

***Tub Txawj, Ntxhais Ntse: Experiences of Hmong American Undergraduates***

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**ABSTRACT:** Exploring the educational experiences of 13 Hmong American undergraduates attending a predominantly White university, a total of six males and seven females participated in four semi-structured 90-minute focus groups (2 all female, 1 all male, and 1 mixed gender), framed within a psychosociocultural approach. Students shared their narratives about the individuals who influenced and the factors that informed their educational experiences. The narratives were analyzed for emergent themes using a social constructivist approach and a multi-step content analysis. Twelve emergent meta-themes were identified and framed within the psychosociocultural approach. The psychological themes were college self-efficacy, feelings of intellectual phoniness, experience of microaggressions, and cognitive flexibility in making sense of the unwelcoming environment. The social dimension themes included different types of support from parents, siblings, Hmong college peers, and student-based groups and programs. Four themes emerged for the cultural dimension that included shifting perceptions of gender roles, community responsibility, community pressure, and shifting parent-child relationships. The study's findings aligned with the extant research on Hmong American undergraduates and extended the understanding of gender scripts and the influence of familial and cultural expectations within higher education. Directions for future research and implications for university personnel working with Hmong American undergraduates are discussed.

Authors' note: Tub Txawj, Ntxhais Ntse means "educated sons and daughters."

The educational literature on Hmong Americans focuses largely on students in primary and secondary school, with less emphasis on students' experiences in higher education (Hutchinson 1997; Lee, S. J., 2001, 2005; McNall, Dunnigan, & Mortimer, 1994). With almost half of the Hmong population younger than 18 years of age, nearly one-fourth (23.2%) have a high school or equivalent degree, with just over 12% earning a bachelor's degree and less than 4% holding a graduate degree (US Census, 2013). Despite the lower degree attainment, the number of Hmong undergraduates has doubled in the last decade (2001 to 2010) from 13.2% to 26.7% (Xiong, 2012). As the research on Hmong American undergraduates is sparse, the extant literature is mixed. Some research indicates that their academic achievement is equal to or better than their non-Hmong peers (Hutchinson, 1997; Swartz, Lee, & Mortimer, 2003), whereas other studies reveal challenges that hinder their educational success (Lee, 2001; Reeves & Bennett, 2004; Vue, 2013).

As many Hmong Americans are first-generation college students, research that focuses on their educational experiences is needed to understand how they negotiate an educational environment that is often based on different values than their own (e.g., White, male oriented, individualistic, competitive). In such situations, students frequently experience tensions as they confront and negotiate a university shaped by ideas and values not congruent to their worldview (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000; Lin, Her, & Gloria, 2015; Lor, 2008). Research on acculturation (i.e., adherence to one's native cultural values) and identity suggests that Hmong American college students who are bicultural and attribute importance to their culture are more successful as a result of negotiating different cultural expectations (Ngo & Lee, 2007; Vue, 2013). How successful students are in managing this process may influence their decisions to stay in school or to persist academically (Gloria & Ho, 2003; Lin et al., 2015). To provide perspective and context about how Hmong American students experience college, scholars are called to explore the non-cognitive aspects of their multi-faceted educational realities (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000; Lin et al., 2015). Research that assesses how the university can provide a learning environment that responds to students' holistic needs is also warranted (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000; Museus, 2014; Vue, 2013). As such, this study sought to provide insight into the narratives of Hmong American undergraduates and how they experience college as a means to equip all levels of university personnel to support Hmong American students. To set the stage, a review of Hmong values relative to education is provided.

### **Hmong and Education within the Context of Community and Family**

Because clan and community membership directly inform many Hmong individuals' identity and cultural self-understanding (Moua, 2003; Xiong & Lam, 2013), their educational experiences need to be explored from the approach that culture directly informs the importance of education (Ngo, 2013). Imbedded within the group memberships and social structures are cultural notions of responsibility, obligations and expectations, and division of work and familial roles that are delineated through gendered lines and structured through paternal clan lineage (Donnelly, 1994; Moua, 2003). For example, traditionally, males are frequently expected to provide for and protect the family and carry on the family lineage. Females, once married, are taken into her husband's clan and expected to be housewives and homemakers where they perform household duties such as child-rearing, cooking, cleaning, and sewing (Donnelly, 1994; Moua, 2003). These gendered roles understandably influence students' educational processes and

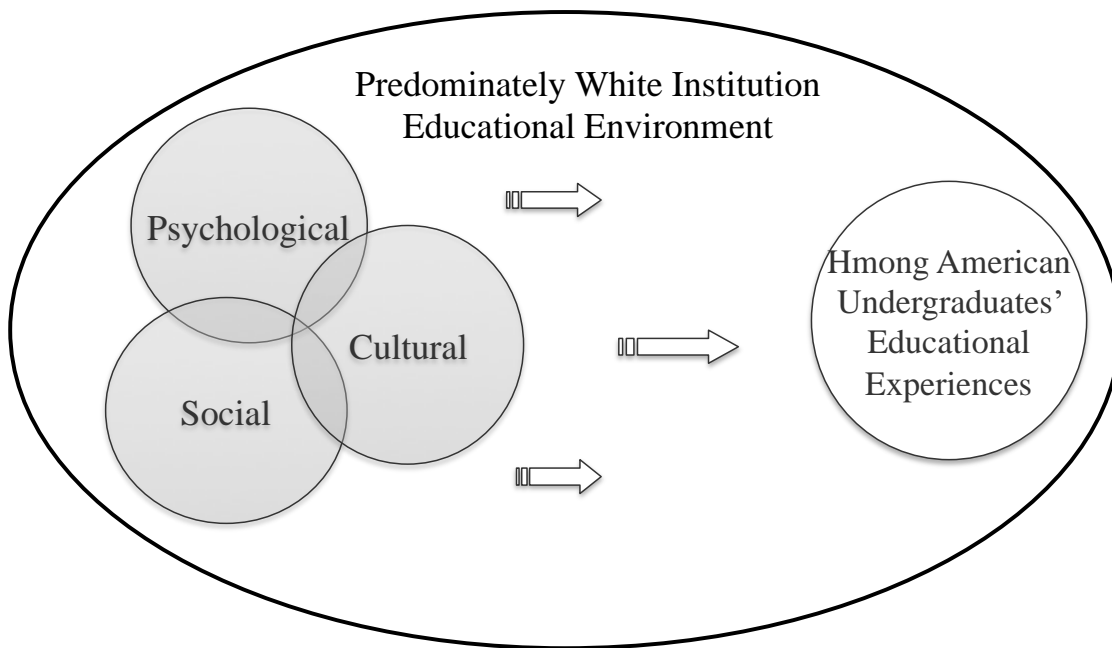
outcomes (Her & Gloria, 2016; Yang, 2014), yet little research exists that examines these differences within higher education.

