for each other cause we understood...culturally like the difficulties that we all endured together.*

A final and significant support mentioned by participants is from staff and faculty at high school and college. One participant described a time when she wanted to give up on one of her classes but her *professor was like, "No, let's work something out."* She also spoke of a professor who supported her and *was a first-generation student too, way back in the day.* In addition to support as a FGCS, this

participant also described support from professors when facing racism at school.

One of her professors was “more informal.” She described going to his office:

He’s like, when we start talking about racism, he’s like “Okay, hold on” and then he closes his door and then...he’s like messing with you. And then he’s like “Yeah, do you not see this racist shit that’s going on right now? Look at this new newspaper article... look at this other college, they’re having a black face party,” and I’m like “Wow, dang.”

She also said that students of color are more likely to seek out professors to discuss *issues they’re having on campus than like the next steps in life.* Additionally, it is important to identify which professors are willing to be informal and provide support to students facing issues on campus: *Yeah, and the professors thing was a pretty tricky thing because I had to figure out which ones wanted to keep it professional, which ones I could talk about these issues with.* Similarly, another student indicated that she felt especially supported by Asian staff:

[A] lot of my advisors were supportive as well...one of the advisors was also a Hmong female as well. And so she had gone through a lot of it and so she was very supportive. And I know my other one was a Chinese-American and she was very supportive as well.

Two participants also discussed how it was helpful to have teachers who supported them academically. One participant stated, *And [my professors] understood what I was lacking in my academic skills and they were able to help me find those parts. And that wouldn’t have happened if I didn’t have a good relationship with them.* Another participant stated,

I was fortunate to have like a great English teacher who would work with me on my English. She gave me an opportunity to study and then retake the test. I'm glad that she saw that, that she saw that I was having difficulty and she was willing to work with me on it.

In addition to support from individual staff members, one participant also mentioned the significance of support from programs in which she participated: a youth program during high school and College Possible.

Changing View of Higher Education

Five of the six participants shared how the Hmong American view of higher education is changing. Participants outlined multiple modes of change including an increased understanding of the need for networking, greater acceptance for other paths to success, stronger encouragement for women to pursue education, and waiting for childbearing.

Need for networking. Half of the participants described how the Hmong American community is beginning to see the importance of networking in addition to education. One participant describes this growing understanding for Hmong American parents:

And [Hmong American parents] see that...it takes a lot more than just having a college degree to obtain a job. There's networking, there's so many other complex ways that needs to go about it. Even the Hmong men...who have obtained their college degrees, they've kind of seen, they kind of question, "Wow, how come I have my college degree now, why aren't like companies and

places just calling me up?" you know, and so they're kind of, I think that's...a cultural common sense that we don't know about yet.

Another participant shared how networking helped her and how she tries to teach her parents the importance of networking:

[N]etworking is such a big thing. If I'm not allowed to network with people... like I found [my current] job through networking. And do this job through networking and the relationships I'm building with people here, it's led me to different opportunities. So, if I was just to be cookie cutter, go to work, don't talk to people, don't build relationships with people. I wouldn't be good at what I'm doing.

Different from the other two participants, one person shared how people struggle with networking:

I think [networking is] a challenge for a lot of people too. But I just feel like maybe it's the person themselves I mean if you're not really talkative or you don't feel comfortable networking. Or you don't know what to say to professional networking people, then you kind of just put yourself, shy yourself away from meeting, connecting with people and then getting those opportunities. I almost think that happens to a lot of people.

It can be inferred that Hmong Americans are becoming increasingly aware of the need for networking, in addition to higher education, in order to be successful in the American world of work.

Other paths. One third of participants described how the Hmong American community is beginning to accept that higher education may not be the only path to success. One participant shared,

[F]rom the beginning when Hmong people first came here and they were fed this idea that oh if you just work hard at education then you'll have a good job. But, as they see a lot of their sons and daughters obtain their degree but not get a job right after and like 2 or 3 years after and not have like a big paying job like 60 grand a year, 70, 80. Um, then parents are starting to question whether education is the key to success.

