

Perceptions and Knowledge of Hmong High School
Students Regarding Mental Health

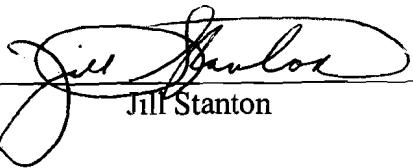
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ABSTRACT

The Hmong people have a unique history of trials and tribulations juxtaposed with their ability to thrive as a small ethnic group in countries dominated by different ethnic majorities. From China to the United States, the Hmong have faced challenges to maintain their cultural identity. Now in the U.S., Hmong people face the challenges of adaptation and accommodation of trying to blend two cultures. This challenge is not just in the home and community, but also within schools.

Hmong students face a myriad of issues surrounding school, home, social, and cultural expectation that can lead to academic difficulty, stress, and other mental health issues. Besides family, the educational setting plays one of the most important roles, not just in educating students, but also in helping to develop a sense of self and “place” in this world. Attempting to bridge the gap of living in two cultures, social pressures from parents and school, and wanting to be Americanized can leave a Hmong student feeling

isolated and struggling to form an identity in American society. Hmong students need to have school professionals they can turn to for help and who can be advocates to help others learn about Hmong student struggles.

School psychologists, counselors, social workers, and other school service staff should be keenly aware of their student population needs. It is important that mental health professionals and other school service staff be competent in the area of Hmong culture and Hmong student needs in order to provide them quality services. This literature review highlights key areas that need to be addressed in order for Hmong students to benefit from a full educational experience and suggests potential areas of future research.

One possible area of inquiry could be to survey Hmong high school students to gain their perceptions regarding mental health and ethnic identity. Using a survey would be a way to begin the process of gaining a better understanding of Hmong student mental health awareness and needs. Such knowledge could have important implications for school mental health as well as other school service staff.

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Chapter One

Introduction

The Hmong people have been facing adversity for centuries, dating back to their original migration from China into Southeastern Asia in the 18th century. Hmong history is filled with constant migration from lowlands to highlands and across several countries and continents. Hmong people have had unique experiences with the Chinese, the French, and the Americans during the Vietnam conflict. These experiences combined with their ensuing transition from Laos to Thai refugee camps, and eventually to the U.S. and other western countries, have all helped to shape the identity of their culture (Thao, 1994). The Hmong originally resided in the lowland river valleys of China; however, ongoing war with the Chinese majority led to the movement of the Hmong people to the southern mountain regions. Continued persecution from the Chinese forced many to relocate to other areas of Southeast Asia, particularly to Laos beginning in the 1800's (Pfaff, 1995) and stretching into the 1900's.

Persecution continued for the Hmong in Laos, and was exacerbated during and after the Vietnam War. The Hmong people who migrated predominately lived in the northern mountains of Laos, where they participated in slash-and-burn farming to grow rice, corn, and opium. Although self-sufficient and independent, the Hmong people faced persecution from the lowland Lao (largest ethnic group in Laos) because of religious and lifestyle differences, such as their animistic religious beliefs and farming techniques (Pfaff, 1995).

With the advent of the Vietnam War, the Hmong became allies with the U.S. in what later was called the "Secret War" of Laos, against the spread of communism.

Hmong allied themselves with the U.S. at the assurance the U.S. government would help them regardless of the outcome of the war. After the war, Laos became a communist country and many Hmong people fled Laos because of continued persecution, not only because of ethnic differences, but now also because of their involvement with the U.S. in the war. Thousands of Hmong attempted the arduous exodus to Thai refugee camps facing incredible hardships along the way. In the mid 1970's, the first refugees began coming to the U.S., sponsored by individuals, agencies, and church groups. Federal programs provided support and Hmong refugees had good opportunities to begin the adaptation process. For example, many were able to find housing and gain access to employment and education, and did so with relative success. The Hmong refugees were placed throughout the country, which created problems for a culture of people organized by a tightly knit extended family structure and clan system. This created a second wave of migration of families and clans moving together and settling in certain communities based on family location, clan location, and the availability of services. This migration increased the concentration of Hmong people in certain areas, predominantly in California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin.

Nationally the population of Hmong people has increased 97% from 1990 to 2000 with 94,349 Hmong persons being counted in 1990 and 183,310 in 2000 (Pfeifer & Lee, n. d.). Minnesota and Wisconsin have the 2nd and 3rd highest populations of Hmong in the United States at 41,800 and 33,791 respectively. Between 1990 and 2000, the population of Hmong increased 148% in Minnesota and 106% in Wisconsin. The Minneapolis/St. Paul (Twin Cities) area is the most Hmong populated metropolitan area in the United States, with census 2000 data indicating 40,707 Hmong people (Pfeifer & Lee, n. d.).

However, some researchers believe these numbers to be underestimates of the true figures (Pfeifer & Lee, n. d.). Migration to the Midwest and Twin Cities area has continued into 2005 with the closing of Wat Tham Krabok refugee camp in Thailand. The U.S. federal government agreed to accept approximately 15,000 Hmong refugees and about 5098 members of this group came to Minnesota (Pfeifer, personal communication, June, 2006). From 1990 to 2000, Hmong people in the Twin Cities area have showed gains in home ownership and mean household income, and the poverty rate for the Hmong is in decline (Pattison & Roberts, 2003). Despite these gains, in approximately thirty years of residence in the U.S., language and education have remained problem areas with the Hmong 2000 Census Publication: Data and Analysis (2004) findings indicate that 45.3% of Hmong older than 25 had no schooling and only 27.2% of Hmong older than 25 had a high school diploma. Twenty-nine percent of the Hmong population was considered to speak English “well” from the ages of 18 to 64 while 39.7% could speak English “well” from the ages of 5 to 17. Compared to the U.S population as a whole, Hmong people were somewhat more likely to have two or more disabilities and more likely to have a mental, self-care, go-outside-home, and employment disability.

