

More than “Model Minorities” or “Delinquents”: A Look at Hmong American High School Students

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Hmong American youth are often stereotyped by the popular press as either high-achieving “model minorities” or low-achieving “delinquents.” In this ethnographic study, Stacey Lee attempts to move beyond the model minority image of 1.5-generation students and the delinquent stereotype of second-generation students to present a more complex picture of Hmong American students’ school experiences. The author explores the way economic forces, relationships with the dominant society, perceptions of opportunities, family relationships, culture, and educational experiences affect Hmong American students’ attitudes toward school, and the variation that exists among 1.5- and second-generation youth. This article provides insight into how forces inside and outside school affect attitudes toward education, and suggests possibilities for ways in which schools might better serve these students.

The first Southeast Asian refugees arrived in the United States in 1975, and within ten years the popular press identified Southeast Asian youth as “the new whiz kids” (Brand, 1987). Conspicuously absent from these reports were Hmong American youth, whose academic difficulties bumped up against the popular “model minority” image (Walker-Moffat, 1995). The first Hmong arrived in the United States as refugees from Laos over twenty-five years ago. Early scholarly and popular descriptions of Hmong refugees emphasized the differences between Hmong culture — described as rural, preliterate, patriarchal, and traditional — and mainstream American culture (e.g., Donnelly, 1994; Fass, 1991; Rumbaut & Ima, 1988; Sherman, 1988). These cultural differences were explained as the root of many of the social and economic problems Hmong refugees faced in the United States. For example, cultural bar-

riers were identified as the reason behind the high dropout rates among Hmong refugee students in middle and high school (Cohn, 1986; Goldstein, 1985). Hmong girls, in particular, experienced high dropout rates, which were traced back to the Hmong cultural practices of early marriage and early childbearing (Goldstein, 1985; Rumbaut & Ima, 1988; Walker-Moffat, 1995).

While the early research on Hmong refugees painted a grim picture of Hmong student achievement, much of the recent research has highlighted the success of Hmong American students. Several researchers have argued that Hmong students as a group have overcome their early difficulties and are now managing to do well in school despite high rates of poverty, low levels of parental education, and the cultural practice of early marriage among teens (Call & McNall, 1992; Dunnigan, Olney, McNall, & Spring, 1996; Hutchinson, 1997; Hutchinson & McNall, 1994; Rumbaut, 1995). Scholars attribute the success of Hmong American students to the support of the immigrant community, family support, and adherence to traditional values such as respect for elders (Hutchinson, 1997; Rumbaut, 1995). Thus, in contrast to earlier portrayals of Hmong culture as problematic, current scholarship characterizes it as a positive influence on student achievement. In his recent study on Hmong students in Wisconsin, Hutchinson (1997) concluded that "Hmong youth will be more successful in their educational careers than any other immigrant or refugee group to ever come to the United States" (p. 1). It would appear that Hmong American students have joined the ranks of the model minority.

Although many Hmong American students appear to be successful, there is evidence that some Hmong youth are exhibiting serious adjustment problems. Truancy, rising dropout rates, and delinquency among teens have been identified by researchers as some of the major concerns within Hmong American communities (Faderman, 1998; Thao, 1999; Walker-Moffat, 1995). These problems have not gone unnoticed by the popular press, which has highlighted the rise of Southeast Asian gangs (e.g., Ingersoll, 1999; Kifner, 1991). The academic literature and the popular press convey a perception that Hmong American youth fall into two opposite groups: high-achieving model minorities, and delinquents, truants, and gang members.

Research on other Southeast Asian ethnic groups suggests that dropping out of school, truancy, and other forms of resistant behavior are more common among second-generation than first-generation youth (Rumbaut, 1995; Zhou & Bankston, 1998). Some researchers argue that the youth who experience trouble in school and with the law are those who have become disconnected from their families and culture and therefore become over-Americanized (Rumbaut, 1995; Zhou & Bankston, 1998). In his research on Hmong youth in Chicago, Thao (1999) asserts that youth who are over-Americanized are particularly vulnerable to gang involvement. Similarly, the popular explanation the media advances suggests that second-generation youth have lost their culture. One newspaper article, for example, referred

to the rise in Southeast Asian gangs as evidence of the “cultural growing pains” (Ingersoll, 1999, p. 1) within immigrant communities. Such analysis, of course, oversimplifies the reasons youth engage in resistant behavior. This analysis assumes that “American” culture is inherently dangerous and that Hmong culture can protect its youth from harm. Furthermore, it places Hmong-ness and American-ness into mutually exclusive categories.

Other researchers have observed the impact of race, social context, and economic opportunities on the adjustment of second-generation youth (Ima, 1995; Portes, 1995, 1996; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995). Portes asserts, “There are three features of the social contexts encountered by today’s newcomers that create vulnerability to downward assimilation. The first is color, the second is location, and the third is the absence of mobility ladders” (1995, p. 73). The strength of this selection of work is that it considers the impact of structural forces on student adjustment.

