

THE SEARCH FOR EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES  
A STUDY OF THE HMONG STUDENT EXPERIENCE

A Thesis

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by

Cha Lao

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Department of Sociology

Abstract  
of  
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Only a hand full of researchers have studied the Hmong population in the United States. As one of the lowest academic achieving ethnic groups among Asians, the Hmong students' educational experience is a study worthy to examine. The purpose of this thesis was to study the Hmong student experience in higher education. Specifically, what are the social capital and cultural resources that these students utilize during their academic journey? Social capital theory and the intersectional system of inequality (race, gender, and class) guided this research. Data was collected from Hmong students on the CSUS campus using in-depth interviews. The results from my research showed that the intersectionality of race, gender and class affects the academic success of the students. On the other hand, different type of social capitals or the resources that a student utilizes play an important factor in their education. The male students tended to bring up their gender role more so than their female counterparts.

\_\_\_\_\_, Committee Chair  
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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The experiences of refugees in the United States are distinct from other immigrants' or that of U.S. citizens. Refugees are unique in that they are forced to move from their homeland into another one and are exposed to new cultural and societal norms. In 1975 many Southeast Asian refugees came into the United States because of "political instability in Third World countries" (Desbarats 1985:522). In this research, I use the words "refugee" and "immigrant" interchangeably, since some researchers claim that refugees share similar experiences to voluntary immigrants who willingly come into the host society (McNail, Dunnigan, and Mortimer 1994). Although they may choose a host nation, however, they have little choice of staying in their homeland if they want to survive. For many, the political agenda of their homeland hunts them down like animals. A refugee is defined as follows (Refugee Council USA):

Any person who is outside any country of such person's nationality or, in the case of a person having no nationality, is outside any country in which such person last habitually resided, and who is unable or unwilling to return to, and is unable or unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of that country because of persecution or a well founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.

Therefore, refugees are displaced individuals who leave their homes (such as immigrants) but are unique because their movement is motivated by the desire to stay alive. Many move so that their family could have a better life.

Refugees include children. As refugees in host countries, children are often placed into the educational programs/institutions with the intent of acculturating them to the host society. Thus, there is a common assumption that educational institutions serve as a bridge to socialize adults and child refugees into the host society. However, family and students are placed in poor neighborhoods and underfunded schools, which lack programs that can help their transition into the new society (Huyck and Fields 1981).

### *Significance of the Study*

There are few studies on the educational experiences of refugee students especially in the Sacramento region. As a person who belongs to one of the Hmong communities in the Sacramento area, I have observed that there is an increasing population of Hmong refugee/first generation students. Many students do not complete high school or college; however there are some Hmong students who do graduate and move on into higher education. I was among these fortunate ones to gain access and graduate from college. Only a handful of my Hmong peers who had graduated with me from my high school has completed college. Most of those who graduated are Hmong female. I hope that my time and effort with this research can help improve the low graduation rates among the people in my community. Within the last decade, there has been visible support in Sacramento for Hmong youths' higher education, but I believe there are educational gaps that still need to be examined. Are the students who graduate different from those who do not graduate? Are the graduates incorporating "successful traits" into their lives to graduate from school? Or are these differences in graduation due to how assimilated the individuals are to American culture? I was interested in

understanding what specific resources a Hmong student utilizes for a successful educational attainment and what role assimilation played in their academic success.

I will be focusing on the Hmong student population in Sacramento, California. I have chosen this population due to their population within the Sacramento region. In a regional study by Fong and Kim-Ju (2006), the authors used data from the 2000 US Census to show that from 1990 to 2000, the Hmong population in Sacramento County increased 195.3% (4,270 in 1990 to 12,610 in 2000). In 2010 there were about 26,996 Hmong Americans living in Sacramento County (US Census 2010). They more than doubled from 2000 to 2010. However, this notable increase in population does not reflect a prosperous Hmong community. Fong and Kim-Ju (2006) found that among Hmong aged 25 years and older in the Sacramento County, only 2.8% had a bachelor's degree and 2.0% had a graduate or professional degree. Within the same region, 20.1% of whites aged 25 years and older had a bachelor's degree and 11.8% had a graduate or professional degree (Fong and Kim-Ju 2006:11). Their average household size is 7.1 person per household, their median household income is \$28,405, and their poverty rate is 46.1% (U.S. Census, 2000). These numbers clearly show the flawed model minority myth.

#### *Research Question*

In this research, I explore the experiences and factors that affect Hmong students' academic success in higher education? The central research question guiding this study is: What are the social capital and cultural resources that Hmong students utilize during their academic journey? Understanding their experiences and what resources are available to Hmong students' education is important because the knowledge gained from

their academic experiences can help future refugee/immigrant students adjust and be better prepared for American higher education. In addition, findings from this research may influence educational policies to better serve students with similar circumstances, e.g., immigrant, first generation, and minority status. This study can help assist students who are culturally different (from mainstream ones) and come from low-income families where the individual may experience not only financial difficulties but also cultural conflict with the dominant culture (Bosher 1997, Vang 2005). Also, this research could inform the educational policies of "what works" and "does not work" for Hmong students and how to adjust programs or direct available resources to the needs of the students. This study was informed by social capital theory because it is, "useful in explicating how ethnic-based forms of social organization and collective action are embedded in interpersonal networks, and how these forms of organization and action generate and distribute resources" (Sanders 2002:330). In addition, the intersections of race, class, and gender plays a vital role in shaping access to social capital and thus mediate the educational success of students. Therefore, the incorporation of race, class, and gender will also be examined to explain the students' educational attainment.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I will first explain about the historical background of the Hmong and why they have become refugees in the United States. I then summarize studies about Hmong refugees and other similar groups and how the use of social capital affects their lives. Finally, I will explain the theoretical framework and my hypotheses that guided this research.