Part of the Hmong people’s ongoing struggle with education is the large gap in cultural practices and values with the cultural majority. According to a study done by Timm (1994), “the primary ideological conflict between Hmong culture and American culture is the Hmong focus on traditional family values in contrast with the American emphasis on individual freedom” (p. 5). Differing expectations from home and from school may create a clashing of values and create conflict for Hmong youth who are attempting to live in two differing cultures. Hmong students are trying to balance familial

expectations of being Hmong with trying to fit in with American peers at school. This experience of attempting to bridge the gap between Hmong culture and American culture can create problems at home and school resulting in academic, social, and emotional issues.

Hmong home environment, expectations, and roles may differ significantly from the school or “Americanized society” outside of the home and can create an experience of “culture clash” (Thao, 2003) for Hmong students. Issues regarding parent/child roles, family obligations, gender roles, dating, and style of dress can create a dissonance between students and their parents and has been described in the literature as “Intergenerational conflict” (Lee, 2001, p. 518), “generational conflict” (Yang, 1990 as cited in Dufresne, 1992) and “generational dissonance” (Portes and Rumbaut, 1996 as cited in Lee, 2001). According to Lee (2001), “Intergenerational conflict between immigrant parents and their American born teenagers reflects the tension over how each group imagines the future of Hmong America” (p. 518). According to Timm (1994), the pull between the traditional family values of Hmong culture and individual freedom of American culture is at the heart of the Hmong dilemma in the U.S. The older, less acculturated adults are at odds with the more acculturated youth. This clash of cultural ideals and values can also create difficulties at school.

Differences in social/cultural practices by the Hmong students and lack of understanding by school staff may lead to problems with the school/home relationship and communication. For example, Iverson and Krabo (1993) discussed how Hmong children in special education classes have come to school with bruises from traditional

healing practices and the teacher has reported the incident to protective services not realizing the bruises were a result of a common cultural practice.

All these issues surrounding school, home, social, and cultural expectations can lead to stress and other mental health issues for Hmong students. Attempting to bridge the gap of living in two cultures, social pressures from parents and school, and wanting to be Americanized can leave a Hmong student feeling isolated and struggling to form an identity in American society. Hmong students need to have school professionals they can turn to for help and who can be advocates to help others learn about Hmong student struggles. School psychologists, counselors, social workers, and other school service staff such as administration staff, teachers, the school nurse, custodians and bus drivers all need to be keenly aware of their student population needs. This includes being aware of cultural differences and related acculturation issues Hmong students may face.

Hmong students in today's educational system face a variety of issues educationally, socially, and emotionally. Besides family, the educational setting plays one of the most important roles, not just in educating students, but also in helping to develop a sense of self and "place" in this world. Social pressures at home and at school can create difficulties in identity formation and may result in opposition or resistance to social expectations, creating problems in the home, at school, and in the community. For this reason it is of great importance that mental health professionals in schools have a solid understanding of some of the issues their Hmong students may face. It is important that mental health professionals be competent in the area of Hmong culture and Hmong student needs in order to provide them quality services. It is equally important that students have positive perceptions toward their school's mental health services so they

can be utilized if needed. One way to gain this information is through assessing the perceptions and attitudes of Hmong students regarding mental health and how school mental health services are meeting their needs or how they can be improved.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study is to investigate the perceptions of Hmong high school students in regard to mental health and the mental health services provided in their school. Perceptions will be assessed through a survey provided to a high school, with demographics that reflect a relatively high Hmong population in St. Paul during the 2007-2008 school year. If mental health professionals in the schools are aware of Hmong student perceptions of mental health and school mental health services, they can better adapt to meet their Hmong student's needs.

Research Questions

There were 12 main research questions this study wished to address. They were:

1. How do Hmong students view counseling and mental health?
2. When Hmong students have social/emotional problems, to whom do they go to for help/support?
3. How do Hmong students feel about talking with a mental health professional from a different culture about cultural related problems at school?
4. Have Hmong students perceived bias by students, teachers and/or administrators?
5. What kind of academic and social problems do Hmong students report facing in school?

6. What are Hmong students' perceptions of how acculturation problems have affected them in school and home?
7. Do Hmong students feel their school mental health services are meeting their needs?
8. How important is culture and maintaining cultural traditions to Hmong high school students?
9. Is being identified as Hmong important to their individual identity?
10. Do Hmong students think that it is better to attend a school with many or few other Hmong students?
11. Do Hmong students feel like their parents can/do advocate for them at school?
12. What are Hmong student's perceptions of their parent's involvement at school, such as their participation in meetings and activities?
13. Are Hmong students aware of any parent advocacy groups in their community?

Definition of Terms

The following key words are defined to further clarify the content of this research paper.

Acculturation - Cultural modification of an individual, group, or people adapting to or borrowing traits from another culture.

Animism- a belief system that combines supernatural power, ancestor worship, superstition, spirit worship, and shamanism (Thao, 1999, p. 10).

Ethnicity- a shared worldview, language, and set of behaviors that is associated with a cultural heritage (Holcomb-McCoy, 2005, p.121).

Hmong- Spelling used to refer to the White Hmong, one of the two major cultural and linguistic groups of the Hmong people (Thao, 1999).

Indigenous healing - Helping beliefs and practices that originate over time within a culture, that are not transported from other regions, and that are designated for treating inhabitants of the given group (Sue, 1999).

