

HMONG AMERICAN SUCCESS WITHIN
THE CENTRAL VALLEY

A Project Presented to the Faculty
of
California State University, Stanislaus

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
of Master of Social Work

By
Linda Lee
May 2020

CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

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THE CENTRAL VALLEY

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Dr. Pollie Bith-Melander
Assistant Professor of Social Work

Date

Dr. John Garcia
Professor of Social Work

Date

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this project to the Hmong American community in the Central Valley. I hope that this project will be a source to educating our own communities about who we are as Hmong. I dedicate this project and this opportunity to encourage our younger Hmong American youth to strive and seek success in the Central Valley. It is my hope that we, as the future, can continue to advocate for our elders here in the Central Valley by contributing in any way that we can back to our Hmong community.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have three acknowledgements. First and foremost, I want to acknowledge my family. My parents, Cha Vang Lee and Youa Lee, are blessed with five sons and seven daughters. Growing up, my parents have loved us, encouraged us, and pushed us to be the best we can be. Ua tsaug rau kuv niam thiab kuv txiv vim hais tias nej hlub kuv heev. Ua Vaj Tswv tsaug tias nws pub nej rau kuv. I will always remember your support and love throughout these hard years of working for my Master's. I want to thank my eleven siblings for guiding me and supporting me. Thank you for believing in me and making sure I knew I was not alone through this journey.

Secondly, I want to thank all of the individuals who willingly participated and contributed to this project: Paul Lo, PaNhia Moua, Kimiko Vang, and Jerry Yang. Thank you for volunteering your time to make this project possible. Your experiences, stories, and wisdom will continue to make an impact for our Hmong communities. I would also like to acknowledge the individuals and groups who contributed to the media aspect of this project: Luis Alcazar, Fishermen's Project, The Kong and Shu Project, Khai Wu, and Kristine Yang. I appreciate the contributions that you all have made as a part of this project and for using your talents to make this project come together.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge the CSU Stanislaus, Master of Social Work program faculty, staff, and my colleagues. We were faced with many challenges these last two years. We faced a pandemic that changed our last semester

together. Through all of that, I appreciate the support, encouragement, and friendships these last two years. Thank you for making this journey of obtaining our Master's an experience worth remembering and sharing for a lifetime. Through these relationships, I have learned how to use my presence and voice as a source of power to advocate and help make a change in the world.

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ABSTRACT

This graduate project was created from an observed need of the communities in the Central Valley to hear the experiences of Hmong Americans and their success. This graduate project aimed to create a short documentary film that explores lived experiences of four individuals who are deemed success, defined by Joseph A. Klinge in *Hmong American Experience: The Definition of Success in American*. In creating this film, six individuals were identified and asked to participate in the graduate project. Four of the six individuals: Paul Lo, Panhia Moua, Kimiko Vang, and Jerry Yang, were interviewed and met one-on-one to share and record their journeys. This short documentary film explores the definition of success, culture, higher education, and family support in order to educate the communities on who Hmong Americans are. The four individuals share their views and experience on success in the Central Valley, culture and family roles, all while encouraging young Hmong American youth to work towards higher education and to stay hopeful on finding success in the Central Valley.

BACKGROUND

The Hmong people have a generation of parents who learned how to survive in a new country after fleeing from the Secret War, after being caught helping the CIA during the Vietnam War, and a generation of children who are being raised to succeed in the United States. We are a growing population that continues to thrive since settling here in the 70's, and we deserve to be heard, recognized, and encouraged. According to the 2010 U.S. Census Bureau, there are over 91,000 Hmong residents in California. Of these 91,000 residents, 60,000 are living in the Central Valley: 31,000 in Fresno, 12,000 in Merced, and 26,000 in Sacramento (2010 U.S. Census Bureau). The Hmong people began to settle in California following the placement of General Vang Pao in Southern California. The late General Vang Pao was a respected leader to the Hmong people starting back in Laos during the Secret War and opened doors for the Hmong people to move and find refuge in the United States (Martin, 2011).

Drawing from the 2010 U.S. Census Bureau, there was an approximate 39.6 percent increase in the Hmong population between 2000 and 2010. From these statistics of Hmong in the Central Valley, it is concerning that there is still very limited focus and attempt on educating communities in the Central Valley about this ethnic group. Hmong people have been in the United States for a little over forty years and yet have accomplished a great amount. We have individuals who are pioneers into fields, some of the identified individuals are: Chief of the Department of

Anesthesiologist Panhia Moua, the Honorable Judge Paul Lo, Mayor Steve Ly, and Deputy Director of the Employment and Training Kimiko Vang.