Another participant described how she educates elders that there is more than one path:

[I]t all comes down to communication and educating our elders and my parents that it's okay that I'm going on this path. It's not education or... it's not cookie cutter for everyone. That you may have grown up with that view or that path. But it's different, you know we're in a different country. We're different and if I was to take that cookie cutter path that you set for me because your parents set it for you and that country that you were in, set for you. It doesn't work like that here.

One participant described a split view of education:

I think it's a split because I've talked to a number of folks who really push for higher education. I mean I've talked to about the same number of folks who've said maybe education isn't all that, in that it's not the route for everybody. But the ones who do view educational attainment as a good thing, they're really for

it. They see it as the key to you know more opportunities. They encourage their own kids and other student, other kids that they see. They really encourage them too. And then the other half, is not necessarily like "Oh don't go, it's a bad thing" but it's a, it's not for everybody. There's other paths in life that you can take.

One can conclude that some Hmong American families are starting to accept that success can be realized through means other than solely higher education.

Women also encouraged. Thirty-three percent of participants shared that earlier generations of Hmong Americans encouraged only men to go to college. One participant stated, *I think [the Hmong American community's view of education] has changed a lot, especially towards girls. That you know, it's a good thing for everybody and not just for boys.* Another participant shared this view and stated,

I know when [Hmong people] first arrived here in the US, they encouraged the men to go to college, but then the women were not encouraged as much. Until a lot of them only had high school diplomas as the highest. But then now it's really changed, and they encourage people, guys and girls, to go to college.

It seems that the Hmong American culture is urging women to pursue education more so than in the past.

Wait for marriage and childbearing. Half of the participants shared how many Hmong women are now waiting until they complete their education before getting married and bearing children. One participant described this shift:

[T]raditionally Hmong women were married at a pretty young age for teenagers. You know, by the time you're 18, if you're not married you're

considered an old maid...we've changed with the times so they don't really encourage that among Hmong men or women to get married at a younger age and have pursued them to get an education or work on vocational training and such.

Another participant shared this understanding of shifting views within the Hmong American culture: *I know if the parents are more modernized or Americanized, they encourage their kids to not get married early so they can go to school and finish.* A final participant shared her decision supporting this shift, *I definitely didn't want to get pregnant, like I didn't date until my last year.* Even if women do get married and bear children in college, one participant described that Hmong American women are better able to balance both. She stated,

[S]ometimes marriage and childbearing does prevent Hmong women from attending school and pursuing their education. But I see like nowadays, it's not, Hmong women say they can do it all, and they do. You know I feel like the marriages now are a little bit, the Hmong men are a little bit more supportive.

One can deduce that many Hmong American women are now waiting until after college to marry and bear children. However, if they do choose to balance marriage and childbearing with college, there is more support within the Hmong community for their academic success than previously.

Discussion

Interpretation of Findings

This qualitative study explored the perspectives of female Hmong American first-generation students on how gender impacted their college experience. Each of

the themes discovered in the present study were supported, at least partially, by previous research. However, this study demonstrated that perspectives may be changing and that this may be resulting in contradictory influences and messages.

Unique expectations for Hmong American women. One of the sub-themes of this section was that Hmong American women are held to a higher standard than Hmong American men by their parents. The findings demonstrated high expectations of Hmong American women in the household, but also in higher education. In fact, this study's findings supports Xiong's (2013) study that found that Hmong American women are more likely to attend college than Hmong American men. This is an interesting juxtaposition that respondents felt the pull to excel in both the more private sphere of the home, as well as the more public sphere of college. To further complicate this interface, the results of the present study were also consistent with Lee's (2001) explanation that in-laws determine whether their daughter-in-law will pursue higher education after a Hmong girl marries into the family. Therefore, even if a young woman was raised in a family that encouraged higher education, she may marry into one that does not. Hmong American women receive a variety of messages and it is difficult to navigate them.

Collective culture. A portion of the findings related to collectivism was the idea that Hmong American women have a responsibility to their family to fulfill roles such as cleaning, cooking, and paying bills. This is consistent with feminist social work theory—Dominelli (2002) connected the role of caregiving to women's ability to work. Women's role of cook, cleaner, and bill payer can similarly have an impact on their success in higher education.