Mong- Spelling used to refer to the Blue Mong, one of the two major cultural and linguistic groups of the Mong people; however both (Hmong and Mong) can be used interchangeably and are pronounced the same (Thao, 1999).

Refugee - An individual or group of people who flees to a foreign country or power to escape danger or persecution.

Assumptions and Limitations

It is assumed that the Hmong high school students who participate in the survey will answer the questions thoroughly and honestly. A limitation to this study would be that not all Hmong students can or will answer the questions thoroughly because of language or cultural barriers, lack of understanding, or not wanting to give the correct information. Another limitation of this study is that the results cannot be generalized to the entire Hmong high school student population and only reflect the perceptions of Hmong high school students from one school.

Chapter Two

Review of the Literature

This chapter will include a discussion of the historical background of Hmong people, followed by a discussion of Hmong family, culture, spiritual, and mental health systems. In addition, this chapter will look at specific issues faced by K-12 Hmong students and their families regarding education and social/mental health. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of what research has discovered about ethnic/racial identity development pertaining to ethnic minority group adolescents.

Hmong Historical Background

Hmong people have a history dating back over 5000 years ago. Theories on the origin of Hmong people vary, including theories of Mesopotamian, Ultimate Southern, Chinese and Russian origin. Discussion of these theories is beyond the scope of this paper and detailed discussion can be found in the literature (Thao, 1999). Due to the lack of writing system, early Hmong history has been recorded by Western and Chinese scholars. However, most of the known Hmong history takes place in the fertile area of China between the Yangtze and Yellow river valleys dating back to 2700 B.C. (Thao, 1999; Theune, 1999). This location meant centuries of bloody struggles with Chinese rule and oppression, primarily because of the need for fertile growing land. The Hmong attempted to fight for their peaceful agrarian way of life, but continued conflicts made the Hmong flee to the southern mountain region of China, and thus began the concept of the Hmong being known as mountain people. Being isolated and protected in the mountains helped the Hmong to preserve their culture and resist Chinese assimilation for thousands of years (Fadiman, 1997).

In 400 A.D., the Hmong established a kingdom independent of Chinese dominant rule in the Honan, Hupeh, and Hunan provinces in southern China (Theune, 1999, p. 14). After centuries, Chinese oppression again gave the Hmong no choice but to flee, this time to the western mountain ranges known today as the Kweichow and Szechuan mountains. The Ming Dynasty, in the sixteenth century, built a wall known as the Hmong Wall that was one hundred miles in length and ten feet in height, a smaller version of the Great Wall of China, as a way to contain and control the Hmong people (Theune, 1999).

Hmong migration to Laos dates back to the 1800's (Pfaff, 1995), but Chinese oppression in the 1900's led to the largest of the Hmong migrations (Theune, 1999). Hmong migration out of China not only led to Laos, but also Vietnam, Thailand, and Burma.

In the 1890's, the French took control and colonized Laos and the rest of what is considered Indochina (Vietnam and Cambodia) and used the countries for exporting large amounts of goods such as rice, rubber, and opium. The Hmong were involved in the exporting of goods, but were also involved in many revolts against an unfair French taxing system. This led to the French decision to leave the Hmong alone and for the next few decades they were able to live relatively undisturbed in the mountain regions of northern Laos (Fadiman, 1997).

In the late 1950's and early 1960's, the United States began to get involved in the building Vietnam War conflict. Communist rebellions in Laos and Vietnam were independent movements to force out the French rule, and the U.S. maintained a close watch on these countries with concerns over the spread of communism. Laos was considered a neutral country, yet U.S. secret agents and green berets covertly entered the

country to recruit and train the Hmong to fight on the U.S. side. The U.S. was aware that the North Vietnamese (Viet Cong) were using a supply route that went through northern Laos and Hmong territory to get weapons and supplies to the fighting areas in South Vietnam. This supply route was known as the Ho Chi Min Trail. Hmong clan leaders and General Vang Pao, the highly respected Hmong military leader, agreed to work with the U.S. with the agreement that the U.S. would take care of the Hmong even if they failed in their mission fighting the Viet Cong and the Pathet Lao (communist group in Laos) (Thao, 1999; Theune, 1999; Fadiman, 1997).

After years of fighting and thousands of Hmong lives lost, the U.S. pulled its troops out of the war in 1973. With no protection from the U.S., the Hmong were left to fend for themselves as the Viet Cong began retaliation attacks against them. Entire villages were destroyed and contaminated by gas, eliminating the potential for the Hmong inhabitants to return and resume their way of life. Hmong men, women, and children were brutally murdered. The Communist Pathet Lao was taking control of the country and had harsh plans to extinguish the Hmong people. With a long history of resisting the dominant culture and fighting for their independence in the various countries they have called home, and no U.S. protection to be found, the Hmong were again forced to flee (Theune, 1999; Fadiman, 1997). It should be noted that some of the important Hmong military personnel, including General Vang Pao and their families, were airlifted to safety by U.S. forces; however tens of thousands were left to fend for themselves. Thus began the long journey through dense jungles and eventually across the dangerous and difficult Mekong River to Thailand refugee camps (Fadiman, 1997). According to Pfaff (1995), “between 1975 and 1992, over 100,000 Hmong crossed into Thailand as well as

approximately 250,000 other Laotian ethnic groups” (p.49). This mass exodus to Thailand into small rudimentary refugee camps created further hardship for the Hmong refugees. Food and water was limited and thousands of people confined to a small living space helped to create an environment of pervasive malnutrition and disease. The international community became aware of the mounting crisis in the refugee camps and many international agencies including the United Nations High Commission on Refugees, began coordinating efforts to bring in supplies and help ameliorate the camp conditions. Families were reestablished, schools and markets formed, and the camps resembled small communities of relative stability where the Hmong waited and pondered whether to pursue life in another country or eventually attempt to return to life in Laos.