For some Hmong American students, education is a pursuit clearly informed by cultural roles and expectations derived from parents and Hmong communities (Lee, n.d; Her & Gloria, 2016; Ngo, 2013). For example, in several studies of Hmong American undergraduates, they identified experiencing strong expectations and pressure from their parents to succeed in school (Lin et al., 2015; Lor, 2008; Sengkhammee et al., 2017). However, it may be the discourse and expectations within some Hmong communities that parents manage and in turn pass to their children (Her et al., 2012; Ngo, 2013). That is, education is highly valued within many Hmong communities; the perception is that degree obtainment brings favor and prestige to one's clan and family (Hutchinson, 1997). This is particularly relevant for Hmong males as they have been traditionally allowed the option to gain an education (Moua, 2003). An individual's academic success is communally shared within the family and clan, which symbolically also infers familial status within a Hmong community (Swartz, Lee, & Mortimer, 2003). Relatively few studies have explored these various dimensions of Hmong American undergraduates' educational experiences (Lin et al., 2015; Lor, 2008; Sengkhammee et al., 2017; Vue, 2013), thus this study's purpose is to gain an integrative perspective into the students' narratives and how these dimensions influence their educational experiences.

### **Psychosociocultural Approach to Study**

The psychosociocultural (PSC) framework (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000) was used to explore the educational experiences of Hmong American undergraduates at a predominantly White university. A meta-model that emphasizes the interrelationships of students' psychological, social, and cultural dimensions, the framework implements a whole-student approach emphasizing the context and influence of the university environment on students' experiences [See Figure 1]. The framework has been implemented with different racial and ethnic students, including Asian American (Gloria & Ho, 2003) and Hmong American (Lin, Her, & Gloria, 2015; Sengkhammee et al., 2017) undergraduates. Each dimension individually and collectively informs students' educational well-being and academic persistence processes. The psychological dimension emphasizes self-beliefs and attitudes (e.g., confidence in one's abilities to complete academic tasks) as well as intrapersonal affect (e.g., sense of academic phoniness or imposter syndrome). The social dimension addresses relationships, connections, and social supports such as those from family, friends and school peers, community members, or academic mentors. The cultural dimension centralizes students' sense of cultural values (e.g., congruity or fit of person and context values), role or importance of culture (e.g., ethnic identity and values orientation) as well as perceptions of the cultural context of the university environment.

Figure 1. *Psychosociocultural Approach to Educational Experiences.*



### **Psychological Dimension – Imposter Syndrome**

Previous research applying the PSC framework to Hmong American undergraduates has revealed that the psychological dimension was most predictive of academic persistence decisions with feelings of intellectual phoniness (i.e., imposter syndrome) emerging as the strongest negative predictor (Lin, et al., 2015; Sengkhamee et al., 2017). First, in a study of 95 Hmong American undergraduates, increased feelings of intellectual phoniness was associated with decreased college self-efficacy, lower self-esteem, and decreased perceived social support from friends (Lin et al., 2015). It was social support from friends and perception of the university environment that were most predictive of academic persistence decisions for the students. Further, upper-division students had greater confidence in their abilities to complete college-related tasks as compared to lower-division students. In a second study, feelings of phoniness were most predictive, following by social support from friends, of 103 Hmong Americans' persistence decisions (Sengkhamee et al., 2017). Further, the relationship of intellectual phoniness and self-esteem emerged stronger for the male students than for the female students.

### **Social Dimension – Peer and Familial Support**

The role of peer support is an influential means by which to decrease feelings of intellectual phoniness and increase academic persistence decisions among Hmong American undergraduates (Lin et al., 2015; Sengkhamee et al., 2017). As first-generation college students, Hmong American undergraduates often rely on their peers to provide academic support that their parents cannot, given their lack of familiarity and understanding of higher education system (Lin et al., 2015; Sengkhamee et al., 2017), despite their strong desire to do so (Her & Gloria, 2016). As Hmong American students may experience pressure from their family and

community to succeed (Lee, 2008; Swartz et al., 2003; Xiong & Lee, 2011), which may in turn add to their sense of ability to succeed (Lin et al, 2015), the role of academic peers and mentors is an important source of support of guidance. For example, in a qualitative study of 18 Hmong American undergraduates, social support from peers served as a mechanism to motivate each other over time, create examples of how to maintain cultural connections (e.g., priorities of family) while at school, and influence overall educational success (Lor, 2008).