Purpose of the Project

The purpose of this graduate project was to create a documentary film that captures the stories of four to five individuals in the Hmong community within the Central Valley who have been pioneers and leaders in their chosen fields. The outcome of this graduate project was to have a short documentary film, approximately 5-10 minutes, that included personal stories addressing of the Secret war, the transition and assimilation to the mainstream culture in the United States, their experiences with receiving services or assistance while growing up, and personal stories in regards to their work and contributions to the Hmong community. With the 39.6% increase of the Hmong population between 2000 - 2010 in the Central Valley, there should be more accessible teaching and learning tools for students, faculty, and the community to have in regard to the Hmong community (2010 U.S. Census).

The purpose of creating this film, Hmong American Success in the Central Valley, was to create a teaching or learning tool focused on the Hmong people. The film highlights and shares the work and success of individuals who come from a family of refugees. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, success is “a degree or measure of succeeding, a favorable or desired outcome; also: the attainment of wealth, favor, or eminence.” As Hmong Americans, success is defined in a simpler term: it is not wealth that determines success but rather being in a position to help others and creating a name for your family. This project was created by collaborating

with individuals who are open to sharing their story of finding refuge in the United States and building a new life by focusing on their careers.

OBJECTIVES

There are four objectives that anchor this graduate project and are critical to the successful implementation and completion of this work. The first objective was to identify and recruit four to six individuals who were willing to partake in the recording of interviews and who were viewed as successful pioneers in their fields by the Hmong community. The second objective was to create a guide and questions for the interview. The third objective was to conduct an interview with each selected individual, edit the interviews, and produce a short documentary film. The fourth objective was to receive feedback from students, faculty, and the public on the outcome of the project.

The first objective was working to identify and contact four to six individuals who are willing to participate in the interview and production of the documentary film. The criteria that must have been met to be considered a candidate for an interview was he/she must be Hmong, the candidate's parent(s) were born in Laos/Thailand, the candidate themselves were born in Laos/Thailand or has siblings that were born in Laos/Thailand, and the candidate must be viewed as a successful pioneer in their specialty field. The importance of honing in on these individuals was to create a more realistic portrayal of success as Hmong Americans within the Central Valley. These individuals have come from a background of refugees, parents who had little to nothing when coming to the United States, working hard in school without much guidance from parents, and may also have received services and assistance

growing up. These stories will contain much more raw and personal experiences to show that through hard work and perseverance, success is possible.

The second objective was to create a guide for the interview to help probe and lead the interviewee to share their experiences. The interview guide included open ended questions to lead the interviewee and redirect them to sharing personal experiences relating to the topics of journey and success in the Central Valley. The guide contained open ended questions and topics such as: personal stories and/or parents' stories of coming to the United States, and the assimilation process. The guide also contained topics that include their journey to success in their field of work, address the decreasing number of Hmong Americans in higher education, and how to encourage the youth today to continue higher education.

The third objective was to conduct an interview and produce a documentary film. The interviews were conducted face to face and the interviewer traveled to the interviewee's destination of choice. The importance of this was to capture the daily lifestyle of the individual: what their office looks like, their home life, their community. This was significant to capture as it will showcase a more personal insight to the reality of their success in the Central Valley.

The fourth objective was to set a date and time to conduct a viewing the documentary film to the larger campus. The importance of having a viewing of the film is to satisfy the goals set forth to educate and spread awareness on the growing Hmong population to our campus community. Once the viewing is complete, the fifth objective was to receive feedback from the viewers. The importance of the feedback

is to get a better understanding of how the short documentary film will be received in a larger setting and as a teaching and learning tool. It will also assist for future projects that are similar on what to work towards and how to enhance the process of creating a film.

SIGNIFICANCE/DISTINCTIVENESS OF THE PROJECT

There are multiple reasons that motivate me to use this opportunity to create a film that will allow me to advocate for this particular population and my community. After twenty-four years in the Central Valley, I constantly get asked what ethnicity I am. Upon answering with “Hmong”, I get puzzled looks and rather blunt responses such as, “is that Mongolian or Chinese?” Upon the realization that my own community is unaware that there has been an increasing population of Hmong in the Central Valley since the 70’s and 80’s, it inspired me to create something that would bring light to this population.

With the growing Hmong population in the United States, it is concerning that there are still many individuals who have not yet come to learn about a culture and group that is prevalent in their community. This raises questions and concerns in regard to whether or not the Hmong population in the Central Valley are recognized for their contributions and whether or not others are aware of their presence and their needs. If they remain under the radar in their own communities, are agencies and organizations also missing this group and their natural leaders. Furthermore, if as a group they are going unrecognized then they may not be receiving adequate services and assistance. Through observation in my undergraduate studies and currently in my graduate studies, there is simply not enough educational materials and scholarly attention devoted to Hmong Americans in higher education.