### *Background about the Hmong*

In Laos the Hmong people were recruited by the CIA in the early 1960's to stop the Vietnamese communist forces. However, in 1975 the United States withdrew from Laos and left many Hmong to defend for themselves. Many were displaced due to this involvement with the U.S. A large portion of the Hmong population fled into neighboring Thailand and settled in refugee camps. Those who were fortunate left soon after U.S. troops pulled out of Laos and found refuge in several receiving countries (i.e. United States, France, Australia). Others had to wait for various organizations and sponsors from the receiving countries so that they could leave the refugee camps. Ngo and Lee (2007) explains that Hmong were among the third wave of Southeast Asian refugees to settle in the United States. They were "the least educated of the Southeast Asian refugees" and "had lower English proficiency, less experience with formal education, and fewer transferable skills" (Ngo and Lee 2007:418-419). Having lived in the rural mountain areas of Laos for centuries, many of the Hmong refugees had difficulty adjusting to life in the city. City life consisted of working for money, using that money to purchase food and other goods and services, pay rent, bills, etc. In addition, Hmong did not have a written

language until after the Secret War. Their culture was taught orally, so many were illiterate. The Hmong were farmers that grew their own crops, lived an agrarian lifestyle and could not transfer many of their living skills to inner city life.

*Model Minority Myth: The Hmong Minority*

The Hmong experience dispels the common myth of the Model Minority within the United States. This myth holds that Asians are the *model minority* who have overcome racial oppression and achieved the American Dream by their independent merit (Ngo and Lee 2007). Furthermore, Asians supposedly overcome the challenges and barriers that prevent other less successful minorities from social mobility. Simply, Asians have made it by pulling up their own bootstraps. However, this myth masks the underlying oppression and poverty that many Asian Americans experience due to the unique racialization experienced by Asians. In addition, the term Asian suppresses the ethnic/national diversity within the word. It aggregates those who come from humble backgrounds with those that have migrated via professional preference legal pathways (Portes and Rumbaut 2014). This practice is widespread among researchers who homogenize Asian Americans and neglect the diversity within the Asian population. Hmong American experience crumbles the *model minority*.

The stereotype of the model minority conceals the struggles of many Asian Americans. In studying Hmong students at a Wisconsin high school, Lee (2001) documents that Hmong students are often, "overlooked because they are quiet and teachers assume that they are working hard" (Lee 2001:515). People assume that Asian students are doing fine in their academics and cease to offer support. The model minority

myth conveys a false image of success to people of Asian ancestry. In one of Lee's interview, however, a guidance counselor even concluded that the Hmong students are not as motivated as the East Asian (Chinese and Korean) students. The myth hides the structural context and policies that have favored high-income and educated Asian immigrants, who are already successful and not necessarily products of the American Dream. The myth conveys that all Asian students have equal access and opportunities and that those who fail do so because of their individual or cultural failings.

Gender also affected the education of the students. In Lee's (2001) study, some of the female students were expected to follow traditional roles in a patriarchal culture both at home and larger society. At home, they were expected to be obedient daughters who took care of household work and/or their younger siblings which limited their time to focus on academics. Young women were also expected to marry young and form families. Educational attainment for low-income, first-generation, and minority women becomes challenging to achieve. In addition to gender barriers, Lee (2001) found that high school culture favored White middle-class students at the expense of minority students' education. Lacking a sense of support, a majority of the second-generation Hmong students complained, "that they cannot relate to the curriculum or their teachers" and, "distrust their teachers, assuming that they are racist or at the very least critical of Hmong culture" (Lee 2001:522). Thus, with these various intersectional factors affecting Hmong students, how do some students "make it" and overcome those difficulties? Race, class, and gender all affect the lives of Hmong students. Within contrast to Asian nationals who migrate through professional immigrant categories (e.g. H1A and B),

Hmong students come from humble backgrounds and then face racial, gendered, and class biases that structurally limit their social mobility.

*Culturally-Tied Network as a Resource*

Collective individuals share a distinct relationship with one another and may be a resource to each other. According to Bourdieu (1986), a person can profit from social capital through social ties to members of their social network. Each person within that social networks may specialize in a special skill, trait, or have other social ties to other network of people that may be beneficial. Thus, a person who has or knows the right connections may be at an advantage when compared to those who do not. The majority of refugees left behind their possession of goods and arrived to the United States as very poor individuals or families. They had no social capital in the new land, though they had and developed social capital among themselves. At first, refugees may have been separated from family and their close-nit social ties disrupted during the relocation. Therefore, localized governmental agencies and other refugees can assist refugee students. In addition, parents of refugee students can be a key source of support for refugee students. This study explores how refugees overcome personal difficulties in relation to their educational attainment. Before exploring the resources that refugee students use for education, it is important to examine their lived experiences. One of the salient experiences for most refugee students is the cultural gap between their host society and their own ethnic background.