### **Cultural Dimension – Education Values**

As noted earlier, many Hmong American communities have high educational expectations for their children (Swartz et al., 2003; Xiong & Lee, 2011), viewing education as the path to propel the family and community economically and socially (Hutchinson, 1997). Yet, within the context of higher education, the fit or congruence of one's home values and those of the university setting are often at odds, making the balance of one's native or home cultural values a negotiated process (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000). For Hmong American students, those who viewed the environment positively and perceived a match between their cultural values to those of the environment were more likely to make persistence decisions (i.e., decide to stay in college; Lin et al., 2015). By class standing, the upper-division Hmong undergraduates felt less welcomed and more culturally incongruent in the university environment as compared to their lower-division counterparts. Lin et al. (2015) posited that the class standing difference might be a function of time and experience of negative interactions or micro-aggressions while on campus that influenced their sense of comfort within the educational setting. The authors subsequently called for universities to explore the educational experiences of Hmong American students to determine how they can best intercede.

### **Purpose of Study and Research Questions**

Given the paucity of the literature on Hmong Americans in higher education, this study explores the educational narratives of Hmong American undergraduates. Two main questions based within the Hmong undergraduate literature and the psychosociocultural framework guided the focus groups: “Who or what are the factors that influence your educational experience?” and “Who or what contributes to the psychological, social, and cultural processes that influence your educational experience?” Follow-up and clarification questions were posed to gain full narratives and ensure rich or quality data (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

## **Methods**

### **Study Setting and Procedure**

Conducted at a single, large, predominantly White university in the Midwest, the study recruited students simultaneous to a separately conceptualized quantitative study. It was unclear as to the total number of Hmong / Hmong American undergraduates on campus; however, it was estimated at 350 at the time of the study. Students were recruited via a Hmong-affiliated student organization, advising office, language classes, and student diversity campus offices. After completing the quantitative survey, students were invited to participate in a focus group interview. From student-submitted information, the researchers contacted the students and assigned them to a focus group based on their availability. The groups were held in a private conference room on the university campus that lasted 1.5 to 2 hours and were facilitated by two of the study's researchers. One researcher was consistent to all four groups. Students were provided food and beverages during the focus group. The groups were audio-recorded, which

were later transcribed (first by one of the session facilitators followed by the second facilitator) to ensure the conversations were correctly transcribed.

### **Study Participants**

A total of 13 Hmong American undergraduates (6 males, 7 females) comprised four groups, which included two all-female (3 in each), one all-male ( $n = 3$ ), and one mixed-gender (1 female, 3 males) focus groups. By class standing there were six first-years, one sophomore, one junior, three seniors and two fifth-year seniors. The participants' majors were diverse, such as Art History, Biology, Biochemistry, Engineering, French, Language and Culture of Asia, Nursing, and undecided. All but one student was first-generation in college.

Students ranged in age from 17 to 23 ( $M = 20.08$ ,  $SD = 1.89$ ) with self-reported GPAs ranging from 2.40 to 3.60 ( $M = 3.06$ ,  $SD = .34$ ). Seven students reported being born in the US, and six were born in Thailand. The students reported having 1 to 6 ( $M = 2.91$ ,  $SD = 1.83$ ) brothers and 0 to 6 ( $M = 3.00$ ,  $SD = 1.91$ ) sisters. Each of the participants indicated that they had either a brother or sister who had gone, were currently enrolled, or had graduated from college. When asked how they self-identified, three identified as Hmong and ten identified as Hmong American.

### **Team Member Positionality and Efforts to Ensure Trustworthiness of Data**

The research team itself served as a unique academic and cultural support context for research projects and professional development with an emphasis on mentoring and graduate training. The team consisted of six members, all of whom were Hmong Americans, who ranged in academic status from undergraduates to doctoral students and represented a diversity of studies (i.e., Counseling, Education, Family Studies, Nursing). Because each of the researchers had substantial working knowledge of the university and lived experiences as a Hmong American student within the university context, some of which were challenging and unwelcoming, the researchers discussed their expectations and assumptions to ensure data trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). During all stages of the data analysis, the team members openly addressed disagreements and biases to ensure that the analyses were credible, dependable, and as close to the students' meaning as possible. The team reached consensus at each step of analyses. Finally, a more senior researcher audited each stage of the analyses to ensure confirmability of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Auditor feedback was discussed and integrated via team consensus.

### **Process of Data Analysis**

In preparation for the study implementation, the research team read the extant literature on Hmong Americans in higher education, as well as pre-K through grade 12, given the limited literature and discussed student development and persistence theory for students of color. These processes drove the development of the interview protocol and prepared the team for the multi-step content analysis (LeCompte, 2000). Following a social constructivist orientation, the team emphasized the social and cultural meanings of the students' educational experiences (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007). The first step of LeCompte's (2000) five-step content analysis involved transcribing, cleaning, and organizing the transcripts. In the second step, the team identified items through line-by-line coding that became the unit of analysis. For the third step, the team determined groups and categories (i.e., stabilizing item sets) to assemble taxonomies of item sets. For the fourth step, the team created emergent themes or patterns. The final step

involved identifying meta-themes and returning to the narratives to identify illustrative quotes. Following this process, a total of 59 item sets were derived from the PSC model for Hmong American undergraduates' educational experiences from the four focus groups. Twelve meta-themes were identified, which are discussed within the extant literature and illustrated with student statements. Within the psychosociocultural framework, the dimensions overlap (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000); however, the themes are presented emphasizing the most salient dimension (See Table 1), while acknowledging that it was informed by the corresponding dimensions.