Culture clash. All sub-themes of the culture clash theme were supported by previous research. Participants in the current study shared experiences of feeling like outsiders in the classroom—one student shared about an experience of her swim coach failing to call her name when taking attendance and referring to her as “oriental” and another student told about her classmates’ surprise that she brought candy canes for Christmas. Both of these personal stories demonstrate Davis and McDaid’s (1992) assertion that fellow students and teachers act with prejudice toward Vietnamese students (as cited in Ngo & Lee, 2007). These are also examples of microaggressions, or “brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group” (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin, 2007, p. 273). The participant who explained how her lab partners looked at her when talking about spring break is another example of a microaggression because “[m]icroaggressions are often unconsciously delivered in the form of subtle snubs or dismissive looks, gestures, and tones” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 273).

The present study also found that participants experienced a tension, or culture clash, between life at school and life at home. Lee et al.’s (2009) notion that differences in acculturation can cause distress within the family was supported by the participant who shared the experience of speaking “fancier” when she drove home from college with her brother. The participant who said that she does not feel connected to any community supports Stebleton and Soria’s (2012) view that the absence of a sense of belonging can develop from trying to bridge two cultures.

Personal accounts shared by participants also emphasized how their college experience could have been different if staff and faculty had provided greater support and if the curriculum had been different. Stebleton and Soria (2012) and Swartz, Lee, and Moritmer (2003) indicate the significant role that educators play in the experience of FGCS. The findings of the current study support the idea that educators should play an active role in being aware of and supporting FGCS at the school. Additionally, one participant explained how the curriculum at her college highlighted the dominant, White American view and views from other cultures were left out. This supports Jehangir et al. (2012) and Lee's (2001) research on the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy.

Participants also shared about their parents' lack of formal education. All participants' parents immigrated to the United States from Laos, and many of the participants' parents had no formal education. This is congruent with Swartz, Lee, and Moritmer's (2003) finding that many Hmong who emigrated from Laos had no formal education.

Findings from the current study support ideas from the conceptual framework as well. One participant recalled her experience of being tracked into ESL when she was in seventh grade, despite having a far better English proficiency than this designation implies. This is consistent with Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman's (2007) definition of institutional racism. The experience of having to explain one's culture or being put on display that another participant described portrays Bonilla Silva's (2006) definition of cultural racism.

Motivation and support. Participants shared many personal accounts of external motivational factors and supports that are consistent with the previous research. The participant who spoke of wanting to make her family proud and the other participant who spoke of the importance of gaining a reputation through education in the Hmong community demonstrate Lehman (2009) and London's (1989) concept of familial prestige. Additionally, participants also explained how the Hmong culture views education as the key to success. This supports Lee's (2001) folk theory that education is the road to economic success.

Participants indicated family support, social support, and support from staff and faculty at high school and college as contributors to their academic success. This is inconsistent with Jenkins et al.'s (2013) finding that FGCS did not have much support from family and friends. In the present study, family and friends were a significant support for participants.

In addition to external motivation, participants also described internal motivational factors including sacrifice of others, paving the path, proving others wrong, and motivational self-talk. Previous research has focused mostly on external motivation, and the internal factors found in this study bring new insight.

Changing view for Hmong Americans. Participants shared their perceptions of how the Hmong American view of education is changing. Their responses were in agreement with Vang's (2013) finding that higher levels of acculturation are demonstrated by a desire to have fewer children and a lower likelihood of using the Hmong language (*Figure 2*). However, it is interesting to note

that participants were more likely to use English with friends and neighbors and more likely to use their language of origin at family gatherings.