In this article, I explore the way economic forces, relationships with the dominant society, perceptions of opportunities, family relationships, culture, and educational experiences affect Hmong American students’ attitudes toward school. Specifically, I compare the way 1.5-generation and second-generation Hmong American students respond to education.¹ Additionally, I focus attention on variations within each group. The following questions provide the focus for this piece: How do Hmong American students view education? Do responses to education vary between 1.5-generation and second-generation students? I pay particular attention to how the forces inside and outside of school affect attitudes toward education.

Data for this article was collected as part of a one and one-half academic year ethnographic study of Hmong American students at a Wisconsin public school, University Heights High School (UHS).² I visited UHS three days per week on average for three to five hours at a time. The primary means of data collection were participant observation of Hmong students in the high school (e.g., in classrooms, during lunch periods, during study hall, and during extracurricular activities) and interviews with Hmong students and school staff. Interviews lasted from one to three hours and were taped when possible. I also analyzed school documents, observed Hmong parents at meetings organized by the school district, and conducted participant observation at local Hmong community events. Although there are many places in the article where I provide verbatim quotes from interviews and describe individuals in detail, at other times I speak more generally about a group. My decision to speak generally reflects an effort to protect the identity of individuals who revealed sensitive information that they did not want traced back to them.

¹ The term *1.5 generation* is used to describe foreign-born individuals who arrive in the United States as children and are largely educated and socialized in the United States (see Portes, 1996).

² The name of the school and individuals quoted are pseudonyms.

Located in a mid-size city in Wisconsin, UHS enjoys an excellent reputation in the city and the state. Mr. Schenk, the school social worker, explained that the faculty and staff at UHS are proud of its high academic standards and many consider UHS to be a “public prep school”:

It is a public school that has many, many qualities of a private prep school. It services a population in the community that are primarily university families or university-connected families, professional families. And then . . . about a fourth of . . . the student population . . . are special populations: African Americans, Asian Americans . . . probably . . . somewhat less a percentage of poor kids. But it really is . . . in terms of the traditions, in terms of the way it views itself, it’s really kind of a prep school. It is invested in the academic standards . . . the quality of the students, in terms of the high achieving, it has a really broad selection. . . . And so it is kind of a secondary image, a secondary school, trying to become like a university, which it is very close to. Then I think that if you are looking for a sort of prep school attitude toward academics . . . that is what would capture University Heights High — a public prep school.

UHS enrolled 2,023 students during the 1999–2000 academic year, with 29 percent of these students classified as students of color and 14 percent listed as receiving free or reduced lunch. Several members of the staff commented that the percentage of students of color and lower income students had grown significantly in the last twenty years. A significant portion of the student population still comes from middle-class and professional families who live in the neighborhood of the school. Although there has been an increase in the diversity of the student population, Mr. Schenk’s comments suggest that the school continues to reflect the culture of the middle-class students.

Since UHS and the school district classify all students of Asian descent into one category, “Asians,” it was difficult to attain an exact count of the Hmong students. According to estimates by various school staff, there were fifty-four Hmong students enrolled at UHS during the 1998–1999 school year and approximately sixty-five enrolled during the 1999–2000 school year.³ Most of the Hmong students were from low-income families and received free or reduced lunch. Many lived in low-income housing in the poorer sections of the city.

With few exceptions, Hmong American students at UHS were acutely aware of issues of identity and typically used ethnicity, race, gender, age, generation, and marital status to situate others. In my first encounters with Hmong students I was typically asked the following: “Are you Hmong?” “Where were you born?” and “Are you married?” As a third-generation Chinese American woman, I share a panethnic/racial identity with the Hmong students. This helped to facilitate our initial conversations, but the fact that I am not Hmong still branded me an ethnic outsider. Because the Hmong stu-

³ School staff estimated the number of Hmong students at UHS by searching the school roster for Hmong surnames.

dents saw me as an outsider they were initially very cautious around me. Many of my informants, for example, would switch to speaking Hmong when discussing potentially sensitive topics (e.g., marriage, funerals, ritual healing, etc.). Two of my primary informants hid their married status from me for several months until they felt that I was trustworthy. Significantly, these young women hid their married status from school officials, for fear of moral and even legal judgment.

Similarly, in her research on Hmong immigrants in Wisconsin, Koltyk (1998) discovered that most Hmong go to great lengths to protect their culture from the gaze and criticism of outsiders. Koltyk (1998) explains, "As the Hmong have learned that aspects of their culture seem primitive or offensive to many Americans, they have become reluctant to talk to outsiders about them" (p. 14). By keeping their secrets and sharing aspects of my Chinese cultural background, I was eventually able to gain the trust of many students, though they remained cautious in new situations.

"There are two groups of Hmong students at UHS"

During my first week at UHS, Mrs. Her, one of the Hmong bilingual resource specialists, informed me that there were basically two groups of Hmong students at UHS. Using language that could best be described as diplomatic, she referred to the first group as the English as a Second Language (ESL) students and the second group as the "Americanized" students. She explained that the ESL students were "newcomers" and the Americanized students were born in the United States, and that the Hmong student population at UHS had shifted over two decades. In the 1980s, Hmong American students were all first generation, while today they are mostly second generation. While ESL students were the norm in the 1980s, most Hmong American students at UHS today are in mainstream classes. Mrs. Her elaborated by saying that the newcomers "still keep and value Hmong traditions," and that the Americanized students had adopted more American ways. She added that the two groups of students had very different relationships to schooling. She explained:

We don't have problems with those ESL kids. Because, they are, I don't know, they seem, maybe they're not Americanized, . . . so they are still thinking, like they said they are still, let's say, good kids. So they are working hard and trying to graduate from UHS. The other problems, I think the problem that most of the Hmong students face are students who are in the mainstream — they are facing truancy.