Huyck and Fields (1981:248) found that refugee children who are immersed in their own culture group is beneficial, because the community serves, “as a buffer to

rejection and isolation.” Refugee children are often targeted as outsiders who do not belong. They may look, talk, dress, and act differently from the host society which makes them a target to those who cannot accept the “outsiders.” A student may experience negative situations while they are in their educational environment. For example, the host society may hold stereotypes and prejudice notions about refugees which can lead to a hostile campus environment (McBrien 2005). Culture as a personal resource may reduce these negative experiences because refugee students can relate to others who are like them and affirm each other. Students’ culture serves as a bridge to bond with similar others and create a social network of support. Refugee groups may develop intricate social networks to share resources with other group members (Sanders 2002). Culture can be used as an outlet against the rejection of their host society. In addition, Huyack and Fields (1981) note the experiences of Cuban refugees who may fare better than other refugee groups because of the familial ties in the United States. These familial ties help Cuban refugees better adjust to the changes in their environment. These refugees are a special case because there are large communities of Cuban refugees in the southeastern U.S. Moreover, the first wave of Cuban refugees had significant amount of financial and human capital that facilitated their incorporation to the United States (Portes and Rumbaut 2006). Cubans are consequently advantaged compared to other newly arrived refugees since they use their cultural network and ethnic enclaves to locate other refugees for support (Huyack and Fields 1981; Portes and Rumbaut 2006).

Huyck and Fields (1981) found that acculturation to the host society is an important factor in the lives of refugees. However, not all refugees may want to

acculturate or assimilate and may live in ethnic solidarity to keep their ethnic/racial culture and identity. Furthermore, if an ethnic group is rejected or denied full acceptance by the dominant group, that ethnic group may not become assimilated into the host society (Sanders 2002; Portes and Rumbaut 2006, 2014). Not all refugee groups will be accepted into the host society as easily as were the Cuban refugees who faced a different context of reception based on favorable government policy, labor market opportunities, and their social and human capital levels that were quite different from a humble and racially distinct Hmong population.

Eisenbruch (1988) discovered that in the process of adjusting to a new society, refugee children's culture is disrupted hurting their mental health. Southeast Asian refugees are influenced by kinfolk network. This means that familial network is a very important resource for these groups of individuals. Since most refugee families are separated and resettled into different geographical location, "The entire family has undergone the trauma of being uprooted, oftentimes the family support systems are not available to its members" (Eisenbruch 1988:289). Consequently, many families also experience such disruption of the kinfolk network and refugee families cannot "mutually assist one another" (1988:289). Eisenbruch argues that providing students with an identity of their cultural group will be beneficial to their mental state. Therefore cultural identity may become an important factor in the educational success of refugee students. By being more in touch with their cultural group and having a strong kinship network, refugee students may be able to utilize other refugee students as a resource for their educational development (Eisenbruch 1988, McNail, Dunnigan, and Mortimer 1994); that

is, other students provided an important resource readily available to the refugee student. Eisenbruch stresses the importance of how cultural network and identity may benefit a refugee but does not state how the refugees attain a cultural identity. Some refugees may live in isolated areas without any social ties to others which they can relate to or live in a diversified community that does not have their own cultural population.

Family ties or kinship network may provide refugees with resources for higher education. In a longitudinal survey study of the educational achievement of St. Paul, Minnesota Hmong students, McNail, Dunnigan, and Mortimer (1994) found that Hmong students may be pre-exposed to education as a means of success in their homeland. This is due to the fact that the foundation for education was “laid in Laos” which “many Hmong believe that education necessarily conferred high status” (1994:47-48). McNail and associates proposed a cultural-model to explain the educational experiences of the Hmong students. Simply, Hmong culture values education for their community. Similar to Eisenbruch’s study that culture is a vital component to the individual, McNail and associates (1994) argues that because there is a support for higher education within the Hmong culture, they, “Often do better than the white majority in school” (1994:45). The authors also argue that “Hmong families, peer groups, and the Hmong community provided a high degree of support for academic success” (1994:59). Both McNail and associates and Eisenbruch (1988) say that a refugee’s network and culture are important resources. Cultural values are a resource to an individual’s educational attainment. However, the research by McNail and associates is limited to the study of high school students. There is no guarantee that culture will help Hmong students achieve

academically in college where the settings are more likely to be predominately white or diversified, Hmong students are not necessary with and within their cultural network in those settings. Consequently, outside the mainstream cultural norm (middle class and white), Hmong, Miens, and Cambodians have the lowest education achievement, even when compared to other Asian groups such as the Vietnamese, Chinese, Koreans, Japanese, etc (Fong and Kim-Ju 2006). The notion that certain Asian groups' culture values education reproduces the model minority myth and covers up/hides the struggles of Asian groups who are not making it in the United States (Wu 2002).

Contrasting the body of literatures above, McBrien (2005) shows that the culture of a refugee may disadvantage the educational achievement of refugee students. Examining the literatures concerning Khmer parents, McBriend concludes that the parents “feared loss of face by pushing a child who subsequently failed. They also believed that through reincarnation, one’s present position was determined by a life lived previously” (McBriend 2005:346). In this sense, the parents did not want to intervene in their child’s education. The child's academics were a reflection of the parents' parenting skills and educational knowledge. Thus, the parents' social reputation is honored by how their child's life compared to other children. In addition, they saw the child’s education as predetermined not by the individual him/herself, but by a supernatural rule which states that what happens in the now happens for a reason because of an individual’s past life. From McBriend's (2005) study, the Khmer students cannot depend on their own culture since their parents will not get involved in the students education. According to this author, student’s education is hurt by cultural deficits.