Finally, the findings of this study support Ngo and Lee's (2007) assertion that Hmong American parents often support their daughters in pursuing higher education before marriage and childbearing. Furthermore, Dunnigan et al. (1996) concluded that early marriage and childbearing did not affect Hmong women's pursuit of higher education (as cited in Ngo & Lee, 2007). The findings from the current study are inconclusive regarding this. One participant shared that she had a friend who had positive energy and balanced marriage and childbearing well with college. On the other hand, another participant shared about her friend who dropped out of college to care for her child. The second participant did share that her friend may not have dropped out if she had been attending college closer to her family; her friend's family could have helped with caregiving responsibilities. It is possible that early marriage and childbearing are supported by Hmong American women's extended family members—a Hmong American mother pursuing higher education who has extended family members available to care for her children may be more likely to succeed in higher education than a Hmong American mother who does not have extended family members available to provide childcare.

The findings from this study show that the Hmong American experience is changing. Even if their parents did not attend college, Hmong American students may be able to draw on experiences of siblings and extended family members who have attended college to support them through the educational process. As the Hmong American experience changes, however, large institutions as a whole have

not changed. Microaggressions make the FGCS experience difficult. Having staff and faculty in higher education who have had similar experiences (e.g. who are of Southeast Asian descent or who were FGCS themselves), however, can help to support Hmong American FGCS in large educational institutions.

Strengths and Limitations

This study's strengths include the richness of information shared by participants, exploration of institutional practices, focus on Hmong Americans, and breadth of participants' higher education experience. Participants were candid and vulnerable in sharing their experiences in the American education system, which provided rich findings and went beyond statistical assessments. This study found how institutional practices (e.g. curriculum, assigning students to receive English Language Learner services, professors recognizing FGCS who are struggling, etc.) impact Hmong American women's experience of higher education. This is a strength because institutional practices are largely missing from previous research which has typically focused on cultural values within the Hmong community. Additionally, the focus on Hmong Americans is a strength because there is little available in academic research regarding this population. Finally, participants had a great breadth of experience in higher education including five of the six participants having completed at least their bachelor's degree.

Limitations of the study include the small sample size and diversity and one incomplete acculturation assessment. The study included only six participants, which makes it difficult to generalize findings. While the participants spoke of their firsthand perspectives within the Hmong American community, these views

represent only six persons' perspectives and cannot be generalized to the Hmong American community as a whole. All six participants attended Midwestern colleges, and it is possible that the study may have garnered different results if participants had been from other regions of the United States as well. Finally, one participant did not fully complete the acculturation assessment, and it is possible that more or different conclusions could have been drawn in regard to acculturation levels if all acculturation assessments had been fully completed.

Implications for Social Work

This study has implications for social workers both on the individual level and the systemic level. The first implication for social work at the individual level is that not all Hmong American students are at the same place; there are various levels of acculturation, as well as support. It is important for social workers to assess for level of acculturation when working with immigrants to the United States. The findings of this study show that varying levels of acculturation within a family can cause distress. Social workers should be sensitive to this when working with family systems. The second implication for social work at the individual level is the role that school social workers can play in working with individual students in the K-12 setting. School social workers can support students by assessing whether they are in the appropriate level of English Language Learner (ELL) services, including whether ELL placement is needed. A final implication for social work at the individual level is that social workers can help prepare Hmong American students for the cultural clash they will experience when they enter college. For example, social workers can provide support for navigating relationships with White students

on campus who may not have had much interaction with people of color in their hometowns.

In considering a more macro level of practice, social workers can help support Hmong American parents in navigating the United States education system and advocate for Hmong American students within college and university systems. This study found that Hmong American parents are often unable to help their children academically and when applying for college. Social workers can help Hmong American parents and their children find resources for academic support as well as supports in the college application process. If the Hmong American parent speaks limited English, social workers can arrange translator services to assist in navigating supports such as college information sessions.

Social workers can advocate for Hmong American students using multiple avenues. One participant shared that her friend dropped out of school due to a lack of childcare. Social workers can advocate for colleges to provide affordable childcare on campus. This study found that educators sometimes do not understand the culture clash or obstacles faced by Hmong American FGCS. Social workers can advocate for relevant training for educators so that educators are more likely to recognize and support students who are struggling. These trainings can teach educators about how to identify and educate others about microaggressions. They can additionally include strengths within the Hmong American community to avoid the potential for trainings to create cultural racism mindsets among faculty and staff. Social workers can also advocate for culturally relevant curriculum in the classroom that teaches multiple perspectives rather than solely the dominant White

perspective. Social workers can advocate hiring more staff and faculty of color as well as advocate for changes in American society that create a mostly White applicant pool for staff and faculty positions (e.g. close the achievement gap, increase access to education opportunities, etc.).