### **Emergent Themes and Illustrative Narratives**

#### **Psychological Themes: Self-beliefs**

*College Self-efficacy: "I know I can do it too."* Overall, the students expressed a strong sense of college self-efficacy or the belief in their ability to complete college-level work within their narratives, revealing nuanced processes of how self-efficacy emerged. For some, self-efficacy was a salient belief that they already held entering into college. One student stated, "I just had it in my head that I'm this incredibly smart person and that no one can ever out-beat me in anything." For others, it was only after the students had successfully completed a semester of coursework that their self-confidence increased. A student shared, "the first semester, I did really well, that's when I realized that I can compete with the majority of students." Others found their confidence once they saw other Hmong students succeeding in school. One student indicated,

I do feel competitive with the other Hmong students just because you're in the same... you know, you are all Hmong students. You are all here. So, I feel like if she can do it, I can do it. If he can do it, I can do it.

Although students ranged as to when they gained a sense of efficacy in their ability to complete their college tasks successfully, they largely believed in their ability to be college students. It is this sense of self-belief that has been linked to increased decisions to stay in school or make academic persistence decisions for Hmong American undergraduates (Lin et al., 2015; Sengkhammee et al., 2017).

Table 1. *Focus Group Emergent Themes*

<b>Emergent Themes</b>	<b>Illustrative Statement</b>	<b>PSC Dimensions</b>
College self-efficacy: “I know I can do it too.”	“I just had it in my head that I’m this incredibly smart person and that on one can ever out beat me in anything.”	Psychological
Feelings of phoniness: “Do I really belong here?”	“When I got accepted into [name of University], I almost felt like I didn’t belong because I knew people that didn’t get accepted and they were a 100 times a better student than I was in high school.”	Psychological and Cultural
Experiencing microaggressions: “I’m just as smart as you are, I belong here too.”	“Just the fact that you’re Hmong. Regardless of how intelligent you are, how much education, you’re always going to be looked upon as always affirmative action”	Psychological and Cultural
Cognitive flexibility: “Accept it and keep going.”	“You just accept it, where you just have to roll through with it.”	Psychological and Cultural
Social support from parents: Expectations of <i>rau siab kawm ntavw</i>	“I think my parents, looking back like all the work they put in so I can get an education so I can make it. If I missed the bus they will not yell at you for missing the bus, they will put me in a car and drive me to school.”	Social and Cultural
Siblings as college peers: “I have a built-in support system:	“My brother is a Chemistry major, so if I need help with Chemistry, I have him already. And then, the classes I’m taking, they’ve [siblings] already took the class, so they usually tell me which professor is better.”	Social and Cultural
Social support from college peers seeking: “I need to be around other Hmong people.”	“I have the other students, the other Hmong students, because as supportive as your parents are, I think is our fellow students that really push me.”	Social and Cultural
Social support through student groups and programs: “It’s one of the reasons that I remain her, that I didn’t drop out.”	“One great thing about [name of federally-funded support program] is that they actually try to give you a head start on your social network. They try to make you feel a part of this university.”	Social and Cultural
Shifting perceptions of gender: “We need to broaden our horizons.”	“I think of it as almost two different worlds...my life here [at college] is a lot different from my life at home.”	Cultural
Community responsibility: “There are not enough of us.”	“Within the Hmong community, I don’t think we have enough people to represent ourselves that is why our parents push us [into education], just so we can represent ourselves in the community.”	Cultural
Community pressure: “We can’t mess up.”	“We’re one of the families in my clan that are looked up more so we can’t mess up [in college], otherwise they’re going look down on us.”	Cultural and Psychological
Shifting dynamics of parent/child relationship: “My parents, we talk more!”	“Now my parents tell me a lot more...and they really acknowledge me. I think it’s the fact that when you make it here, [my parents] are like, ‘oh yeah, you’re mature.’”	Cultural and Psychological



***Feelings of Phoniness: “Do I really belong here?”*** Despite a sense of efficacy, many of the students reported feelings of academic phoniness or imposter syndrome while on campus. The phenomenon of intellectual phoniness involves individuals believing that they are unable to achieve or meet the expectations of the university despite being capable or able (Clance & Imes, 1978). The sense of phoniness was evident in different elements of their educational experiences, from admissions to the classroom setting. For example, students questioned or had a sense of disbelief about being admitted to the university. One student stated,

When I got accepted into [name of University], I almost felt like I didn't belong because I knew people that didn't get accepted and they were a 100 times a better student than I was in high school.

Similarly, students questioned their intellectual abilities; as one student indicated,

Well, I personally haven't really experienced all other stuff [educational options] that these other [non Hmong] students have, so I felt like I can never contribute anything intelligent to whatever we are discussing in class.

Although the majority of students reported experiencing feelings of phoniness during the first semester of their educational tenure, there was a marked shift in this feeling after having successfully completed academic tasks and gained or affirmed their belief that they could succeed. One student stated, “After my first semester, I realized that I'm just as good as anybody else as long as I work hard.” Although the sense of phoniness decreased across their educational tenure, these feelings were evidenced across all levels of class standing.

***Experiencing Microaggressions: “I'm just as smart as you are; I belong here too.”*** For the students, the experience of microaggressions was often and directly tied to feeling phony. For example, one student described the process of not feeling confident in oneself or a sense of belonging as a function of the environment as reflected in the statement,

[A] lot of Hmong students don't have the confidence in themselves, and part of that comes from everyone [on campus] telling them that they're not smart enough.

Microaggressions were a primary element of their educational experience. All of the students reported experiencing subtle everyday exchanges of discrimination and racism (Sue, Bucci, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2007) within the university environment. The students expressed that racist messages were transmitted in ways that told them about “their place” at the university and in society at large. In particular, they experienced microaggressions that targeted their importance, value, and capacities as Hmong individuals. Described as being “looked down upon,” one student provided a poignant and comprehensive statement in saying,

...just the fact that you're Hmong. Like regardless of how intelligent you are, how much education, you're always going to be looked upon as like always affirmative action ...even here on campus, a lot of students, every time you talk about affirmative action they just think that every White kid who ha[s] a friend who couldn't get into this campus because some other minority get into it for free...even with the professors, they give you a fake show of respect that 'oh, we respect minority, we're [intellectually] interested in Hmong,' but they're interested in you like a tax subject [afterthought].... You can't have an even conversation with the professors or even other students because ... they still really look at us like we're backward and a third world people.