Although few Hmong refugees planned on moving to the United States, as years passed and lack of stability in Laos continued, the reality set in that relocation was inevitable (Pfaff, 1995). France accepted a small percentage of the Hmong refugees, however the United States accepted the majority. Between 1975 and 1979 more than 20,000 Hmong were accepted into the U.S. The resettlement process resulted in many families having to split with some members being accepted to relocate to the U.S. and others not. Families were forced to make decisions not knowing when they may ever see their loved ones again. Pfaff (1995) summarizes the new challenges faced by the Hmong refugees in their relocation to the United States:

Packing horrible memories of war and flight, they left behind squalid refugee camps to begin lives in a highly industrialized, technologically driven consumer society. They faced significant linguistic, educational, economic, cultural and racial barriers which created confusing, embarrassing, and even frightening

situations in their daily lives. Most had never lived in a house with plumbing or electricity and had little familiarity with common household appliances.

Automobiles, telephones, televisions, and computers-icons of modern American life-had remained on the periphery of their experience. With a world view which valued, first and foremost, the welfare of the family and group, Hmong refugees attempted to cultivate the land of the “rugged individual” (p. 65).

Individuals and voluntary agencies, such as church groups, helped to sponsor the Hmong refugees, locating essential needs such as housing, food, clothing, and help with cultural adaptation to their new community. Once the Hmong refugees began to become established in their new communities they became sponsors for other family members in Thai refugee camps (Pfaff, 1995; McInnis, 1990).

Current concentrations of Hmong people in the Midwest are predominantly a result of secondary migration from their initial area of placement. According to McInnis (1990), “secondary migration is the voluntary movement by a refugee family from their initial placement with sponsors to a different location; this move takes place without the assistance of their original sponsors” (p. 6). The initial placement of Hmong refugees were dispersed throughout the country with the idea that dispersion would ease the economic stress on communities and hasten Hmong adaptation to the U.S. (McInnis, 1990). However, secondary migration occurred as communities of Hmong became well established and extended families became reunited creating large concentrations of Hmong in specific areas including the Twin Cities and Western Wisconsin.

Traditional Hmong Family, Cultural, Spiritual and Mental Health Systems

One defining aspect of Hmong culture is the clan system. A clan is an extension of the family unit that includes all extended family members who belong to the clan and is the main organizing principle of Hmong life (McInnis, 1991). Clan organization helps to shape attitudes about society and an individual's position within it including roles and relationships among members (Shade, 1997). A Hmong individual's clan membership can be identified by surname. There are a total of 18 clans, thus there are only 18 possible surnames a Hmong person may have. Clan surnames include: Chang (Chun), Cheng, Fang, Hang, Her, Kue, Khang, Phang, Lee (Li, Ly), Lor, Moua (Mua), Song, Thao (Thor), Vang, Vue, Xiong, and Yang (Thao, 1999). Although varying in size, all of the clan systems are represented in the U.S.

The clan system in Hmong culture creates the backbone of social and political organization by assisting with social support, economics, legal issues and mediation of conflicts (Lee & Pfeifer, 2005). Each clan designates a clan leader who is in charge of all families within the clan, and who is always a male. In the U.S., clan leaders serve two important functions: as liaisons between Hmong and non-Hmong communities, and as mediators to help resolve conflicts within and between clans (McInnis, 1991). Many, if not all, community programs may need to be approved by a clan leader in order for members of the Hmong community to participate. For example, working with children of Hmong culture in schools or within social service agencies may involve the clan leader's decisions in conjunction with parents and school professionals. Lack of collaboration with the organized clan system and leader could lead to the complete withdrawal of a

Hmong family from the helping system. Such concerns should be important to the school professional and serve as an example of the powerful influence of the clan in Hmong life.

Children take on the clan name of their father, not their mother (Yang, 1993; Thao, 1999), thus men are in control of passing on the clan name. Women marry outside of their clan and then take on the clan name of their husband. Traditional Hmong family is patriarchal in nature with men initiating and controlling female personal relationships (McInnis, 1991). According to Thao (1999), each family member is traditionally assigned tasks and works to help their family: the male breadwinning, the wife housework, the children manual labor, and grandparent's childcare and educating the young (p. 12). Traditionally Hmong women marry at a young age. According to Yang (1993), in Laos most marriages occur between the ages of 18-20 for boys and 14-16 for girls. However, in the U.S., because of educational opportunities, more women are waiting until the end of high school (McInnis, 1991). Although changing, early marriage and childbirth does still occur and can create social and educational stressors for Hmong youth.

According to Lee and Pfeifer (2005), 70% of Hmong practice traditional animism and shamanistic beliefs, while the remaining 30% practice a form of Christianity. Traditional beliefs of animism involve a belief that there is a spirit world that coexists with the physical world in which people live. Spirits are considered to inhabit all things in the physical world (Pfaff, 1995). Ancestral, house, and natural spirits exist in the spiritual world and a shaman is able to communicate with the spiritual world through rituals (Lee & Pfeifer, 2005). In traditional Hmong culture, the shaman may take on the role of psychologist and/or social worker. Thus, part of the indigenous healing practices of shamans may include psychological services. Rituals and ceremonies are performed by

shamans to help maintain good relations with the spirits, but not all spirits are considered to be good (Pfaff, 1995). Some spirits are believed to create problems in the physical world such as physical and mental illness. Shamans are called in to perform rituals and sacrifice animals in order to satisfy spirits and help to cure illness and problems. The practice of animism and rituals are rooted in the belief of an intimate connection between humans and animals (Siegel & Conquergood, 1980). Traditional Hmong also believe in reincarnation and people may reincarnate into animals or vice versa. Animal sacrifice plays an important part in shamanistic rituals as an offering to the spirits. Animals such as chickens, pigs, and cows act as messengers and guides to open the altar to the spirit world.