Like many scholars (Thao, 1999; Zhou & Bankston, 1998), Mrs. Her points to the negative impact of Americanization on student achievement. In a later interview, Mrs. Her stated that Hmong parents divided Hmong youth into the "good kids" and the "bad kids":

The good kid will go back to the culture, whether it's a boy or a girl. When they come back home, they will, I guess help the parents, [by] doing housework, chores. I guess [they] dress differently too. . . . A normal kid . . . practicing some traditional culture, and going to school, attending school, getting good grades, will be . . . good, a good child, a good boy or girl. And also, I guess doing what the parents want them to do. . . . And, so the opposite is when the kids start to rebel or talk back to the parents, not obeying. And then wearing the baggy clothes, not attending school. Those are the bad kids.

At a school district–sponsored meeting for Southeast Asian parents, several Hmong parents stated (through interpreters) that they were afraid that they were losing their children to the American culture. Some parents explained that while their children were “good kids” they feared that “bad Hmong kids” at school would influence their children. Like Mrs. Her, these parents viewed students’ wearing baggy clothes as the first sign of trouble. In this regard, Mrs. Her and the parents were in agreement: they all identify “good kids” and “bad kids” by their clothes, their relationship with adults, and their attitudes toward school.

The Hmong students at UHS also emphasized the differences between ESL and Americanized students. In my one and one-half academic years at UHS, the social boundaries between the 1.5-generation and second-generation groups of students were rarely crossed at school. Students in one group would admit to having cousins in the other group, but they maintained their distance. While 1.5-generation students were more likely to participate in the school’s Asian Club, second-generation students dominated the school’s Hmong Club. While the Asian Club included students from various Asian ethnic groups (e.g., Chinese, Tibetan, Vietnamese, Hmong, etc.), all members of the Hmong Club were ethnically Hmong. When I asked 1.5-generation students why they chose to participate in the Asian Club instead of the Hmong Club, they explained that they wanted to be in a club that emphasized teaching others about their culture. These students suggested that the members of the Hmong Club were more interested in parties than in their culture. My observations of the Hmong Club revealed that its members were interested in organizing parties and other social events, but they were also interested in participating in a club where they could express their own identities. Although these second-generation students did not see themselves as being traditional, they participated in the club because they were proud of being Hmong.

Several 1.5-generation students reported that their parents warned them to stay away from “bad kids” who were “too Americanized.” Echoing the sentiments of the parental generation, a 1.5-generation student compared the two groups like this: “We are more traditional. We speak Hmong and know the Hmong culture. The others speak more English — they want to be cool. They don’t follow what adults say.” For their part, second-generation Hmong students ridiculed 1.5-generation students for being too “traditional” and

"old fashioned." They even used derogatory terms such as *FOB* or *FOBBIES* (i.e., Fresh Off the Boat) to describe 1.5-generation students. A second-generation student described 1.5-generation students like this: "FOBS don't care about clothes. They are stingy about clothes. They dress in out-of-date 1980s-style clothes. American-born Hmong are into clothes and cars."

1.5-Generation Students

During lunch hours, members of the 1.5 generation can be found sitting with other foreign-born Asians at the edge of the cafeteria. The more academically successful 1.5-generation students cluster in one group, and those who are struggling academically sit together in another. Observers are likely to hear 1.5-generation students speaking a combination of Hmong and English. Typical topics of conversations include family and school. Born in Thailand or Laos, most of these students have been in the United States for three to eight years. Those who remember life before the United States stress that things are better here than in their native countries. This dual frame of reference is typical of immigrant children and allows them to persist in the face of difficulties in the new country (Ogbu, 1993; Suárez-Orozco, 1989; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995). In describing the significance of the dual frame of reference, Ogbu (1993) writes:

The immigrants often compare themselves with the standard of their home country or with their peers "back home" or in the immigrants' neighborhood. When they make such a comparison they usually find plenty of evidence that they have made significant improvements in their lives. (p. 100)

In terms of cultural expression (e.g., dating, language), 1.5-generation students appear to many to be "traditionally Hmong." Mrs. Her described 1.5-generation students as "not Americanized," suggesting a kind of cultural purity. Although most 1.5-generation students live by their parents' rules, the Hmong culture has not remained static. Even as relative newcomers, 1.5-generation students and their families have made cultural adjustments in response to life in the United States. One of the biggest of these adjustments is their increased support for the education of girls and women (Goldstein, 1985; Koltyk, 1998; Lee, 1997). Furthermore, while 1.5-generation students in this study follow their parents' ways out of respect, many assert that that they will raise their own children in "Hmong *and* American ways." Such attitudes suggest a more complex embracing of Hmong culture than is evident at first glance.