In addition, Portes (1969) also shows how culture may negatively affect education. Portes examines Cuban families who live in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. As time passed, the increasing Cuban refugees who settled within the area became an integrated part of the community. Portes (1969:515) argues that “The weakening of old values and identities has led to increasingly integrative ‘cultural mixtures,’” which, “facilitates attainment of higher socioeconomic rewards and the occurrence of other favorable experiences in the U.S.” The Cuban refugees assimilated/accommodated with their host society to survive. It did not hurt that they were generally of European ancestry and had come from a higher socioeconomic status (quite different from the low-income, Afro-Cubans who came in the 1980's). Therefore, by leaving behind cultural values that do not align with the educational institution of the new host society may increase one’s educational achievements. However, this research is limited to the experiences of Cuban refugees. As I have explained earlier, other literature noted that Cubans are a special form of refugees who developed ethnic enclaves to support themselves (Huyck and Fields 1981), but also approximated the racial and class backgrounds of middle-class mainstream Americans. Their experience of losing their cultural value cannot be generalized to the Hmong refugees. Bonilla-Silva (2006, 2014) notes that some immigrants, contingent on racial and class background, get incorporated in the white classification in the United States and while others, such as Southeast Asians, remain “Otherized” and associated with historically marginalized groups like African Americans. What Portes found in his early study (40 years ago) may not be applicable to the Cuban society of today, particularly considering the racial and class divisions within it.

Portes and Rumbaut (2006) note that the context of reception plays a vital role in lives of immigrants and refugees in the host country. These authors argue that the government of the host country is, "the first stage of the process of incorporation because it affects the probability of successful immigration and the framework of economic opportunities and legal options available to migrants once they arrive" (Portes and Rumbaut 2006:93). The immigrant's future in a new social setting depends greatly on how others will receive or accept them. As a result, how well a refugee does in the host country depends on how that country is willing to provide the support and resources for the refugee group. Overall, some literatures find that the networks which are provided through a refugee's culture offer a sense of bond that they can utilize for their own means. Thus, the cultural network offered individual refugee groups the sense of a shared culture which can be utilized when they need help or assistance.

#### *Parent Cultural Socialization as a Resource*

One of the most important resources for refugee students is the parents of the students. Parents provide the foundation to their child's life and are important to the educational aspirations of their child. Franz's (2003) research of Bosnian refugees found that women rather than men were the breadwinner before emigrating, and now remain the primary breadwinner. Bosnian men had difficulties finding employment, whereas the women easily found jobs to support their family. As a result, mothers of refugee students may become important socializing agents for their children especially female students. In this case, mothers may teach their daughters that they can make it in education because in their gender norms women are the breadwinners of the household. Female are motivated

to overcome patriarchal roles within their own culture and the larger one (Franz 2003). Mothers may serve as persons whom empower female students for social mobility. However, even though the wife may become the breadwinner the husband may still hold authority over the major family decisions. In addition, what about the male students, can they benefit, aside from monetary gain, from their mother as being the breadwinner? Can this literature apply to other refugee women who may not become the breadwinner and come from patriarchal traditions? Does it lead to a double shift with women doing twice the work as men (Le Espiritu 2003; Menjivar 2003)?

Winland (1994) explored the experiences of Hmong women who have converted to Christianity. Women also became the breadwinner within these types of households. The men on the other hand were often confined to low-paid, low-skilled jobs. Back in Laos, the women “were dependent on their husband or male relatives” (Winland 1994:30). This dependency changed as they entered into a new society. Mothers become increasingly important as a resource for the family as they became less dependent on their male counterparts for support. And by attending church, the Hmong women selectively incorporated new Christian beliefs and practices into their own belief system (Winland 1994). These women were able to acculturate and gain some knowledge of their host society by being involved in the church. They become more exposed to the societal norms since it was built on a heavily Christian doctrine. Thus, the Hmong women developed societal ties to others within and outside of the Hmong community. Refugee students may utilize their mothers as a form of income support as well as a powerful socializing agent. Having an extended social network, these Hmong women may provide

their children with resources that they would not have known of if they had not attended church. The church's social web may socialize individuals to perform well in school, "to bring honor to the family and to the ethnic community" (Sanders 2002:344). However, this research is limited to women who have converted to Christianity. This conversion may have better exposed these individuals to the cultural norms of the host society. On the other hand, many refugees do not convert into the dominant religion and may not experience social mobility like the Hmong women. Moreover, it is difficult to attribute mobility to religious conversion without a control group (mother's who did not convert and their children's success).

Conversion to the dominant religion or assimilating to the cultural norm may not be the reason for academic success. In her study, Ramirez (2011) examines the experience of 24 Latino students who were current doctoral students or had completed their doctoral degree at the time of the study. Many of the students lacked the knowledge of applying to graduate school. This was, "even more pronounced for Latino students, particularly for first-generation Latino college students from working-class background" because they lacked the cultural capital or knowledge about graduate school (Ramirez 2011:210). One interviewee stated that he applied to the graduate program simply because the college was close to home and "attributed his lack of knowledge to his parents' unfamiliarity with the higher education landscape" (Ramirez 2011:210-211). Some participants stated that they were "scared," "intimidated," or felt "lost" by the application process while others stated that they did not have the proper support from their mentors or undergraduate program to prepare them for the graduate school

application process. These students struggled because of a lack of cultural capital (middle class knowledge about higher education). Evidently, the culture or religious background of immigrant students' parent is not sufficient to obtain a higher education.