Shamans are believed to be chosen by the spirits, which is often manifested by enduring a serious illness (Pfaff, 1995). Through dreams, helper spirits give signs that the person has been chosen to be a shaman and is given special healing powers. If a person who sees the signs of being called upon to be a shaman decides to fulfill the calling, years of training and assisting a shaman are necessary (Petracchi, 1990). Traditionally the process of becoming a shaman was passed down orally from father to son; however both men and women can become shamans.

Illness and problems are considered to have several possible causes: natural and spiritual factors (Lee & Pfeifer, 2005; McInnis, 1991), and personal curses (Lee & Pfeifer, 2005). Natural causes include organic illnesses such as food poisoning and chicken pox, or other illnesses related to the environment or aging. Some physical injuries may be attended to by herbalists who use herbs mixed with other ingredients for healing. Spiritual factors that may cause illness include: evil spirits or ancestral and

nature spirits that have been offended, loss of one's soul, and curses from a person who has been wronged by another. Such problems require a shaman to contact the spirit world to appease angry spirits or bring lost souls back to the physical world for the ill individual (McInnis, 1991). Various aches and pains, depression, and other mental health issues are considered to be a result of having a lost soul (Lee & Pfeifer, 2005). Souls may be lost because of a sudden fright (e.g. loud noise), fear or too much grief, stolen soul from a spirit, or an unhappy soul trying to transfer to another person. An example of this is in Anne Fadiman's (1997) book, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and The Collision of Two Cultures*, which is about a Hmong child who has epilepsy. Her parents believe she got epilepsy when she was a baby and her sister slammed a door frightening her to the point that her soul was scared away. In this story, which is based on a true case study, a shaman is used to diagnose and treat the problems through rituals.

Treatment for common ailments such as headaches and fevers may involve the use of "coining," "cupping," or "spooning," which are common in other Asian cultures besides Hmong culture (Lee & Pfeifer, 2005; McInnis, 1991). According to McInnis (1991), "coining" is the practice of scraping the skin's surface to draw out bad spirits and "cupping" is the practice of creating a vacuum on the surface of the skin to draw out fever or pain. According to Iverson and Krabo (1993), the Hmong have three main healing arts: spiritual healing, herbal medicine, and body manipulation. The method chosen is based on the cause of illness. Illness that is a result of spiritual factors is treated by a shaman. Illness from organic factors is treated with herbal medicine and body manipulation. In regards to body manipulation such as "cupping," the darker the bruise or

mark, the more effective the treatment is considered to be. All body manipulation and rituals are performed by a shaman, and herbal treatment may be performed by anybody trained in the healing art.

This researcher has spent several years in Southeast Asia and observed the practice of body manipulation quite frequently in Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. Some of the researcher's Khmer (ethnic Cambodians) friends would frequently have visible marks on various parts of their body, depending on the area that was ailing, including their foreheads, as a result of such practices. The researcher also witnessed it being practiced with all ages including young infants. Whenever the researcher would inquire about the bruises, they would indicate they were not feeling well.

According to Siegel and Conquergood (1980), Hmong conversion to Christianity has created rifts in families regarding traditional Hmong animism and shamanism practices. Many of the rituals involve the attendance of all of the family members if possible. The family members who have converted to Christianity may refuse to participate, creating ideological splits and conflict within the typically tightly knit family structure of the Hmong.

Education and Hmong Students

According to the Hmong historian Paoze Thao (1994, 1999), little is known of Hmong education in China before the eighteenth century. Thao postulated that the Hmong made their living by farming, raising domestic animals, and eventually developing guilds like blacksmithing, crafts, and clothes making. These trades were then passed down orally from generation to generation.

In Laos, before the colonization of the French, education was mainly provided by the local pagodas or monastic system which was heavily influenced by Hindu and Buddhist principles originating from India (Thao, 1994). However, according to Thao (1994, 1999), there is no evidence to suggest that the Hmong participated in this system.

During the French colonization period, a European education model was introduced. The education curriculum was based on French ideas and taught exclusively in French. During this time, education was considered to be only for the elite in society and thus only a limited percentage of the population was allowed to participate. Only a few Hmong were able to participate in this system that lasted nearly fifty years (Thao, 1994, 1999).

Pre and post Vietnam War brought the influence of the West and created many changes within the Hmong culture. Christianity was introduced and helped to bring forth a Hmong writing system from American missionaries in the 1950's (Thao, 1994). Despite the introduction of a writing system, it was not allowed to be practiced in Laos and consequently was not used until the migration of the Hmong to the United States in the mid 1970's.

Constant conflict and movement for the Hmong created much disruption for the education of Hmong youth (Thao, 1999); thus, as this group of people began their migration to the United States and entered the school systems, the parents and children had very little experience with formal American education. This created incredible adjustment problems for the Hmong as the refugee children began attending school.