By creating a short documentary film focused on sharing personal stories of how an individual has gone through the hardships of moving and post-resettlement in the United States to finding success in the Central Valley, it will bring forth more discussions on how to better serve and connect with this population. In addition, by sharing their stories and experiences of finding success in the Central Valley, it will create a more positive outlook on higher education for future generations of Hmong American.

According to Hutchison, “life course theory (LCT) looks at how chronological age, relationships, common life transitions, life events, social change, and human agency shape people’s lives from birth to death” (Hutchison, 2011). My work is framed by life course theory and I will be using life course theory to guide my interviews. By having my interviewees share their lived experiences, it will hone in on the aspects of how their experiences as Hmong Americans shaped their decisions to lead them where they are today. By using LCT to focus on lived experiences to find common themes between the interviewees, there may be opportunities to identify turning points in each personal story. In identifying turning points, there may present key factors that may have helped each individual find success or the motivation to seek success in the Central Valley. Doing so, may result in being able to address how services and resources can be implemented to better serve the Hmong community.

METHODOLOGY

The first stage of creating this graduate project involved the identification and selection of interviewees. In order to fulfill the graduate project goal of bringing awareness to the Hmong community, one of the key factors in selecting individuals that meet the following criteria. The individual must be Hmong American, the individual must have completed some level of higher education, the individual should be known and acknowledged in the Hmong community as a successful, and the individual should be considered pioneers, as the first Hmong American to be in the selected field. In identifying individuals, I reached out to the Hmong community at church, at local Hmong stores, and asked family and friends who they identify successful. By doing so, I concluded on seven individuals from the Central Valley. The following seven are listed as:

Judge Paul Lo: Hmong American Judge in Merced County

Mayor Steve Ly: Mayor of Elk Grove

Panhia Moua: Chief of the Department of Anesthesiology at Kaiser
Permanente

Kimiko Vang: Deputy Director at Merced County Human Services
Agency

The next step in the plan was to create a list of open-ended questions for the interview process. The questions will be anchored by life course theory to explore personal experiences that helped shape the individual's course of professional and

personal life. These questions posed as a guide to help start a conversation. The questions included topics such as the post-resettlement process, family dynamics and upbringing, higher education, success in the field, and their contributions to the Hmong community. The plan was to conduct these interviews at the interviewees discretion to allow for their comfort as they are going to be sharing very personal experiences. I traveled to the designated locations and the interviews lasted between one to two hours. No additional interviews were needed for more information and details after the initial interview.

The interviews were conducted face to face with the interviewer and the interviewee. The interviewee signed a release form in the presence of the interviewer that gives consent for footage recorded to be used in the film. There were two cameras recording from two different angles, two sets of LED lights, and a microphone would be used to capture sufficient quality. After the recordings, I worked on editing, trimming, timing, coloring, etc. to assure the best quality possible to create this product.

The timeline for this graduate project was set to begin December and end in April. All interviews and recordings were planned to be completed by no later than March to allow time for the final editing and creation of the film. After receiving the final product, I reached out to Professor Seng Vang in Ethnic Studies Department to request his support in sharing this video with his class to receive feedback on whether it portrayed Hmong Americans in our communities accurately. I believe that by showing this documentary in this specific class, it would be the start of using it as a

teaching and learning tool to bring awareness to the growing Hmong population in the Central Valley. I would also be able to receive feedback and critique from the class.

LITERATURE REVIEW

With the current literature collection and the growing population of Hmong Americans in the Central Valley, there comes a need and an urgency, even a sense of obligation, to raise awareness to this population group. As part of a service to educate and contribute to the growing population of Hmong Americans in the Central Valley, it is important to review literature on factors contributing to the success of Hmong American students. The discussion of literature on the growth in California, specifically the Central Valley, explores the services available to the population, and any existing limitations of the literature. This also includes experiences of parental and cultural influences on success and achievements. The purpose of this project is to educate the general public on Hmong Americans in the Central Valley with a focus on highlighting experiences of individuals who are deemed successful pioneers to the Hmong community. The intentions of these literature reviews are to compare the perspectives of success through the lenses of Hmong Americans and the American myth of success as well as explore the significance of pioneers and how it opens windows of opportunities for future Hmong Americans in the Central Valley.