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Students experienced microaggressions in the classroom with peers and faculty. One student described an experience in which her chemistry lab partner disregarded her abilities to assist in completing an in-class problem. The student shared,

She [lab partner] could've asked me [to help], but I don't know why she didn't. Because she thinks that I'm Hmong, that maybe I'm stupid or something like that.

Yet, the students also expressed frustration in being asked to be “the Hmong representative” on campus. One participant described how it felt when a professor pressed him to speak on behalf of all Hmong during a classroom discussion:

[Y]ou are forced to speak for your entire ethnic group and I have to do that. But you're forced to do it over and over again and it comes to a point where I don't want to do it anymore.

Although the literature on experiences of discrimination or educational microaggressions for Hmong American undergraduates' is sparse (Xiong, 2015), these incidents clearly influence the perception of welcome and inclusion in the campus environment. As Hmong American students increasingly enter higher education, the campus experience is an area of focus for university administrators to ensure students' sense of belonging, value (Sengkhammee et al., 2017; Vue, 2013), and inclusion in a meaningful and competent way (Lin et al., 2015; Museus, 2014).

***Cognitive Flexibility: “Accept it and keep going.”*** Although relevant to all the students, it was specifically the Hmong male students who used perspective-taking or cognitive flexibility to negotiate microaggressions and stereotypes while on campus. Cognitive flexibility is the ability to hold awareness that there are alternative options or perspectives about an event or interaction. This was a salient student process that informed their experience. For the male students, using cognitive flexibility was described as a self-negotiation that served to deflect negative messages and/or manage negative interactions on campus. One male student shared,

I think most Hmong get defensive but I think we all really just kind of learn to accept like a norm...you can't make a big fuss about it cause if you fuss about it all the time ... that is really going to consume you.

Similarly, the male participants conveyed that they managed the stereotypes by recognizing or taking the perspective that their time on campus was only for a short time of their lives.

You just accept it, where you just have to roll through with it... If you can't let it go or you can't accept it or you let it affect you too much...you're not going to be here [college campus] after 4 or 5 years.

In relating the pressure of stereotypes to emotional well-being and academic persistence, one student directly and matter-of-factly stated,

I would say it happened so often that you can't even count it. I would say a lot of the Hmong students are very strong and just taking it like, “well, we'll have to live with it, you just put your head down and keep going...and just let the comments roll off you.

Indeed the process of cognitive flexibility via perspective-taking is an important means of coping or buffering the negative educational settings and experiences by male undergraduates of color. Similar coping was found among Latino male undergraduates, who reported that by

changing their perspective of a negative encounter they were able to use it as a “push” or motivation to persist (i.e., use of their anger about microaggressions to motivate oneself to stay in school; Gloria et al., 2016).

### **Social Themes: Interrelationships and Connections**

***Social Support from Parents – Expectations of “Rau siab kawm ntawv” (Work hard in school)***. Despite many Hmong parents having little knowledge about college and its demands (Her & Gloria, 2016; Her et al., 2012), they are consistent in providing verbal encouragement and material support of their children with an expectation for *rau siab* or focused efforts of hard work (Her et al., 2012; Her & Gloria, 2016). This study’s students shared similar stories of their parents offering such tangible support. For example, one student recounted his parents’ process of support saying, “Do you need money? Do you need food?’ Those are things they can help you with. That’s [what] they ask you mostly.” The students acknowledged that their parents’ hard work and sacrifice to provide them the opportunity to gain an education was viewed as ultimate support and encouragement. One student described this process stating,

I think [of] my parents, looking back [at] all the work they put in so I can get an education so I can make it. If I missed the bus they will not yell at [me] for missing the bus, they will put me in a car and drive me to school.... They show support in enormous ways.

Important to the process of parental support was the expectation of *rau siab* as a means to succeed and advance oneself and one’s family. Students shared that because their parents did not have the chance to earn an education informed the support they received. One student stated,

The biggest factor is my family, especially my parents. Because they always tell us [siblings], tell me stories about their lives back in Thailand, and how they didn’t get a good education or the opportunity to get one [an education]. So, I guess by listening to their stories I’ve learned a lot in trying to pursue a good education.

A student also shared how her parents viewed education as key to individual and family success.

So my family has been really, my parents have really really [been supportive], pushing us to go to college because they want us all to receive a higher education. Because it is true, it’s the key to success. And I think they saw that when they came to the United States and that’s why they pushed us so hard, but at the same time, it’s really hard because we’re all in college and we’re all really supportive of each other, but we’re all broke too. So it’s really hard.

The students’ parents played a significant role and had substantive influence on the students’ drive, motivation, and persistence to gain an education, a process that has been consistently evidenced within the educational literature for Hmong American undergraduates (Her & Gloria, 2016; Hutchinson, 1997; Lor, 2008; Ngo, 2013).

***Siblings as College Peers: “I have a built-in support system.”*** In the discussion of parents and family being of primary support, the students also identified that their siblings, who also attended the university, were important college peers. As both siblings and college peers, the students identified them as readily available resources, described as a “built in support system” to navigate college. The students identified turning to their siblings for academic support, such as tutoring and course selection. One student indicated,

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My brother is a Chemistry major, so if I need help with Chemistry, I have him already. And then, the classes I'm taking, they've [siblings] already took the class, so they usually tell me which professor is better... So if I'm looking for a class, they usually recommend something.