Perceptions of Education

From their parents, 1.5-generation students have acquired a "folk theory of success" that links education to social mobility (Ogbu, 1993), a concept typical among immigrants from many cultures (Gibson, 1988; Suárez-Orozco,

1989). Many students who participated in this research study diligently because they, like their parents, believe that education is the route to ascending the socioeconomic ladder of American society. Most students dream of going to college or vocational school after graduating from high school. It is not uncommon to find members of the 1.5 generation studying in groups before school and during lunch. Some students seek out other hard-working foreign-born Asians as friends and study companions. Friendly competition over test scores on the latest French or chemistry test helps to further motivate the students. Many 1.5-generation students are well aware that UHS has a reputation for being an excellent school with high academic standards. In comparing UHS to schools in Thailand or Laos, they conclude that the educational opportunities in the United States are far superior and consider themselves to be fortunate to be attending such a school.

May, a sophomore, dreams of becoming a doctor. She firmly believes that as a woman her educational opportunities are greater in the United States than they would have been in Laos. Furthermore, she maintains that UHS is a particularly good school:

This is a really good school. At this school if you want to be a success you can. There are harder and better classes here than at other schools. I feel lucky to go to school here and I tell my sister that she is lucky she will be coming here.

Family Obligations

Like other immigrant children, 1.5-generation Hmong youth report having significant family responsibilities that they must juggle along with their schoolwork (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996; Song, 1999). Many Hmong students at UHS are responsible for interpreting for their parents, driving their parents to appointments, performing various household chores, and even working to help support the family. Jackson, a senior in high school, misses school occasionally because he has to drive his parents to appointments. Cha, a sophomore, must work at a local supermarket in order to earn money to help support his mother, who is living on disability insurance. Cha explained, "It is my job to take care of my mother . . . my father is in Laos." Girls, in particular, are often expected to help cook, clean, and take care of younger siblings. May wakes up at 6:15 A.M. and helps her younger siblings get ready for school. She catches the bus at 7:00 A.M. and meets her friends to study in the school cafeteria for an hour before school starts. After a full day of academic classes, she attends an after-school tutoring program for academically talented students from disadvantaged backgrounds until 7:00 P.M. When she gets home, she cooks dinner and then helps her siblings with their homework before doing her own homework. By the time she goes to bed at midnight she is exhausted. Jackson, Cha, May, and others perform this caring work because they feel obliged to their parents and because they believe it is the right thing

to do. Despite the fact that the traditional parent-child relationships are reversed within these families, parental authority is preserved.

In describing the conditions necessary to maintain parental authority, Portes and Rumbaut write:

Parental authority is maintained in those admittedly rare instances where little acculturation takes place in either generation. More commonly, that authority is preserved where sufficient resources exist to guide second-generation acculturation. These resources are of two kinds: first, parental education, allowing the first generation to "keep up" with their children's learning and to monitor its course; second, ethnic bonds, creating incentives for youth to comply with community norms and to combine them with American cultural patterns. (1996, pp. 240-241)

Although the parents of 1.5-generation students have little formal education, most 1.5-generation students report that their parents have close ties to the Hmong community that support parental authority. May, for example, reports that the Hmong community monitors her actions and that this prevents her from straying from her parents' ways. May's parents' ability to maintain their authority also derives from their willingness to make certain cultural accommodations. In describing her parents, May says, "They are traditional, but they want me to go to college." May is quick to point out that her parents' support for her education distinguishes them from some Hmong parents, who fail to support higher education for their daughters. Because her parents support her dreams for higher education, she perceives them as reasonable. This judgment leads her to follow their rules with little resistance.

Although students rarely complained about their family responsibilities, it is important to note that family obligations can interfere with students' educational pursuits. In her research on Hmong college students, for example, Ngo (2000) discovered that students often had to choose between their education and their family responsibilities. In my study, students explained that family obligations often had to come before homework, which ultimately affected their grades. Cha, for example, explained that after work and household chores, he was often too tired to do his homework. Similarly, early marriage and childbearing can create obstacles for young women. Many immigrant parents now believe that their daughters should wait until after graduating from high school to get married, but there are still some parents who encourage their daughters to marry while in high school. On the subject of early marriage, Dunnigan, Olney, McNall, and Spring (1996) recently concluded that "early marriage and childbearing do not appear to serve as an impediment to young Hmong adults' pursuit of education" (p. 206). Unlike these researchers, I am less optimistic about the impact of early marriage on the educational persistence of Hmong girls. Although most parents value education for their daughters, once girls are married, the decision to pursue

education is in the hands of their in-laws. Furthermore, even when in-laws support the idea of education it is often difficult for young women to successfully pursue an education when they are responsible for the care of the in-laws' family.

During my research at UHS, I learned about three girls who were pressured into getting married. The experiences of my respondents serve as cautionary tales regarding the impact of early marriage on the pursuit of education. One student explained that although she did not want to get married, she ultimately agreed to the marriage out of feelings of obligation to her parents. Her in-laws and parents have all agreed that she should be allowed to go to college when she graduates from high school, but her increased family obligations often interfere with her studies. This young woman now splits her time between her parents' house, where she continues to help cook and care for her siblings, and her in-laws' house, where she also cooks and cleans. Given the increase in her family responsibilities, she now fears that she will not be able to earn the grades to win a scholarship to go to school, but she has not given up. Such stories serve as a warning to researchers who would too blithely dismiss the impact of early marriage on girls.