### *Localized Resources*

A person's chance for a better life usually does not depend solely on the individual but also on his or her structural context or environment. Where some individuals live may be an important factor to where they are able to find localized resources. In his study of Indochinese refugees, Broadway (1987:128) found that "an additional factor in fostering the development of residential enclaves is the central role of the extended family in facilitating both the economic and emotional adjustment to the host society." Many refugees in the study stayed in areas that were close to their sponsoring church or Asian stores (Broadway 1987). Living in an enclave becomes beneficial to refugee students. These enclaves provide refugees with an "adjustment to the host society," which eased their transition into the host society. Education requires a huge emotional strain on an individual. Living in ethnic enclaves, refugee students may be able to make use of the available resources (i.e. Churches and other refugees) to help them with their education and a sense of belonging. Broadway's study focused on individuals who lived in a small town of Garden City, Kansas. The study focuses on a micro-structure and may not be generalizable to the larger population but provides important insights to the settlement of refugees on an individual level. In this case, the author writes that the Indochinese refugees congregate into a community for, "support

and assistance in adjusting to life within a new community” (Broadway 1987:134). Thus, the localized resources are a form of social capital.

Along Desbaratas (1985) found that secondary migrations by refugees were typically in areas that had favorable supportive social structure such as governmental assistance program and/or highly concentrated refugee populations. Refugees were more likely to move to areas that “offer climatic, economic, and social advantages” (Desbaratas 1985:535). In the study, Desbratas states that California had one of the highest refugee populations due to governmental programs helping refugees, which also attracted refugee settlement in addition to the large refugee population. Refugee students within such a community may utilize the assistances from the government (monetary terms or social assistance programs) towards their education. Also, by living in a concentrated area with other refugees, individuals can socially/emotionally/physically assist one another in times when they need help.

Having some similarity to Desbaratas’ study, Delgado-Gaitan (1994) found that in Yolo City (pseudonym), California, all the Russian refugee families that he studied were dependent on welfare assistance for support and moved to the area because of a large Russian population. In Delgado-Gaitan’s study, the Russian refugees used the churches as a mediator between the child and parent. The church was an institution that provided support for the refugee by offering English classes and family counseling. In a society that they are unfamiliar with, churches can be utilized as a central place of reference by refugee students (Huyck and Fields 1981). In areas such as the one described here, Russian refugee students would have abundance in resources. First off, individuals who

are concentrated in such areas have their living subsidized by the government which may alleviate the need of finding employment to buy goods and services. Second, as shown already, concentrated areas of refugees provide an individual with the need of social support and may even provide them with a culture that reinforces education as a desired value (McNail et al 1994). Overall, Russian refugees who are located in Yolo City can utilize the localized resources within that community for their need of goods and services. However, the study may not reflect how other refugee experience life in the U.S.

Delgado-Gaitan notes that the values and experiences of Russian refugees are similar to that of European Americans. Other refugee groups may not have “Euroamerican immigrant experience,” as have the Russian refugees. In addition, the study of 12 families cannot be generalized as an overall experience of Russian refugees in the population.

#### *Theoretical Framework: Social Capital*

A person's resource may depend greatly on their surrounding and network. The links in a metal chain connect and are bond to one another to form a chain. As a person adds on more links, the chain gets longer and longer. Each bond made between the links is essential to keep the chain connected as one long piece. This concept can be compared to the concept of a person's social network or to be more precise, social capital. Persons with a large social web are connected to individuals whose knowledge or interest are slightly different from one's own network. Thus, a person with a large social network may have vast information about a certain idea or any institutionalized subject that may advance the success of that person. A term used to define the phenomenon of a person's human network is called social capital. Social capital may provide important resources

for an individual since it serves as a network of supporting relationship between two or more people.

One may ask, "Why is it important to study the concepts of social capital?" The relationship that people build with other corresponds to their mutual needs of one another. The resources that a person receives from their investment in the social relationship with other people depends on the type of relationship that is develop between those individuals. As a result, success in education, career, economic, etc. may be linked to knowing the "right" resources. Pierre Bourdieu is a renowned social theorist who conceptualized social capital. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992:119) define social capital as, "The sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition." People construct their network through the need of seeking information or mutual need from others. The connection of social relationship and social bonds are tied to the social shared norms within one's social network and the benefits of the reciprocal relationship. These networks may depend on the career or background of a person. A plumber may be connected to septic tank companies and a sociologist student may have a social network with professional sociological thinkers. Therefore, the relationships that people form create an intricate informational and supportive social web.

### *Hypotheses*

The information and support that a person receives from his/her social capital varies based on what is the actual gain from that relationship. For this purpose, social

capital is applicable to many concepts including educational attainment. Some may argue that educational attainment is dependent on an individual effort while some may argue that success in education depends largely on a person's social capital (Bourdieu 1989). Because of the pervasiveness that hegemony has on subordinate groups in the United States, I propose that immigrant/refugee students and students of immigrant parents of color may have many difficulties in their pursuit of higher education compared to native or even foreign-born European individuals. Many do not complete high school or college; however there are some immigrant students who do graduate and move on into higher education.

Students who are culturally different and come from low-income families may face not only financial difficulties but also cultural conflict with the dominant culture (Bosher 1997; Vang 2005). Their webs of social support are not embedded in institutional power, though their own social/cultural capital may still be sources of support (Tara Yosso, 2005). That in itself may affect the educational attainment of the students. The adoption of the traditional norms of society, through the use of hegemonic force, positions the student into a difficult position. Minorities' social capital may be used as a buffer against such conflict. Many immigrants and minorities live in ethnic enclaves that provides a system of social support and network that a heterogeneous community may not/cannot offer (Portes 1969, 2007; Broadway 1987; Desbaratas 1985; Sanders 2002). People derive important social capital from within these ethnic enclaves that may not be found in the larger community or in higher education.