Historically Hmong people have little experience with formal education and have a relatively new literacy system. Because of this, it is important for Hmong parents,

teachers and administrators to build strong relationships and collaborate for Hmong student success (Thao, 2003). In Thao's (2003) study, home and school factors were examined that were thought to prevent Hmong students from excelling in school and resources were identified that would help to empower them to be successful academically. Thao found a school culture and a home culture that reflects aspects of both cultures in both settings is an important aspect for student academic success. Thao also found that school staff often lacked familiarity with Hmong people and culture which made contact between the home and school difficult; and school personnel knowledge of Hmong cultural traditions was crucial to improving the parent-school relationship. One student in Thao's (2003) study explained the problem as follows:

I think my parents don't understand how American people work and their school system. My parents don't come to my conference. They don't even know who are my teachers. My teachers also don't even know who are my parents. When my parents come to school they don't speak English so they rather stay at home. My teachers do not bother to try and reach out to my parents and always depend on a Hmong translator who is not always available. I am not sure they know what is going on in my life because they don't work together to plan a good future for me (pg. 34).

Research on Hmong parent perceptions of school indicate respect and trust in the school system to educate their children (Thao, 2003; DePouw, 2003). Hmong parents view teachers as authority figures who know how to educate their kids and parental input is therefore unnecessary. Thao's (2003) study found that parents perceived that the school would contact them if there were problems. The parents felt intimidated

and expressed having little understanding of the school system because of language barriers, differences in schooling experiences and cultural differences. According to DePouw (2003), such issues of communication and misunderstanding create feelings of frustration for Hmong adolescents,

These students grapple with all the representations of themselves, trying to forge positive and affirming identities by incorporating and claiming all aspects of themselves. Their parents, while working hard to support their educational achievement, also sometimes undermine their own support because of their fear that their children will lose their Hmong culture (pg. 15).

According to Timm (1994) this fear of loss of Hmong culture is related to the loss of the Hmong language in America. Hmong parents value education; however they do not want to lose their language or culture which is viewed to be interconnected. Timm's (1994) study found that both parents and students discussed problems regarding communication between older and younger members of a family.

Another issue regarding the Hmong adolescent experience in schools is the responsibilities placed on them at home and at school which at times may come into conflict with one another. In Lee's (2001, 2005) study, Hmong students explained that family obligations usually had to come before homework such as household chores, cooking, taking care of younger siblings, interpreting for older family members, driving parents to appointments and working to help support the family (pg. 512). Lee (2001, 2005) also states that some families still follow the traditional practice of early marriage and childrearing which also impacts education, especially for women. These family obligations may often create problems with getting school work done and may make it

difficult for Hmong students to participate in school extracurricular activities or socialize with non-Hmong peers.

Social/Mental Health and Hmong Students

In her ethnographic study of a Wisconsin high school, Lee (2001, 2005) discussed the perceived development of two different groups of Hmong students identified as “Americanized” and “traditional.” Based on interviews and observations, the “Americanized” students were those who exhibited characteristics of speaking mostly English, wearing baggy clothes associated with hip-hop culture, “being into cars”, being associated with gang activity, and not following the direction of adults. “Traditional” Hmong youth were characterized as being good students, being conservative, speaking both Hmong and English, not caring about style of dress, and generally following a more Hmong traditional way of life. Parents’ and teachers’ perceptions generally pointed out that the “Americanized” Hmong were bad, disrespectful, uncaring and had troubles in school while “traditional” Hmong were viewed as the opposite. Lee’s (2001, 2005) study generally found the two groups could be characterized further to “1.5 generation” (“traditional” group, born in a foreign country but raised in the U.S.) and second generation (“Americanized” group, born and raised in the U.S.). Another general difference between these two groups was related to frame of reference. The “1.5 generation” group had a dual frame of reference because they were born in another country and lived in the U.S., while the second generation group only had American experiences to reflect on. Having a dual frame of reference had an affect on the student’s worldview and offered a more generally hopeful attitude about life. “1.5 generation” youth could better relate to parent’s experiences in Laos and better understand the

differences between cultures. The second generation youth did not have the benefit of this comparison and were more likely to compare themselves to their white, American peers. Both of these groups made efforts to not be like one another and to not be associated with the opposite group, such as forgoing membership to certain after school clubs if the predominant membership was made up of students of the other group. Despite these attempts of differentiation from one another, the students were more alike in character and goals than parents, teachers or their peers thought and many did not fit into neat categories.

According to Lee (2001, 2005), the issues Hmong youth encounter are much more complex than “traditional” versus “Americanized.” Such labels do a disservice in that they attempt to simplify complex issues of establishing an identity while living within two cultures. Identity issues and cultural practices of today’s Hmong youth create conflict, not only within generations, but also between generations especially between parents and their children.

Familial obligations of Hmong adolescents such as interpreting, driving and helping to support the family economically, can create an issue of role reversal between parents and their children and can affect how Hmong adolescents view their parents as authority figures. According to Dufresne (1992),

A sort of role reversal often occurs which causes children to lose respect for parents. Because children attend school and learn English more quickly than adults they commonly become the ones the family depends upon for all contact with the English speaking world: social service paperwork, bills, house rent. This

creates a role reversal in which parents and other adults of the family are devalued (pg. 5).

According to Thao (1999), part of the problems between Hmong parents and their children are because of differing expectations at home versus the greater American society. "In the home, Mong adolescents are taught to conform to Mong social norms of politeness, filial piety, respect and obedience" (pg. 91). In contrast to this, within U.S. culture, Mong students are encouraged to assert themselves, to voice opinions and question things. Thao (1999) ascertains that these differences create situations for Mong adolescents to rebel and talk back to their parents and elders. Mong adolescents may think they know more than their parents and may criticize their actions.