Although my data suggests that early marriage may negatively affect girls' education, I would caution schools not to condemn early marriage. Early marriage is a highly political issue and one about which the Hmong community is very sensitive. The fact that many married Hmong girls at UHS choose to hide their married status suggests that they are well aware of the fact that school authorities would condemn their status. By condemning early marriage, schools may inadvertently be asking students to choose between their education and their families.

ESL as a Safe Space

Although UHS has an excellent reputation among the White, middle-class population of the city, some people of color have criticized the school for overlooking the specific needs of students of color. The ESL program at UHS, however, is led by a team of educators dedicated to serving students who are English-language learners.⁴ Most 1.5-generation students are enrolled in the ESL program, which offers courses in ESL, social studies, science, and math. The school offers guided-study courses to help students make the transition from ESL to mainstream classes. In addition to these course offerings, the department employs part-time bilingual resource specialists to assist with tutoring and translations, as well as a special guidance

⁴ It is important to point out that not all teachers in the ESL program were equally dedicated and/or qualified to work with ESL students. For example, two teachers had reputations among the students for being "nice, but too easy." Other ESL teachers criticized these "easy teachers" in hushed tones. Furthermore, some of the very dedicated ESL teachers complained that their efforts to improve the ESL program were often thwarted by school district regulations.

counselor to help students select courses. In ESL classes students are encouraged to draw on their cultural experiences. They are also afforded the freedom to develop their English-language skills without fear of being ridiculed by mainstream students (Olsen, 1997). Students who are 1.5 generation reported that they felt more comfortable talking in their ESL classes than in their mainstream classes. In short, the ESL program provides a safe space for its students in a large and often intimidating school. Ms. Heinemann, the chair of the ESL department during the 1998–1999 school year, believes that the mission of the ESL program is to teach students the academic and cultural skills to make the transition to mainstream classes. In her words:

I think we're teaching language and culture, including the culture of an American high school and how to access that. I'm very concerned about holding kids separate because, for their learning, they need to be in contact with peers. And I think for our society, if we don't have different groups mixing at the high school level, some of those groups will never mix. So, for those two reasons, I've worked really hard to try to create joint courses between departments.

Despite the efforts of the ESL program to integrate ESL students into the mainstream of the school, ESL and former ESL students remain socially segregated from mainstream students. Several 1.5-generation students complained about the social environment of the school, where it is difficult to make "American" friends. Although they are frustrated by this, most of them also emphasize that they are getting superior educational opportunities in the United States. Many 1.5-generation students report having close relationships with their ESL teachers, which further confirms their faith in the American educational system. May, for example, said she even felt comfortable talking to Mrs. Heinemann about "private things."

Contrary to the model minority stereotype, most 1.5-generation students were not high achievers. In fact, achievement among 1.5-generation students ranged from high to low, with the majority passing their classes with average grades. According to some school personnel, a growing minority of ESL students are falling into a pattern of chronic truancy.

Mr. Thao, a bilingual resource specialist, explained that some students begin skipping classes because they cannot keep up with the material. According to Mr. Thao, these students are often overlooked because they are quiet and teachers assume that they are working hard. Unfortunately, these students do not receive the assistance they need in order to survive academically. Thus, the emerging stereotype of the hard-working, quiet model minority works against the students' best interests. Their quiet demeanor serves as a reminder that resistance to schooling is not always expressed through direct confrontation. Other chronic truants, however, have come to the attention of school authorities for engaging in what is characterized as "negative behaviors." Sam, like other 1.5-generation students who are chron-

ically truant, began skipping classes because he could not understand the material. Since becoming a chronic truant he has been suspended for fighting on more than one occasion. According to the tenth-grade principal, the most recent suspension came after Sam hit a White student for calling him a derogatory name. Although the principal was sympathetic to Sam, he could not make exceptions to the rules regarding fighting.⁵ For Sam, the suspension served to confirm his suspicions that UHS is a racist institution. Unlike the higher achieving ESL students, Sam cannot console himself with dreams of higher education because his high school grades are low. For students like Sam, UHS is a social and academic minefield. What is significant about Sam's case is that he only began to skip his classes after he had struggled academically. Skipping classes was a way for him to avoid further embarrassment and frustration caused by his academic difficulties. Students like Sam do not begin skipping classes out of a desire to resist authority or out of a rejection of school. Unfortunately, Sam's truancy exacerbated his academic difficulties and got him into other trouble.

At the other end of the spectrum are the few students who are successful enough to make the honor roll. Interestingly, the students with the highest educational aspirations and the highest levels of achievement (e.g., grade point average) are girls. They are also the most likely to participate in after-school tutorial programs for academically successful students, and to be identified by teachers as exceptionally hard workers. In my previous work on Hmong American college women, I discovered that high achievement among Hmong women was in part a response to cultural norms regarding gender, which have been described as patrilinear and patriarchal (Donnelly, 1994; Lynch, 1999; Rumbaut & Ima, 1988). In describing the role of Hmong women in Laos, Donnelly (1994) wrote, "Ultimately, each woman worked under the command of men of her own household — under her husband if married, under her father and brothers if unmarried, under her son if aged" (p. 32). Gender roles in Laos were also shaped by the agricultural lifestyle. For example, women were encouraged to marry as teens and bear many children, who could then work on the farm (Lynch, 1999). Hmong American girls and women perceive the United States as a place where they have the chance to gain gender equality. Hmong American women explained that Hmong men could get respect with or without an education, but education was one of the only ways for women to gain freedom (Lee, 1997). May, for example, is a high-achieving sophomore who works hard in school because she wants "a good life where I won't have to work as hard as my mother." May's mother works two jobs, maintains the family's vegetable garden, and takes care of the house.