Similarly, these siblings are identified as providing supportive challenge and encouragement. One female student indicated in agreement with the role of sibling peers stating,

I have two older sisters who go to school here also. They're always going to be smarter than me. They push me too because I told them, "I'm not doing good in school."

As the first-generation of their family members to go to college, many Hmong American students often look to other family members who are similarly attending college to help them navigate the higher education system (Xiong & Lam, 2013), a process that was readily identified for the students in this study. Given the centrality of family within Hmong culture, sibling support of each other through college reflects the process that an individual's success is representative of one's family and clan success (Hutchinson, 1997; Swartz et al., 2003).

### ***Support from Hmong College Peers: "I need to be around other Hmong people."***

Whether sibling or non-sibling peers, the Hmong students were clear that they wanted and needed the support of Hmong college peers. Overwhelmingly the students reported that Hmong college peers played an important role in providing social and academic support, helping them feel comfortable on campus and in the classroom and being described as a "second family." One student poignantly expressed,

I have the other students, the other Hmong students, because as supportive as your parents are, I think is our fellow students that really push me... I think that's where the real support system is. I definitely feel like the [Hmong] students' support is where that is, especially Hmong. Hmong students here have great student support for each other.

Both the male and female participants identified academic and social support from peers; however, there was a distinct difference of support sought by gender. The male students emphasized how peers provided social support that related to their perception of and comfort within the campus environment. One male student shared about the importance of

hanging out with other Hmong people who kind-of experience the same thing like you and not hanging out with someone who considered you [different], there is a brotherhood.

Similarly, another male student compared academic and social peer support, with a stronger emphasis on the social aspect of support. He stated,

You'll take a lot of classes with your Hmong peers and help each other out, but I think that the biggest [support] is the social aspect.

In contrast, the Hmong females emphasized the importance of peer support relative to academics. Specifically, they focused on how they supported and motivated each other to study. One female student described this process with her Hmong peers,

We have a lot of the same requirements, so we try to take the same professors at the same time. But it doesn't always work out, so we always study together and it helps.

Although there were differences in how the study's female or male students used and relied on peer support, it did not influence the gender composition of the peers sought (i.e.,

having friends of both genders). Similar to previous research (Lin et al, 2015; Xiong & Lam, 2013), support from peers of similar backgrounds and cultural affiliation (Vue, 2013) is an important and needed process relative to having a positive experience and inviting climate in which they persist academically. For example, one student poignantly stated, “if you don’t have that [Hmong peer] support, you won’t be able to stay here [in school].”

***Social support through student groups and programs – “It’s one of the reasons that I remain here, that I didn’t drop out.”*** In addition to support from Hmong student peers via informal means, the students also identified how they sought social support through formalized university structures (e.g., being members of Hmong-specific organizations and/or federal or stated funded student services programs for students of color). The student groups and programs provided academic, social, and cultural support and resources as first-generation college students, individuals from low-income families, and Hmong American students. Addressing how Hmong students can access both social and academic support, one student stated, “They [Hmong students] can network from there [student organization] and make sure you know somebody who’s in the same major as you.” Importantly, these student groups and programs provided them with the opportunity to build their social support system, making the needed connections and networks to navigate college as one student expressed.

One great thing about [name of program] is that they actually try to give you a head start on your social network. They try to make you feel a part of this university. Coming here is hard to go out there and meet people and from what I can see, [the program] is one of the great things that helped me stay here at the university.

Although the students sought connection through these formalized groups, the extent of other university connections beyond the groups and programs was more limited. For example, one student highlighted the disconnection between Hmong students and campus personnel. Reflecting on how Hmong students responded to a campus racial incident, the student shared, “I don’t know a single Hmong who went to the Dean of Students...or any support services from this university.” Instead, the Hmong students responded by attending a Hmong student organization to discuss the effects of the incidents on their experiences as Hmong students.

As reflected by the students’ narratives, being connected with student groups and programs facilitated the creation of social support systems that assisted their academic persistence. Students’ having connections and feeling valued within those systems is consistent to the Hmong American undergraduate research (Lin et al., 2015; Lor, 2008) and a critical venue by which to build inclusive contexts for students (Museus, 2014; Vue, 2013).

### **Cultural Themes: Values of Family and Community**

***Shifting Perceptions of Gender: “We need to broaden our horizons.”*** Evident across the focus groups was how Hmong American students’ educational experiences influenced their gender discourse. As Hmong males have traditionally had access and familial/clan support to pursue education, they are in turn viewed as often having more prestige, power, and status within the community (Moua, 2003). However, with both males and females seeking higher education, males’ perceptions of females and females’ self-perceptions were addressed as part of the educational experience. First, most of the male students conveyed that the dominant discourse of female oppression in a patriarchal Hmong society did not apply in the university setting. The

males acknowledged their counterparts as equals or higher achievers than male students as well as more active participants in student-run organizations. One male explained,

I'm pretty sure they'll [Hmong women] be doing a lot better than the guys. I'm not sure how it's like, maybe outside their home, but here on campus I feel like there's a pretty strong student support network and the whole gender issues thing really...I don't really feel it applies. ... If you look at a lot of student leadership positions [in the Hmong student organizations], a lot of them are filled by the Hmong women.... It shows that a lot of women are taking charge.

Yet, the male students realized that their female counterparts had an option to negotiate a gender discourse of oppression within higher education, whereas the males perceived themselves as being viewed as the "oppressor." One male student aptly explained the idea stating,

Hmong women ... if they internalize that "oh, we're oppressed, we need to break out of this," well of course they're going to progress. ...Hmong men only have the option of being an oppressor or bookish or, you know, like the comic relief or the side-kick.