According to Lee (2001), at the heart of the intergenerational conflict between immigrant parents and their American born teenagers is a difference in values and what each group imagines for the future of Hmong people in the United States. Issues of dating, marriage, style of dress, parent/child roles, and gender role are examples of areas of tension between Hmong parents and their children. For girls, traditional parent expectations of forbidding girls to spend time alone with boys, and potential dates meeting the entire family before going out, can create conflict with adolescent wishes. Parental preference for arranged marriages or the traditional practice of bridal kidnap also can be in direct contrast with second generation adolescent wishes to meet and marry whomever they want. Style of dress is another source of tension between second generation adolescents and their parents. According to DePouw (2003), Hmong parents may often interpret any departure from traditional Hmong practices to be indicators of delinquency, particularly style of dress. Wearing hip-hop style, baggy and loose fitting

clothes may bring ridicule from parents and may lead parents into thinking their child is involved in gang activity. In a study by Thao (2003), a student offers his perception on the issue of style of dress:

Our parents, teachers, and administrators think we were in a gang. Even if we don't do gang things, they still said the way we dressed, we are gangsters. No Mong kids want to dress the old-fashioned way. We want to be like other non-Mong kids, too. They continue to put us down at home and in school by the way we look. They don't say those things to other non-Mong kids who are dressed like us in school. I think they need to understand us a little more before they say we are all gangsters. You know, sometimes we need to hang together in school with other Mong kids during lunch just in case other kids who don't like Mong kids jump on us (p. 32).

Misunderstandings by parents and adults, and criticizing their child's decisions, may lead to communication problems and resistance to parental authority. Lee's (2001) study found that several Hmong students were warned by their parents against becoming "too Americanized" and associated this with being a "bad kid". Perceived parental problems of increased independence and their child's style of dress are seen as evidence of Hmong parents losing their children to "American ways" (Lee, 2001). However, adhering to more "traditional" practices and following parental wishes may create tension with non-Hmong peers, the non-Hmong community, as well as within the Hmong youth community. Thus, Hmong students face issues regarding intergenerational conflict and intragenerational conflict in trying to bridge the gap of values and form a sense of self as they develop into adulthood in the United States.

An ethnographic study by Timm (1994) compiled interview data spanning two years, exploring Hmong cultural and educational values in comparison with mainstream American values; her study revealed many similarities, but also some distinct differences.

Similarities included:

- Respect for hard work

- Concern for personal honor

- Honesty

- The importance of personal responsibility

- Respect for family values

- A need for good citizenship

- The need for good education as preparation for a good job

- A belief that firm and loving discipline of children builds good character

- A parent's dream for their children to turn out to be "good people"

Differences included:

- A strong clan-oriented society

- Tradition of bringing personal decisions to clan elders for advice

- A willingness to abide to clan elder's decisions in one's own life choices

- Tradition of arranged marriages

- High value placed on early marriage

- A belief in education for some, but not all males in a family

- A belief in extremely limited education for females

- Animistic religious beliefs and ancestor worship

- A belief in spirits which could be harmful

A rural lifestyle and a feeling of living at the mercy of nature's power

A focus on clan or lineal relationships whereby social life revolves around family membership

A past time orientation

A focus on activities which meet present needs

A limited spatial orientation (p. 6, 7)

Comparing these views with mainstream America, there are some dramatic differences between values that could create a mine field of issues and misunderstandings, especially for Hmong youth who are attempting to embrace values from each. For example, the influence of American peers and society has changed the experience of marriage and the teen years. In traditional Hmong culture, marriage meant maturity and independence. Now because of the longer delay in marriage practices, Hmong parents are presented with new challenges of raising a teenager in American society, something they have little experience with in Laos (McInnis, 1991).

Ethnic Identity Development

An important aspect of Hmong adolescent development, as well as with all youth, is the development of an identity. All the various messages and information Hmong youth receive from home, school, and the community help to shape how they view themselves and their place in the world. As Hmong youth develop into adolescence in high school, they may begin the process of trying to search for who they are. Understanding ethnicity is part of this developmental process, especially for youth of different cultures of color. According to Holcomb-McCoy (2005) "ethnicity is assumed to be a meaningful variable to the extent that it has salience and centrality for the

individuals involved” (p. 121). Phinney and Chavira (1992) purport that ethnic identity is important due to the relationship to the psychological well-being of ethnic minority group members. Phinney (1989) found a positive correlation between ethnic identity and self-esteem with high school students and that having a sense of belonging can have an impact on academic achievement. Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, and Vedder (2001) found ethnic identity to be related to positive school adjustment. In a longitudinal study on ethnic identity and self-esteem (Phinney and Chavira, 1992), participants with ethnic identity progression were found to have higher self evaluation scores, high scores on social and peer relations, and on family relations. The aforementioned research exemplifies that developing an ethnic identity is important for adolescents and thus it is important for school mental health professionals to have an understanding of the process through which adolescents come to see themselves and develop a sense of belonging to particular ethnic groups.

Phinney (1989) proposed an ethnic identity three-stage model of development that identifies the central role ethnicity plays in adolescent identity development. Phinney’s model proposes an adolescent begins with an unexamined identity and goes through a period of exploration to an achieved ethnic identity. According to Phinney’s model, adolescents in the early stages of development have not been exposed to issues of ethnic identity and are characterized as having an unexamined or diffuse ethnic identity. In this stage youth may simply not be interested in ethnicity or have given it little thought, or they may have absorbed attitudes of their ethnicity from parents or other adults and not thought through the issues themselves (Phinney, 1990). The second stage of Phinney’s (1989) model is characterized by the process of exploration of ethnicity without making a

commitment to a particular ethnic identity, called moratorium. According to Holcomb-McCoy (2005), this process of exploration of one's culture may involve a realization of cultural differences between the culture of origin and the dominant culture. Learning about one's culture of origin is an essential part of identity formation process because it can help to clarify a personal perspective about the meaning of ethnicity (p. 121). This moratorium stage involves an intense immersion in activities to learn about one's culture such as reading, going to cultural events, and talking to people (Phinney, 1990, p.503). As a result of this process, an adolescent may develop a deeper understanding and appreciation of their ethnicity of origin and this allows for the adolescent to make a firm commitment to their ethnic identity, or identity achievement, the third stage. This stage is characterized by a feeling of ethnic pride, a sense of belonging and confidence (Phinney, 1989). Phinney (1990) believes that this last stage may have different meanings to different people because of varying historical and personal experiences and does not necessarily mean a person will have a high degree of involvement with their ethnicity of origin including a need to maintain language and customs.