⁵ According to the school district's conduct and discipline plan, middle and high school students charged with hitting another student are subject to suspension.

Second-Generation Students

For the young, there is no going back. For better or worse, they are Americans.
(Faderman, 1998, p. 88)

At lunchtime, large groups of second-generation students gather at tables in the cafeteria. All American-born students are welcome, but the students they refer to as "FOBs" (1.5-generation Hmong American students) are not. After eating their lunch, some students run outside for a smoke while others stay inside and talk or study.

Although they proudly assert their American-born status, second-generation youth also express a strong sense of ethnic solidarity. Those who are active in extracurricular clubs choose to participate in the school's Hmong Club. During the 1999–2000 academic year, for instance, the Hmong Club had a difficult time finding an advisor. At one point a teacher suggested that the Hmong Club merge with the Asian Club, but the students dismissed this idea as being out of the question. The students explained that they wanted their own club. When I asked why they chose to participate in the Hmong Club, the girls responded by saying, "I love the Hmong people" and "I can relate to Hmong people."

In interviews, second-generation students consistently asserted that getting an education is important because it leads to a good job. Despite these professed beliefs regarding the instrumental value of education, their actual responses to education vary. Within the second generation are students who work hard, do well in school, and plan on going to college, and others who are chronically truant and on the brink of failing most of their courses. Like some of the 1.5-generation students who are chronic truants, some second-generation students begin skipping classes because of academic difficulties. For these students, truancy does not reflect a rejection of education but is a response to feelings of inadequacy and embarrassment. One such student, for example, stated that he hated going to class "because it makes me feel stupid." Other second-generation students begin to skip classes because of intergenerational conflicts at home. Still other second-generation students skip classes because they doubt that education will lead to social mobility.

Intergenerational Conflicts

Second-generation students routinely complain that their parents are too strict and do not understand life in the United States. According to them, immigrant parents want their American-born children to be "more traditional." However, second-generation youth, born and educated in the United States, inhabit a world apart from their immigrant parents. While many immigrant parents only speak Hmong, most second-generation youth are more fluent in English. Intergenerational conflict between immigrant parents and their American-born teens reflects the tension over how each group imagines the

future of Hmong America. Like students of the 1.5 generation, many second-generation students are expected to perform caring work (e.g., interpreting and driving) and household chores. In second-generation families, however, these role reversals often lead to the weakening of parental authority. Portes and Rumbaut (1996) assert that the loss of parental authority is directly related to the fact that the parental generation has not acculturated at the same rate as their children. According to Portes and Rumbaut (1996), this “generational dissonance occurs when second-generation acculturation is neither guided nor accompanied by changes in the first generation. This situation leads directly to role reversal in those instances when first generation parents lack sufficient education or sufficient integration into the ethnic community to cope with the outside environment and hence must depend on their children’s guidance” (p. 241). It is important to point out that second-generation students are not rejecting their Hmong backgrounds. Rather, they are trying to redefine what it means to be Hmong in the United States. Intergenerational conflict between immigrant parents and their American born teenagers reflects the tension over how each group imagines the future of Hmong America.

One of the most common conflicts between parents and adolescents often revolves around the issue of dating. Girls, in particular, lament that they are forbidden to spend time alone with boys. Jane, for example, complains that “it is so stupid. Parents think that if you are alone with a guy, you are fooling around.” Many girls report that their parents expect their dates to come to the house to visit with the entire family, an idea that most second-generation girls find appalling. Many parents also prefer arranged marriages, while their second-generation daughters dream of marrying someone of their own choice. In an effort to circumvent their parents’ rules, many second-generation youth have turned to the Internet as a way to meet members of the opposite sex. Adolescents report that it is becoming very common for young people to meet on the Internet in Hmong chat rooms. Once adolescents have established a relationship over the Internet, they go to considerable effort to arrange clandestine face-to-face meetings (Lee, 2001).

Another source of tension between second-generation youth and their parents involves the way teenagers dress. Many Hmong parents consider what their American-born children wear to be a sign of gang membership. Mrs. Her describes the way the adult Hmong community view youth who wear baggy clothes: “The kids start wearing the different clothes. Big clothes, loose clothes, baggy clothes. So they [Hmong adults] will start to call those kids ‘gang’.” Second-generation youth report that their parents learn about the dangers of Asian gangs from the television and from the larger Hmong community. The local school district has also tried to educate Hmong parents about the dangers of gangs. This attention to gang prevention contributes to the tension between parents and second-generation youth. For example, I attended a school district-sponsored meeting for Southeast Asian

parents that focused on gangs. The day after this meeting, several students complained that such meetings stir up trouble by leading parents to believe that gangs are more prevalent than they actually are. Hope, a sophomore in high school, complained:

They look at us as some bad kids. They call us some "little gang bangers" 'cause [of] the people around us, the way we dress and stuff. . . . People started dressing all baggy and they don't like it. People, like the old folks, they just say that we've forgotten our language a little bit, [and] we have a little bit, but then we still carry our traditions and stuff around.