For the female students, being in college changed their culturally-prescribed gender expectations, their relationship to their male counterparts, as well their cultural view of themselves. The females described the different gender restrictions within their families, with their brothers having "a lot more freedom...to do what it is that guys want to do." For the female students, they addressed how they negotiated different cultural expectations between home and school, describing the process as negotiating two separate worlds. One female student stated,

[G]oing out and waking up late, you know it is like you don't have that freedom at home. So really I guess that is part of college life, like when I do go home now it's kind-of, sometimes, I think of it as almost two different worlds...my life here [at college] is a lot different from my life at home.

The female students described how they also sought to expand the boundaries of success for Hmong students by questioning familial and clan expectations. One student stated,

I think we [Hmong females] need to broaden our horizon and reach and find something that we're good at. And, I don't think the job industry is thought of just nurses and doctors and lawyers. You know...I think there are other things. I think society, the Hmong community, and the elders, especially, they're kind of narrow-minded. They only see that perspective.

Gender expectations and cultural scripts influenced students' self- and other perceptions as they managed home and school processes—a process that has not yet been fully explored but clearly warrants consideration (Sengkhammee et al., 2017; Lee, 1997; Vue, 2013).

**Community Responsibility: "There are not enough of us."** As many Hmong students continue to be first in their families to attend college and carry the expectations of their families to *rau siab*, the students knew they had a responsibility to attain a higher education to advance their Hmong community. The students described earning a college degree as both a responsibility and contribution to their community's progress. Aware of the lack of Hmong American presence on campus, larger area community, and society, one student stated,

Within the Hmong community, I don't think we have enough people to represent ourselves that is why our parents push us [into education], just so we can represent ourselves in the community.

Although they understood their community obligation and engaged it through earning good grades, the females were less certain about their community contribution, as their Hmong elders had yet to define fully their roles and opportunities as female college students. They nonetheless knew that they would soon be recognized by their community's leaders as one female shared,

I feel like *cov laus* [the elders] they're kind of opening up to, ... they're realizing that Hmong women are becoming very strong. And a lot of us are going to school. More and more of us are going to school and we're getting better grades than Hmong men.

***Community Pressure to Succeed: "We can't mess up."*** A closely-related theme of community pressure emerged for the students. As Hmong American students are looked to as the "intellectual group who must lead the Hmong to the future" (Lee, 2007, p. 5), they experienced the responsibility as community pressure to succeed. Students identified feeling pressure given that failure was not an option and in turn success was a high-stakes process. Students recognized that their potential failure went beyond their individual academic success; it would represent their family, entire clan, and their entire Hmong community. One student explained,

It's kind of like you're letting the whole family down, not just your family, but the whole family [clan], everybody that has hope for you.

Similarly, a student shared that "messaging up" in college was not an option as her family and entire clan "looked up" to her to make it, to be a success. As part of this pressure to succeed, the students named the expectations from her Hmong community and the larger society to obtain prestigious careers as an avenue to advance the Hmong community in general. She stated,

I think what contributes to our pressure is the Hmong community [and] society because everyone expects you to be a lawyer, or a doctor, it's a prestigious thing to do.

Another student referenced the familial and clan pressure to succeed with particular careers.

It's part of what my father's dream [for my brother] to become a doctor. I think that's what my brother's doing and the whole clan looks up to my brother too, so I think everybody wants him to go into that field.

***Shifting dynamics of Parent/Child Relationship: "My parents, we talk more!"*** The final theme that emerged addressed a shift in the parent-child relationship related to the students' status as college students. In many Hmong families, an individual often gains adult status (e.g., individual autonomy from the parents), through marriage (Moua, 2003). Increasingly, attending or attaining a higher education has been a new venue for achieving such status without being married (Her & Gloria, 2016), in particular for females (Yang, 2014). The students described this shifting dynamic within their parent-child relationship as them being perceived as mature individuals who address topics of culture and family. One student explained,

When I go home, we talk a lot about culture and traditions.... In college you try to find where you came from and ...when you go home, those are your cultural connections. Now my parents tell me a lot more...and they really acknowledge me. I think it's the fact that when you make it here [college], they [parents] are like, "Oh yeah, you're mature."

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Similarly, a female student described core gender shifts in her parental relationship, as she no longer was asked to complete household roles but rather supported to focus on her studies.

They don't really ask me to do chores any more. They're just like come and eat and go study, that's all I do, pretty much. I get dropped off at 8[am], and then they pick me up around 12, midnight. And then I just go home, eat, sleep, study.

As the young people who will “*yuav tsum coj haiv neeg Hmoob lawm yav tom ntej*” (“lead the Hmong to the future”; Lee, 2007, p. 5), shifts in gender roles and family relationships were clearly evident in the study's themes as part of this new educational process. The parent-child shifts add to the research on Hmong parents who seek to understand their role and function in supporting their undergraduate child(ren) (Her & Gloria, 2016).

### Implications and Study Considerations

Taking a holistic exploration of 13 Hmong American undergraduates' educational experiences, the study situated its primary questions within an inclusive framework that emphasizes psychological, social, and cultural dimensions of students' processes within the university setting (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000). Across the focus groups, the students' self-beliefs and perceptions of self in relation to others, social support from family, peers, and formalized groups and programs, were steeped within their cultural responsibilities and pressures from family and community. The findings align with research on students of color (e.g., Gloria et al., 2016) and Hmong American undergraduates (e.g., Lin et al., 2015; Lor, 2008; Sengkhamee et al., 2017; Vue, 2013). Importantly, it also extends the understanding of gender scripts and the influence of familial and cultural expectations within higher education. The study's limitations and future directions are presented, followed by the implications for student affairs professionals.