The Definition of Success in America

According to the Hmong American Experience, Klinge explores the definition of success through “autoethnographic” literature. The information provided in this literature introduces the readers to the definition of success through the lenses of Hmong Americans. The common themes that arose from this autoethnographic

literature are family, culture, and societal influences. While following the experiences of individuals to better define success, Klinge makes it a point to compare the definition of success per American standards and “myths” to Hmong Americans perspectives of success. Klinge states that “mainstream society is greatly influenced by the “American myth” which promotes individualism and economic achievements as the necessary means of success” (Klinge, 2012, p. 5).

As we explore the different perspectives around success, Klinge pulls from interviews with individual Hmong Americans who are in some way contributing back to the Hmong community. An overarching theme identified in this literature that seems to be from mainstream American perspectives of success seems to stem from a “self-made man” and someone “who pulled himself up by the bootstraps” (Klinge, 2010, p. 5). In an interview with another individual, the message of success through individualism implies that other ideas of success are inferior. It implies that “the secret of success...had to be found in the man rather than in society, and in cultivated rather than inherited qualities” (Klinge, 2010, p. 6). In an interview with a third individual, the participant stated that the American myth of success “implies being able to fully participate in the economy of the United States: being able to work, provide for one’s family, and sustaining some financial independence” (Klinge, 2010, p. 8).

Contrary to the interviewee’s views and statements on the American myth of success, they provide some insight on what success means in the Hmong culture. The mainstream American perspective on success tends to create conflict with Hmong

Americans because cultural tradition is a great part of their identity and strength. Klinge states that “on one hand, Hmong Americans' accomplishments support the myth idea because it is a fact that success in education and the economic world is the direct result of individual initiative and plain hard work. Nevertheless, Hmong American experience shows...they do not disregard the necessity of individual achievement despite traditional group values” (Klinge, 2010, p. 6). In an interview, one participant explains that “I had been determined to prove that no one could ever hurt me again...I was going to be somebody...building a life where we would be respected, and a life where no one would dare to walk all over us” (Klinge, 2010, p. 8). This statement from an interviewee makes a point to refer to “us” and “we” of the group and the culture. Each interviewee show success as giving back to the group: “helped establish a literary venue for Hmong Americans, became a health advocate in the community and speaks at events to establish Hmong culture in the United States, promote Hmong culture and serves the Hmong community in the La Crosse area” (Klinge, 2010, p. 9).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This graduate project produced a short documentary film that includes personal lived experiences of four individuals within the Central Valley. The individuals are deemed successful among the Hmong community and are successful per the definition offered by Joseph Klinge in his article “Hmong American Experience: The Definition of Success in America.” This short documentary film was conducted through face-to-face interviews with each interviewee. Each interview was about 45 minutes to 65 minutes and was guided by a list of questions. The questions were used as a guide to get the interviewee started on a particular time period in their lives. Each interviewee was encouraged to expand on their personal experiences and stories. This short documentary film can be found on the CSUSTAN Library website or on YouTube.

Implications

This product was designed and completed to bring awareness to the Hmong communities in the Central Valley. With the gathered information and experiences, there are multiple avenues now for social workers in the future to use this information. By acknowledging and understanding the experience of how families struggled financially and had to rely on government assistance, we can begin to bring more awareness of the Hmong community and eventually work on how to encourage policy makers to allocate more aid to help this population. Another avenue that social workers may explore in using these experiences and stories, is to learn and understand the Hmong culture. This may act as an opportunity to open doors of curiosity to learn

about the culture, the values, and traditions. I encourage social worker to continue to explore that curiosity to learn about the Hmong people and to be sensitive when serving this population as family views and traditions are incredibly valuable.

The Experience

The process of creating this product was a tedious but extremely rewarding experience. There are many factors to consider when trying to create a product of this nature. When the product is a short documentary film, there are even greater factors that contribute to the outcome of the final product such as: recording equipment, volunteers for interviews, transportation, editing, communication with all participants. Of all the lessons I have learned through the process of creating this product, the most valuable lesson learned is that this process cannot be done alone. A basic premise of social work is: Do not be afraid to ask for help and to receive help, especially if your skills are limited in what you are trying to achieve. There are people willing to help, contribute, and give back to students. I have learned this lesson well in my journey of creating this documentary.

The next lesson that I learned rather quickly was that a film, even on a smaller scale project such as this, requires equipment that can get expensive really quickly. I needed to think of visual and audio equipment, lighting equipment, storage and memory cards, notebooks, and transportation expenses. I learned about a mini grant through Student Engagement in Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity (SERSCA). I immediately jumped on-board and submitted my application. With the help of SERSCA, it alleviated the financial stress. I was able to get three LED lights

with stands, a wired clip-on microphone, and a 64gb memory card, a 32gb memory card, a SD card adapter, and notebooks.