Implications for Research

The present study added to the body of literature regarding the Hmong American experience in higher education. This study specifically explored perspectives from Hmong American women. Hmong American men's voices are important as well, and further research could be conducted to understand their perspectives better. Future research can further explore how institutional practices impact Hmong American FGCS. Finally, this study's finding of changing views in the Hmong American community demonstrates a need for future research to track these changing views and explore related implications.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. In your opinion, how does the Hmong American community view educational attainment beyond high school in general?
2. Has the Hmong American community's view of education changed over time?
3. Do you think that Hmong American students experience unique educational challenges?
 - a. If so, what educational challenges do Hmong American students encounter?
4. Are there some particular challenges that female Hmong American first-generation college students face?
 - a. As a young woman in the Hmong community, what are your perspectives on pursuing education while balancing marriage and childbearing?
5. When college seemed overwhelming, what were you able to draw on to keep you going?
6. What contributes to the ability for female Hmong American students to overcome challenges and persist in their education?
7. Would you be willing to share a personal story of a challenge you have encountered while pursuing your education?
8. How closely connected do you feel to the Hmong community?
9. What is your highest level of education completion?
 - a. Current college sophomore
 - b. Current college junior
 - c. Current college senior
 - d. Associate's degree
 - e. Bachelor's degree
 - f. Some graduate school
 - g. Graduate school degree completed
10. What is the highest level of your mother's education completion?
 - a. Less than a junior high education
 - b. Did not graduate from high school
 - c. High school graduate
 - d. Some college
 - e. Associate's degree
 - f. Bachelor's degree
 - g. Some graduate school
 - h. Graduate school degree completed
 - i. Unknown
11. What is the highest level of your father's education completion?
 - a. Less than a junior high education
 - b. Did not graduate from high school
 - c. High school graduate
 - d. Some college
 - e. Associate's degree

- f. Bachelor's degree
 - g. Some graduate school
 - h. Graduate school degree completed
 - i. Unknown
12. Were you born outside of the United States?
- a. Yes (if so, please specify country)
 - b. No
13. Were your parents born outside of the United States?
- a. Yes (if so, please specify country)
 - b. No
14. Were your grandparents born outside of the United States?
- a. Yes (if so, please specify country)
 - b. No
15. How old are you?

Appendix B

Acculturation Scale for Southeast Asians

Items 1–7: 1 = Very well; 2 = Pretty well; 3 = Not too well; 4 = Not at all

Proficiency in English language

1. Understand spoken English
2. Speak
3. Read
4. Write

Proficiency in language of origin

5. Speak
6. Read
7. Write

Items 8–10: 1 = Only origin; 2 = Mostly origin; 3 = Origin and English equally; 4 = Mostly English; 5 = Only English

Language usually used

8. With most of your friends
9. With most of your neighbors
10. At family gatherings

Items 11–12: 1 = Mostly origin; 2 = Equally origin and American; 3 = Mostly American

People

11. Close personal friends
12. Nearby neighbors

Item 13: 1 = Only origin; 2 = Mostly origin; 3 = Origin and American equally; 4 = Mostly American; 5 = Only American

Food

13. Food preferences

Appendix C

Email to Potential Participants

Are you a Hmong American woman? Have you completed at least your freshman year of college and at least 18 years of age? Would you like to share your views of Hmong American students in higher education by participating in a research study?

Do you have 30-45 minutes for an interview? Would you like to receive a \$10.00 Target gift card?