With the limited literature on Hmong students, particularly those who are born to refugee parents and live in poor urban communities, my study will provide a micro-level view of the individuals within that community. Although my research will not be generalizable to the larger refugee/Hmong population, it provides important insights about what resources they have used for their education. I hope this study will also present an understanding of how refugees, who are often times the minority, function within a minority dominant setting. Refugees have an identity of being a refugee and a minority. It will be interesting to see if the study will generate any findings if these two identities have any major affect on refugee students' education. Also, social capital seems to be an overarching theme within the literature of refugees and immigrants especially through the shared cultural traits that they have. Applying the social capital theory to Hmong college students may generate some interesting and surprising findings. Recognizing how Hmong's own social capital is situated in a larger context of intersectional system of inequality (race, gender, and class) will help understand the key research question.

### **CHAPTER 3: DATA/METHODS**

Qualitative research was the best way of exploring the study's exploratory questions. I explored open-ended questions and gathered detailed information about the subject. My sample comes from a Hmong student organization on the CSUS campus called Hmong University Student Association (HUSA). I chose this particular college for its diverse Hmong student demographic (1st and 2nd generation, refugee status, gender, class, etc.). From my personal observation, this school has a population of refugee/second generation students whom are mainly from Southeast Asia. Participants must identify themselves as Hmong, currently attending and enrolled at Sacramento State in pursuit of a Bachelor's degree.

Data collection was collected in the 2016 Spring semester. Participants were chosen using a simple random sample technique. In addition to augment to substantial sample size, the researcher used convenient or snowball sampling. I joined the organization to build rapport with the students and asked for volunteer participants. In addition, I asked the officers of the organization to send out a mass email to HUSA members about my research and potential participants. Students were asked to contact me (at a specific email) if they wanted to participant in my research. The names were then entered into an online random name picker and the selected participants were contacted in-person to see if they were still willing to be a participant in the study. Contact information was exchanged between the participants and me. A date and time was set up between each individual participants.

The in-person interviews relied on open-ended questions (see Appendix). An audio recording device was used during all interviews with the participants so that the researcher could have a verbatim transcript of each interview. My sample included a total of 8 individuals. The students came from various majors (psychology, social work, computer science, mechanical engineer, etc.) In addition, their age ranged between 20 to 24 years old. The average GPA for the participant was 2.71. Two participants declined to answer. There were 4 males and 4 females participants. One of the female participant was a graduating senior. These individuals were my unit of analysis. All participants were given an informed-consent form and informed that they could stop the interview at any time that they feel uncomfortable with answering any of the questions asked. None of the student's real name were used for the research. I assigned each participants as pseudonym for the research and asked that they not provide any visual details of themselves during the interviews since an audio recorder was used.

I used the software, Dragon NaturallySpeaking to assist me with transcribing my results. As with all technology, there were some technical difficulties using the software. If a participants spoke far away from the microphone, the transcribing software could not clearly pick up what they were saying. I went back on all the transcription to check and fill in missing or unclear dialogue. I analyzed the responses to the questions first by printing out transcripts of each interview. I read through the individual transcriptions one by one and used different colored highlighters to do open, close, and focus coding. This guided me to find thematic similarities/differences within the responses of my

interviewees. The main findings were color coded and labeled. Similar categories were grouped to find if there are any frequently occurring themes.

Interviews took place at the school site itself (i.e. the school's library or unused classroom) so that I was able to interview each participant individually without outside distractions. Given that I attended and graduated from this college, I cannot generalize my personal experience to those of my participants. Each interview took about 40 minutes to an hour long to conduct and took place in private study room. All the participants in my research are first-generation college students, with one or both parents as a refugee from Thailand. In addition, knowing that the majority of the students in my research will probably be second generation Hmong refugees, English was be the primary language used during the interviews.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this research is to better understand the experiences and factors that affect Hmong students' academic success in higher education. The goal of this research study was to explore social capital that these students utilize during their academic journey. Almost all students mentioned a family member or someone close that had helped them in their process of going onto higher education. Many of them are the first in the family to attend college or a four-year university, suggesting that family members were not the main source of social capital. Most of the participants' parents had little to no formal education. Only one interviewee had a parent with some college education.

### *Family Support*

Although family members may not have been a source of information about getting into college or how to succeed in college, they provided social support in various forms. For example, Lee said that his family was always “pushing me and giving me, that you know, compliment and that you’re doing really good in school or that keep it up with work and I guess that it helps motivate you.” Another interviewee stated that her family emotionally support her by giving her “words of advice to keep going even though it’s hard and they do make efforts like sometimes taking me to school. Just little things like that.”

The interviews revealed that almost all the interviewees were motivated to attend college if they had a person who inspired them to attend higher education. Only one interviewee (Jack) noted that it was self-motivation that lead him to attend college. Jack

stated that he self-taught himself about his career using Google. Although I consider him the outlier in this study, he still provides some important insights to this study.

### *Mentor Support*

My research revealed that students who had a person to guide them or to reference to when experiencing educational difficulties fair better than those who did not. The students who had a guiding person seemed to navigate college better than those who did not. Nonetheless, the common experience is illustrated by Zong Shia when asked who motivated him to go to college. He said

“For me, my sister motivated me. She is two years older than me and she, she motivated me and most of my family because she was the very first sibling who, who graduated as well as the one who pushed the hardest and put the most effort in helping the family such as doing all the paperwork for my mom. She’s the one who, who got me into community service as well as higher educational events as Sac State here as well, when they had the Hmong conference. I think she was the main one who motivated me to, to go to college and achieve a higher education.”