Initially, I created this proposal for a short documentary film with the intention to facilitate the interview, film, and edit all by myself. As ambitious as that sounds, I learned very quickly that it is nearly impossible to do all of that and come out with a quality product. My first interview where I set up my own equipment that consisted of two lights, two cameras, a wired microphone, and facilitated the interview, I walked away feeling completely overwhelmed and feeling defeated. Prior to the interview, I conducted short “test recordings” with family and friends to test the equipment. What these “test recordings” did not teach me was that both cameras I had only had the capacity to record in twenty (20) minute intervals. This was a problem that I ran into during my first interview. I heard a click twenty minutes into the interview but with no idea that recording had stopped and as to not disrupt the flow of the interview to get up to check the camera, I continued to sit there. By the time I had a chance to check on the cameras, both had stopped recording and I had lost 15 minutes of very valuable footage. One thing that I do have, to stay positive is the audio. To salvage the 15 minutes lost, at least there is still a separate file of audio from the microphone my interviewee wore.

Feeling overwhelmed and defeated, I met with three people: John Garcia my capstone professor, Pollie Bith-Melander my chair and professor, and Steve Arounsack film director and professor in Anthropology, who were able to encourage and reel me back to the reality of it. There was no turning back, just salvaging the

work we have and working on the mistakes to be better for the next interview. The encouragement and support I received motivated me to work harder and reach out. Steve Arounsack connected me with Luis Alcazar, a previous student who helped record and edit videos for him. Luis is an Alumni from Stanislaus and shared that he always tries to give back and help the students at Stanislaus when he can. Luis accompanied me to my next interview with Judge Paul Lo where we met in his chambers and had an incredibly smooth interview. This experience has helped me learn that ambition is only the start of something great. However, to attempt to achieve it on your own is only going to exhaust you mentally, physically, and financially. There is help and resources out there we just need to seek it.

Another stumbling block that I came across was the consistency of the interview volunteers. My goal was to interview six individuals and had reached out to them via e-mail or telephone to share my project proposal and significance of the project. All six individuals agreed to participate, and by the beginning of Spring semester I was down to only 4 participants. Though I lost two participants, I still moved forward with what I had and proceeded to conduct my interviews. In my opinion, four is still a good number and I was still able to gather the information that I needed and wanted. Last but not least, the greatest stumbling block that I have encountered was working around COVID-19 and the changes that the campus has had to make upon this pandemic. Upon finishing my interviews on March 4, 2020, I planned on using a space on campus to edit and complete my short documentary film. Effective March 17, 2020 all face-to-face classes were suspended and were to be

continued through alternate modes on April 2, 2020. Since the transition to online, the spaces I had planned to use were closed as well. My personal equipment did not have the capacity to hold all the footage and edit the film which made it seem impossible to be done. After reaching out to my capstone professor and chair, suggestions were made to shorten the film and create a smaller piece or create a PowerPoint slide with the information that I have collected.

Since the pandemic has flipped the world as we know it, we all are battling similar experiences of the unknown and what to do next. What's important is making the most of what we do have. I have four interviews, hundreds of minutes of recorded video footage to go through, and hundreds of minutes of audio recordings to review. Doing what I can with the situation we are being dealt now, is just another part of trusting the process and asking for help when needed. One recommendation that I would give in this situation is to continue to trust the process. It may look like everything is going downhill, it may look like everything that can go wrong has gone wrong, it may even look impossible. But trust that as long as you do everything you can and give it your all, your efforts will not be for nothing.

Recommendation

A recommendation I would make, is to be considerate of the diversity of the participants. Aside from the four participants that were willing to participate, I reached out to three other individuals who declined stating that they were not "successful" as they did not obtain a higher education degree. I recommend reaching out to people who can communicate in the native language to explain in a much more

detail and accurate way as to be inclusive of an entire community. Another recommendation I would make it to be considerate of the storage needed to hold all the interviews. It would make the process of piecing the film together if all the footage is on a storage card. I recommend getting a storage space of 128gb or more to hold all the content. I would also recommend getting creative and reaching out for help. Reach out to professors who may have access to people who are willing and available to help record or edit your graduate project. Post a help wanted post on social media, you may have a friend who is able to help. Ask for permission to use equipment from the University, some departments may have access to cameras, editing programs, audio equipment, etc. that you may have access to if you obtain permission from the appropriate person(s). Last but not least, I highly recommend making the most of your experience and have a good time with your production of a graduate project

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