If you are interested in participating in this research, please contact me. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Lacey Reiersen
reie7071@stthomas.edu
952.393.xxxx

Appendix D
Information Sheet for Potential Participants

My name is Lacey Reiersen. I am currently pursuing my Master of Social Work degree in a joint program with the University of St. Thomas and St. Catherine University. You were recruited as a potential participant in my study regarding attitudes and experiences of female Hmong American first-generation college students. The purpose of the study is to understand your perspective about the college experience for female Hmong American first-generation college students, as well as understand your personal experience as such. Interview questions will explore your views of the Hmong American college experience, views about education in the Hmong American community, personal experiences, acculturation, and some demographic questions. Please review the potential risks and benefits outlined below:

Risks:

- You may feel uncomfortable sharing your experience with me

Benefits:

- You may contribute to creating changes in the American education system through academic research
- The information you provide will be shared verbally with social work professionals during the MSW Clinical Presentation Day in May and via academic research
- If you elect to participate in this study, you will receive a \$10.00 Target gift card

The interview will be audio recorded, with your consent, and a professional transcriber will transcribe the recording. If you decide to participate in the research, any information that identifies you will be kept confidential and will not be included in the final presentation (oral or written) of the research.

Please contact me if you are interested in participating in this study.

Sincerely,

Lacey Reiersen
reie7071@stthomas.edu
952.393.xxxx

Appendix E

**CONSENT FORM
UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS****[Perspectives of Female Hmong American First-Generation College Students on How Gender Influences the Hmong American College Student Experience]****[689886-1]**

I am conducting a study about female Hmong American first-generation college student perspectives and experience. I invite you to participate in this research. You were selected as a possible participant because you are Hmong American woman and the first in your family to attend college (i.e. your parents did not complete a college degree). Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Lacey Reiersen, a graduate student at the School of Social Work, St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas and supervised by Dr. Jessica Toft.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to explore female Hmong American first-generation college student perspectives of the Hmong American college experience and the impact of gender on this experience.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to participate in a 30-45 minute interview. The interview will contain questions about your perspectives on the supports and barriers of female Hmong American first-generation college students, as well as your personal experience as one. I will also ask you to take a short acculturation survey. I will audio record our interview and have it transcribed by a professional transcriber who will have a signed confidentiality agreement. The research will be presented at the School of Social Work Clinical Research Presentation Day in May 2015.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

The study has some minimal risks. You will be asked to share personal views and attitudes about the Hmong American experience in the United States education system. In addition to your views, you will also be asked to share your personal

experience in the United States education system. Depending on how difficult these experiences have been for you, it may elicit emotional responses. You will be debriefed after the interview. You will be asked how you are doing. Three culturally-responsive referral options will be offered, including: Hmong American Partnership, Hmong Cultural Center, and The Family Partnership.

The direct benefit of this study is a \$10.00 Target gift card.

Compensation:

There is compensation for participation in this study in the form of a \$10.00 Target gift card.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept confidential. In any sort of report I publish, I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you in any way. The types of records I will create include paper surveys, written paper and electronic notes, audio recordings, paper and electronic transcripts, and signed consent forms. All written notes and transcripts will be stored on my password-protected computer. Surveys, signed consent forms, and paper transcripts will be stored in a locked file cabinet and only I will have access to them. These documents will be kept in the locked file cabinet for three years. The audio files will be destroyed by May 31st, 2015 and the transcripts by May 31st, 2016. A professional transcriber will also have access to the audio recordings and will be asked to abide by the Statement of Confidentiality.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer and may stop the interview at any time. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with St. Catherine University, the University of St. Thomas, or the School of Social Work. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any up to a week after the interview time without penalty. Should you decide to withdraw, data collected about you will not be used. Please let me know within a week after the interview if you do decide to withdraw from the study. After that point, the data will be considered part of the study.

Contacts and Questions

My name is Lacey Reierson. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at 952.393.xxxx or reie7071@stthomas.edu or Dr. Jessica Toft at 651.962.5803 or jetoft@stthomas.edu. You may also contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651.962.6038 with any questions or concerns.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I am at least 18 years of age. I consent to participate in the study and to be audio recorded.

Signature of Study Participant

Date

Print Name of Study Participant

Signature of Researcher

Date