### Limitations and Future Directions for Study

There are several study limitations that warrant review. Although the students represented different student standings, there was an inverse relationship between student standing and gender, as the majority of the females were first-year students (5 of the 7), and the majority of the males were seniors (4 of the 6). As gender and class standing influence Hmong American students' educational experiences (Sengkhamee et al., 2017), the study's findings may not have fully captured the progressive transition that may have been occurring for the students. Use of a stratified sampling method to gain representation across different class standings is suggested. A longitudinal study that follows female and male Hmong American students across their educational tenures could also address their individual and collective changes to gain a nuanced understanding of their experiences.

The small and close-knit Hmong American community and knowledge of the different clans and families with students attending the university, as well as participant familiarity in the focus groups, may have restricted the depth of disclosure. As a Hmong individual's action is believed to represent one's family and clan (Ngo, 2013), a social desirability to protect one's family or restrict the response about who influenced their educational experience may have occurred. Despite the intentionally selected group format, for individuals for whom connection is salient (Lin et al., 2015; Lor, 2008; Sengkhamee et al., 2017; Vue, 2013), the students may not



have fully described the influence of the pressure or depth of expectations from one's family on their confidence or self-esteem. As the researchers were also well-known within the Hmong American student community, this might have influenced the participants' responses (e.g., discussed what they believed was wanted for the study as a way to assist their fellow Hmong American peers with their team project). A method that distances the participants and researchers (e.g., a "diary" study), could allow students to describe more freely their daily educational experiences. Although the focus groups yielded strong information, longitudinal and/or in-depth interviews could add more nuanced stories and details to the educational narratives of this study.

### **Implications for University Personnel: Supporting *Tub Txawj, Ntxhais Ntse***

The resulting themes from the focus groups direct how university personnel (e.g., student affairs professionals, administrators, faculty) can offer corresponding psychosociocultural (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000) academic persistence support that is relevant and consistent with Hmong American undergraduates' experiences and needs. First, student affairs professionals working with Hmong American undergraduates would do well to assist students in identifying sibling and non-sibling peer support. By encouraging the culturally relevant notion of an "academic family" (Gloria et al., 2016; Lin et al., 2015), students can find support to cope with and take perspective on those difficult and challenging experiences (i.e., microaggressions) that occur.

Having a network of college peers on whom they can rely on as family, the students' can bolster their sense of connection and confidence that they too can succeed in college. By seeing other Hmong students who are similarly successful in the academic setting can serve to decrease their sense of intellectual phoniness and normalize their experiences through the collective. Connecting students to existing Hmong-focused student groups and programs that serve underrepresented first-generation students is recommended, a process identified in the literature as critical to their academic persistence and cultural well-being (Lor, 2008; Vue, 2013). For those students who are not group or program affiliated, it is equally important to encourage them to make use of their home and cultural peer support system (i.e., siblings who have completed or are attending college) to make the needed connections to bolster their sense of belonging and persistence (Sengkhamee et al., 2017).

Next, university administration would do well to provide financial and structural support for Hmong American student support groups that are co-facilitated by a Hmong student leader and a student affairs professional (e.g., counseling center staff, multicultural student professional), allowing a culturally-relevant space for students to support each other. Open and/or semi-structured (e.g., topic-based) talking groups to discuss such issues as motivation, responsibility, and pressure to earn a higher education for their Hmong community could assist in managing their personal and cultural wellness needs. Discussions in single and mixed gender groups are recommended as Hmong gender roles and scripts continue to be salient and influential to the students' educational experiences, a process consistent with a small yet growing literature (Her & Gloria, 2016; Sengkhamee et al., 2017; Vue, 2013; Yang, 2014). Further, faculty need to educate themselves about the role and function of family among Hmong American undergraduates (Her & Gloria, 2016) as a means of culturally congruity relationships and validation of students' mattering and place on campus (Sengkhamee et al., 2017).

Finally, faculty, staff, and front-line student affairs professionals should carefully consider the role that Hmong parents and community elders have on Hmong American

undergraduates' academic persistence. As indicated in this study, students perceived their parents as prominent to their educational experience as they provided emotional and tangible support, held expectations of success for familial and community advancement, and engaged in shifting parent-child relationships as the students entered a new role as adults given their college status. For these reasons, all levels of university personnel should create opportunities (e.g., grants and research, workshops and programming) for Hmong parents to visit campus and gain college knowledge as well as share their wisdom (Her et al., 2012) to support collaboratively their *tub txawj, nxhais ntse* (educated sons and daughters).

### **Conclusion**

Using the psychosociocultural framework, this study provided an in-depth understanding of Hmong undergraduates' experience college at a predominately White institution. The study's findings were consistent with the extant literature regarding self-beliefs and sense of belonging, the need for broad-based social support and connections, and sense of cultural congruity. The findings also extended the literature on Hmong American undergraduates in three significant ways. First, dimensional gender differences within their educational experiences were evidenced. Specifically, differences emerged in the how they managed and coped with microaggressions within the educational setting, utilized peer support to advance their academic endeavors, and negotiated their cultural role and place within the university and in the community. Next, the participants actively relied upon and cultivated various aspects of the community cultural wealth to navigate college. From accessing siblings who were also college peers to seeking out ethnic and gender similar enclaves, it was clear that access to other Hmong individuals mattered. Finally, the role and influence of Hmong parents for Hmong American undergraduates was central in provide motivational support; however, the changing parent-child relationship given educational success was illuminating to understand Hmong community expectations and cultural obligations. In combination, these findings revealed the influence and importance of intersecting identities for Hmong American undergraduates within the higher education setting.

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