Others also mentioned a family member who had completed college to guide them through the process.

Interestingly, some participants felt the duty of being role models for their younger siblings. For example, Lee stated that one of his major motivations to pursue a college education was serving as a role model for his siblings. He is the oldest and first person in his immediate family to attend college. He believes that college is a key to “success or a brighter future.” In his view, by pursuing a higher education in college, he

can show his younger siblings that they can do it too. In a sense, he wants to lead by example. However, Lee stated that he was not doing too well at school at the moment. What kept him going was the encouragements and validation of his friends and family members.

*Barriers: Intersectional System of Inequality*

When the participants were asked if they had any family obligations, interestingly, the topic of gender expectations was discussed. Two of the female participants mentioned that when they came home from school, they had to cook and clean for their family. This took time away from their studies or their homework. Two of the respondents who were asked about family obligations stated that they did not have any. The two who answered “no” to this question were female. They had older siblings or someone else to cook and clean while they came home from school. However, this role was always done by a female household member. In addition, none of the females mentioned anything about the preservation of their Hmong identity to the question. Conversely, the male participants mentioned their Hmong identity.

Upholding their Hmong identity seemed to play a big role in the male participants' education. All interviewees except two are Animist: One interviewee's father had recently passed away so her family is in between Shamanism and Christianity. Another interviewee's parents had converted to Christianity, but still follow traditional Hmong culture because her grandparents are both shamans. The males in this research noted that their Hmong gender role played a big factor in negatively affecting their higher education. There was a sense of responsibility to honor the family name, take on

traditions, and practice cultural rituals. Zong Shia and Tou Nal both noted that their parents expected them to drop everything on the weekends to go help the family or cousins if there was a traditional event being held. Tou Nal said that this caused him frustration and took away from homework or study time.

In terms of challenges they faced, some of the participants discussed familial obligations related to language, finances, and other limitations. For example, many were expected to accompany parents and translate when they had a doctor's appointment or when translation services were not available. Also very common were financial obligations. For example, Lee indicated that pursuing higher education was difficult because of the financial obligations to his family. His dad was unemployed during the beginning of Lee's college years, so he had to work almost full time. This took time away from his studies and motivation to pursue education. When Lee was asked the question of how this impacted his education, he responded, "Makes me want to just work for my family instead of just go to school. Man, like I can't. I can't concentrate on school if all I'm gonna do is go to work again and I'm gonna be tired in class already. I can't even concentrate on my homework. Like it's pretty tough actually." Lee was more worried about the financial security of his family than school, which he later stated "put a stain on" his academic performance.

Mai Pa was one of the only interviewees who did not receive financial aid due to her parents' income (at least \$76,000 per year). The female interviewees all initially stated that their gender did not affect how their parents supported them in higher education. Three of the female interview later stated gender barriers did affect their

education. Mai Pa was the only one who mentioned that her gender did not affect her parents' support for higher education. Mai Pa stated that her mom was very supportive of her attending college since she was the only person in her family to attend a university. She did not qualify for financial aid, but her mom has been financially supporting her with the tuition fees at Sac State.

In contrast, Ling had stated that her parents were very skeptical of her staying out late. One of the barriers for Ling was asking her parents' permission to study late with her friends. The parents would always want her home before dark and disapproved of her staying on campus. She said that "I can't stay too long at school to do any homework or stuff like that. I feel like my parents always needed me to be home or they don't let me go anywhere further than Sac." In addition, she was dependent on her parents for transportation to and from school and felt like she had no other choice but to listen. The parents had told Ling that she needed to study at home. This was difficult to do for Ling because there was a lot of distraction at home and she felt obligated to be a "good Hmong daughter." At home, Ling had cook and clean for her family and put college second to her family responsibilities. Ling stated that she did horrible her first few semesters at Sac State. When asked if she was able to resolve this issue, Ling said, "Rebelling. I don't always rebel but there are times when I feel like I have to rebel. And even if my parents are not happy about it, overtime they let it go." Her GPA improved only after she was able to buy a car and stayed on campus to study.

Mai Jay mirrors the same experience as Ling. She felt that her time at home was spent as a "typical housewife rather than the educated young scholar" that she was. Her

parents expected her to cook and clean rather than studying or working on her homework. She had a curfew and had to stay close to home. Hence, Mai Jay decided to stay local because she “couldn’t really go far because I am a female so...”

Another barrier for some interviewees was their birth order. Some interviewees stated that their title of either being the eldest son or daughter affected how their parents treated them. One of the interviewees is the eldest son. His dad is a shaman and expects his son to learn and contribute to the Hmong shaman community. Most of his free time is spent at traditional gatherings usually held on the weekends. The interviewee noted that it was a sign of respect to be present at gatherings even if he was not doing any work.

There was a recurring theme surrounding the Hmong identity. Interviewees were asked: “How has your Hmong identity helped your academic success at Sacramento State? How has it presented challenges?” Some of the interviewees noted that being Hmong had a negative impact on their sense of self and identity. Most interviewees mentioned that Hmong people were known to have a negative image in the greater community. Mai Jay said that she felt people saw Hmong people, “As someone who can’t go high into like nursing or something. I guess a lot of people just stuck with like child development or psychology.” In other words, there’s a perception that Hmong students enroll in less challenging or prestigious courses and majors. Lee mentioned that Hmong people were the “minority of the minority” and had to “try to be above everyone.” Being Hmong meant that you had to prove yourself as someone who is greater than that of your socially defined Hmong identity. Shoua said that growing up in her city, Hmong people were viewed as people who would amount to negative outcomes in life. It gave her low

self-esteem and self-doubt which made her feel that she could not succeed just by being Hmong. It was as if one way or another, she was predestined to fail.