Hope explains that she would like to learn more about her culture and history, but she finds communication with her parents frustrating. She asserts that she is proud of being Hmong, but she does not agree with all Hmong traditions. She understands that her clothes make her "look like a thug" in her parents' eyes, but she maintains that she and her friends are not in gangs. Because of their clothing, however, Hmong elders and many school authorities assume that she and her friends are involved with gangs. Criticized by adults, many second-generation students like Hope cling more tightly to their peers and turn away from adults.

Hmong immigrant parents view the changing family roles, their children's desire for increased independence, and their children's clothes as evidence that they are losing their second-generation children to "American ways." Research shows that immigrant parents have responded to the situation by trying to further control all aspects of their children's lives. Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (1995) discovered that Latino immigrant parents may "over-restrict the activities of the children and attempt to minimize the host country's influence" (p. 65). Similarly, some Hmong parents attempted to control all aspects of their children's lives. Many second-generation Hmong American youth respond to their parents' hypercontrol by resisting parental authority. Resistance may come in the form of direct confrontation (e.g., talking back to parents) or in the form of indirect challenges to parental authority (e.g., sneaking around). Toua, a junior at UHS, has had problems with truancy for the past two years. She explains that she skips class because "school is the only time we can hang out with our friends." When she is not in school, Toua and her friends are expected to be at home helping with the chores, but at school she and her friends have figured out that they can control their own time. Thus, truancy is an indirect way to circumvent their parents' control.

Toua and Hope are examples of students who experience significant conflict with their parents. This intergenerational conflict is related to differences in opinion regarding how to respond to life in the United States. In other cases, however, the intergenerational conflict is less severe. Moua, for example, explains that her parents are "traditional, but not real traditional," and they are "strict, but not super strict." Although they do not really ap-

prove of the clothes their second-generation children wear, Moua's parents do allow their children to pick their own clothes. They have also allowed their oldest daughter to go away to college in California. Although many Hmong parents now support higher education for their daughters, most expect their daughters to attend colleges near home. The fact that Moua's parents have been willing to make compromises has, paradoxically, helped to limit the intergenerational conflict within the family and helped to maintain parental authority.

"All Americans Are Rich"

In contrast to the generally hopeful attitude of the 1.5 generation, most second-generation students are somewhat cynical about life in the United States, where ongoing experiences with poverty have contributed to their cynicism about opportunities. Unlike immigrants, second-generation youth do not have a dual frame of reference (Ogbu, 1993). All they know is life in the United States and they want to be treated like other Americans. They cannot relate to what their parents say about life in Laos. They are more likely to compare themselves to their White, middle-class peers than to relatives in Thailand or Laos. Based on their observations at UHS and the images from the media, second-generation students have concluded that most Whites are wealthy. Moua, for example, moved to Wisconsin from California with her parents because they heard that there were greater economic opportunities in Wisconsin. Moua imagines that the typical White family is economically well off and supportive. She says:

When I think of the mainstream I think of a White family I guess. As both parents working . . . have really good jobs and maybe one kid or two kids, three at the most. And the kids are doing house chores and everything, they, like, have good grades and even when the girl grows up, the woman, the mom has a good job like a doctor or something. And the father supports the girl — she may go to college to be a doctor or major in business or something and the dad totally supports it.

Moua's father works at two jobs and her mother works one full-time job and takes in sewing. During her senior year Moua worked part-time on weekends to save money to attend community college. Students like Moua compare themselves to their White, middle-class peers, which makes them painfully aware that they are poor. For example, when I asked her why she did not participate in class discussions in her philosophy class, Moua said her experiences were "less interesting" than those of "White kids who have traveled all over." Another student, Toua, lives with her mother and two siblings in low-income housing. Her father died unexpectedly a few years ago. Toua bitterly expresses her resentment about being poor. She complained, "I hate being poor. . . . All Hmong people are poor and live in shabby houses." Toua and many of her peers have concluded that money is the most important thing in the United States, and they dream of being rich.

Some second-generation students see education as the route out of poverty. Like many immigrant youth, these students cling to a folk theory of success that links education to social mobility. Moua, for example, graduated from UHS with a B average. She plans to earn her associate’s degree and then transfer to the local university to earn her bachelor’s degree. Moua’s parents have encouraged her and her two older siblings to pursue higher education in order to get better jobs. Other second-generation youth, however, have begun to question whether education will lead to social mobility. Like other working-class and poor youth, many second-generation youth do not see how academic subjects will help them get a job (Eckert, 1989; Willis, 1977). Furthermore, they question whether it makes sense to spend time in high school when they can be earning money at a job. Some chronic truants hold on to the belief that a high school diploma is important, but they have clearly prioritized their part-time jobs over their schooling. “G,” for example, should be a senior in high school, but she has only earned enough credits to be a sophomore. “G” explains that her part-time job is more important than school because she earns money to buy herself clothes and to travel to Hmong soccer tournaments in cities throughout the Midwest.⁶ She has dropped out of high school, but she still hopes to earn her high school equivalency degree.