Chapter 3

Summary, Critical Analysis, and Recommendations

This chapter will include a summary of the main issues that Hmong people face according to the literature, followed by a discussion of the importance of these main issues for school mental health professionals. This chapter will conclude with recommendations for further research.

The Hmong people have a unique history of trials and tribulations juxtaposed with their ability to thrive as a small ethnic group in countries dominated by different ethnic majorities. From China to the United States, the Hmong have faced challenges to maintain their cultural identity. Now in the U.S., Hmong people face the challenges of adaptation and accommodation of trying to blend two cultures. This challenge is not just in the home and community, but also within schools.

Immigrant parents and their American born children face cultural conflicts that create a clashing of values and hopes for the future of Hmong people. The Hmong have a history and clan-oriented system that is relatively unknown by non-Hmong people. Language, family values, parent/child roles and expectations, religion, educational experiences, and mental health practices often differ from mainstream American practices. For example, Hmong written language was only first developed in the 1950's and educational practices in Laos followed a European model in which only few Hmong were able to participate. Thus many Hmong parents currently living in the U.S. are relatively unfamiliar with the education system, but are trusting of schools to educate their children. Hmong culture traditionally focuses on the family or group system versus the American cultural focus on the individual. This major difference in values can give

Hmong students mixed messages and result in misunderstandings of what it may mean to be “American”. In traditional Hmong culture, religion and mental health are often interrelated. Mental health issues are viewed as an issue within the spirit world and may be treated by a shaman. Conflicts within the home may be settled only within the family or with the help of the clan leader and not be shared with members outside of the family, clan or Hmong community. Hmong students and parents may come into conflict about family expectations and behavior such as working and helping the family, dating practices, style of clothes, and social groups creating pressures at home. Parents may expect their children to maintain Hmong traditional practices while going to an Americanized school, which can make following parental wishes difficult. This can create conflicts between the home and school leaving Hmong students in the middle, resulting in social pressure, emotional strain and academic problems. Hmong students in schools today face the challenge of trying to bridge the gap of two cultures and develop a sense of self and “place” in the world.

These cultural and value conflicts have the potential to create a myriad of mental health and academic issues for Hmong adolescents. It is important for school staff to understand these challenges and to take them into consideration when working with Hmong students and their parents. The school systems that work with Hmong people need to have a greater understanding of Hmong culture, practices and values in order to provide quality educational services. Cultural misunderstandings between school staff and students, school staff and parents, and even parents and their children all create potential roadblocks to the success of Hmong youth. Besides family and home life, school systems play an important part in the process of education, mental health, and

identity formation and development. Culturally aware mental health staff can be better prepared to meet Hmong student needs. Likewise, school mental health professionals can play a key part in facilitating staff understanding of Hmong culture and the challenges of trying to live within two cultures. School mental health staff can help lead the school to help support and facilitate Hmong students during this exciting, yet challenging, time of development.

The purpose of this research was to begin to get an understanding of the literature on Hmong culture and Hmong cultural interaction with education and mental health. Phinney's (1990) review of research on ethnic identity development identified that there is controversy over the study of ethnic identity development in general terms and across cultures versus studying it separately by culture. Phinney (1990) purports that there are some commonalities across groups such as self-identification, a sense of belonging, and pride in one's group are key aspects of all groups to varying degrees. However, more specific study of specific cultural practices, customs and attitudes of individuals and groups could be of particular value for the field of education and counseling. This researcher was unable to find any existing literature pertaining to ethnic adolescent identity development and Hmong adolescents. Further research into adolescent ethnic identity development, especially pertaining to Hmong culture, may be beneficial for school mental health professionals and other school professionals in order to better understand this complicated process.

Further research on Hmong culture and students could include teen suicide, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning (LGBTQ) issues, drug problems and gangs relating to Hmong students. The potential role of Hmong community groups and

services provided such as psychological services and parent advocacy could also be investigated.

Another recommended research area could include gaining the perspective of the groups involved in the education process; mainly Hmong youth, Hmong parents and school staff. Surveying Hmong parents to get their perspective on their experience with school systems and practices would help researchers gain better ideas of how Hmong families and schools can collaborate to better meet Hmong student needs. Likewise, surveying school staff to gain their perspective could further help to narrow the gap of understanding. Gaining the perception of students could include surveying different age groups of Hmong students from elementary to college. Gaining the perspective of Hmong adolescents may be of particular interest due to the importance of this time for ethnic identity development. During adolescence, children begin exploring and learning more about who they are, including their ethnicity. Also, during this time of adolescence, communication of thoughts and feelings and understanding of the world increases; and this can help facilitate the gathering of accurate information. Surveying Hmong high school students' perceptions and knowledge of mental health and mental health practices in their school would be an interesting method to gather information about Hmong second generation youth and could offer implications and insight for school mental health staff.

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