Again, the intersectional system of inequality of race, class and gender affected the respondents' education success. The findings show that there exist an inequality even amongst this small sample. As a racialized-ethnic minority group, who is working class and has traditional gender roles, my participants' experiences going to college illuminated the challenges of attending college that remains hegemonically Eurocentric, middle-class, and patriarchal. One can say that a person's social capital is ultimately dependent on their race, class and gender.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research is limited to the experience of a small sample of Sacramento State Hmong students. It may or may not represent the Hmong students on campus because of the limited sample size but brings to light important implications for future research and may provide guidance for addressing student needs and areas of support. In addition, the researcher's rapport with the participants may have distorted actual responses.

This study shows that the majority of Hmong students felt more comfortable and assured about college when they had someone to help them navigate through higher education. The Hmong student organization HUSA played an important role in networking the students to resources on and off campus. Similar findings were found in the study by Xiong and Lam (2012) where Hmong students found support among school programs and peers. Evidently, social capital within their community provided unique forms of educational support and encouragement. However, as noted about, the Hmong American population remains amongst the most impoverished minorities in the nation and remains educationally, politically, and economically marginalized. There is a continued need to study and support Hmong students in higher education. Hence, it is important to consider how minorities' social capital is embedded in a larger intersectional system of inequality.

The interviews revealed that the intersectionality of race, class and gender affected the participants' academic success. Hmong students are racialized as the "good-quiet Asian student" who are sometimes overlooked in the educational setting. Racial stereotypes such as the model minority has contributed in minimizing and neglecting the

educational challenges faced by Hmong students. In addition, while the Hmong culture strongly reinforces the dynamic of familial responsibility, it has uneven effects on both men and women. Most of the male interviewees felt obligated to support their family and/or to carry on the Hmong traditions in addition to balancing their life as a student. Particularly, two of the male interviewees had parents who were shaman. They were responsible and expected to learn about the shaman practices. The two felt obligated to take time away from their studies and follow their parent. The male respondents felt that attending to religious or cultural events had to be a priority for them. In a traditional Hmong household, the sons (usually the youngest) are expected to take care of their parents when they become of age. One female participant stated that even if she is going to finish college first, her parents have said that they will wait on her younger brothers to “finish their education to take care of them.” The males in this research felt pressure to fully support their family, keep up with their Hmong cultural identity and complete a college degree. They felt force to live up to their parents’ expectations.

Dr. Chao Danny Vang, the Executive Coordinator for the Full Circle Project at Sacramento State and an expert researcher of Hmong students at the college noted in his research that there has been a gender discrepancy in degree attainment (Vang 2018). In his research, Vang notes that in a 2014 Hmong National Development study, it was found that only 8% of Hmong women and 18.6% of Hmong men had a bachelor’s degree or higher. This number changed according to the 2013 U.S. Census Bureau. About 14.7% of Hmong women had at least a bachelor’s or higher degree. Hmong men’s degree attainment dropped to 13.5%. What contributed to almost a 6% increase in degree

attainment in just a year difference? Why did the men's degree attainment drop? There is a need to study and examine the drop in Hmong men degree attainment.

As stated earlier in the literature review, the Hmong participate in a patriarchal system. One would imagine a higher education attainment rate for males, but as the research above shows, that is not the case. I suggest further research into this phenomenon so that both Hmong men and women can equally increase their educational attainment potentials. In addition, I suggest more outreach to students during their high school years and to have faculty/staff that are reflective of the student demographic on campus. This practice may increase the educational attainment of all students. Lastly, educating Hmong parents about how to support the mental well-being of their child would be another gap to discuss.

## APPENDIX

### Social Capital Question

1. Was there any specific person who motivated you to go to college? Please elaborate.
2. What are some of the challenges that you encounter which make it difficult to continue/complete your college education?
3. What in particular motivated you to pursue a college education?
4. What are some resources and assistances available to you that supported your efforts to complete your college education? a) Financial b) social c) emotional
5. What is your biggest challenge in completing college?
  - 5a. How did you overcome that challenge?
6. Are there any kind(s) of assistance that you need but is/are not available?
  - 6a. How did you compensate for this needed assistance?
7. How did your family and friends best support your efforts to complete your college education?
8. What is one thing that would be most beneficial for you to finish college?

### Social Factor Questions

1. Did your gender affect how your parents supported your education? How?
2. Do you feel a sense of belonging at Sacramento State? In your department?
3. How comfortable do you feel talking to your professor?
4. Do you have faculty mentors? Have you sought mentorship? Does it make a difference?

5. How has your Hmong identity helped your academic success at Sacramento State?

How has it presented challenges?

6. Did you have any family obligations? If so, how did it impact your education?

7. Overall, how do you define your academic success at Sacramento State? Why?

#### Demographic Questions

1. Were your parents born in the U.S.?

2. Were you born in the U.S.? Yes / No, if no how long have you lived in the U.S.

3. How old are you?

4. What is your family's religion?

5. What gender do you identify with? Male / Female

6. What is your family's income?

7. What are your parents/guardians' educational level?

8. What is your G.P.A.?

8a. How do you describe your academic success at Sac State?

9. Did you have to take any remedial courses? If yes, please list them.

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