“They think we are all lazy and on welfare”

Second-generation students complain that non-Hmong people mock their culture and stereotype them as lazy welfare recipients with big families. Tim, a senior in the class of 1999, complained that “a lot of Americans think all Asians eat dogs and cats. We don’t. They think Hmong are all on welfare. We aren’t.” Other students tell stories about being treated like gang members by store clerks, police officers, and others. Second-generation students are unwilling to overlook instances of racism and discrimination. Sia, a graduate of the class of 1999, explains her distrust of White people:

For me, I feel, I just feel like some White people neglect me. I mean as much as I try to be nice to them, give them respect, they don’t give it back to me. Why should I even bother with them? Because I feel like I really don’t need people like that. . . . I mean, if you’re not Asian like me, you don’t understand where I’m coming from either. Like White people, I mean, they may say they do, but I don’t see it. They don’t really know how it feels.

Sia’s distrust for White people extends to White teachers as well. During her senior year in high school Sia was having serious family problems and she almost flunked out of school. When I suggested that she tell her teachers or

⁶ Hmong soccer and volleyball tournaments are popular among 1.5- and second-generation youth. Like the Hmong New Year celebrations, the sports tournaments offer Hmong American youth an opportunity to meet and socialize with other Hmong youth. While most 1.5-generation youth report attending tournaments with their parents, second-generation youth attend with families or peers.

counselors about her problems, she refused because she did not trust them to treat her problems with respect. Many second-generation Hmong American students at UHS share a similar distrust of teachers. One semester there was a rumor that one of the vice principals had made racist comments about Hmong students. Although the students were angry about the alleged comment, most were not shocked to hear that a school authority might have made racist comments. Previous experiences inside and outside of school led students to be suspicious of White authority figures.

Most second-generation students were in ESL classes during elementary and middle school, but have been mainstreamed at UHS. Unlike the ESL students who have a somewhat sheltered experience at UHS, students in the mainstream find themselves in an impersonal and highly competitive culture. Mr. Schenk, like other faculty and staff who work closely with students of color, points out that the culture of UHS reflects and favors those same White, middle-class students. Furthermore, they assert that the needs of poorer students and students of color are often sacrificed to protect the interests of White, middle-class students. Mr. Burns, one of the vice-principals, says:

I think . . . any time you have . . . this diverse group, this heterogeneous culture . . . I think just by default, there's some pecking order to that. And I think that exists here at UHS. I mean . . . we have a diverse student population. . . . I think there's still . . . some sort of elemental power relative to those subsets. . . . There has to be some sort of . . . system in place, or some sort of order by which . . . things are [done] . . . at the school. And I think that exists here at UHS. For example . . . I think the school is very responsive to . . . our talented students, the ones who are honor students. It doesn't necessarily mean that the school isn't responsive to the students at the other end of the spectrum. But, you know, the school is set up in a sense to be very responsive to the kids . . . who are achieving.

What Mr. Burns does not say here is that the majority of "honor students" at UHS are White. His comments do suggest, however, that lower achieving students and students who are outside of the mainstream experience a kind of benign neglect at UHS.

Despite these conditions, some second-generation students manage to survive and even thrive at UHS. Each semester a few second-generation students earn high enough grades to make the honor roll. Most of these "successful" students had been identified as "good" students by their elementary school teachers, and they had maintained good relationships with their teachers into high school. The majority of the second-generation students, however, become disconnected from school. They complain that they cannot relate to the curriculum or their teachers. As noted earlier, many question whether classes like algebra, chemistry, or Shakespeare can lead to a job. Tim, for example, believes that the vocational high school he attended when his family lived in California was superior to UHS because it offered job skills. He explains:

My school in California gave a lot of electives and stuff. Back there, they give you vocational classes already and everything. So, you know what part of the field you're going to go into already and get experience and all that. Here is just really academic classes and stuff like that. So I would say I like it there a lot better than here.

Many students also distrust their teachers, assuming that they are racist or at the very least critical of Hmong culture. As mentioned earlier, girls who are married hide their marital status from school authorities. Referring to the impact of isolation of Hmong American students, Mr. Schenk says,

Every kid that I have talked to, whether they are sort of these hard gang members or whomever, that are Hmong, they feel like this place just doesn't fit them. If you listen to the actual words, you know, "the teacher doesn't like me," "I don't have any place to go," "I don't like the principals," "if I am in the hall somebody's . . ." it is all about whether or not they are invited or included in some way. Those are the words. Whether they are angry or whether they are depressed or sad or whatever, those are still the words and the words have to do with being included or excluded.

Several second-generation students remarked that the content of their classes is simply boring and that they crave a curriculum that reflects their culture and history. They asserted that they would take any class that focused on Hmong culture. Hope, a chronic truant who failed ninth grade, said that she would welcome a class in Hmong culture, history, or language so she could learn about "her people." When she was in elementary school she took Hmong language classes at the community center. She still uses some of that Hmong when she participates in Hmong chat rooms.

Like the low-achieving 1.5-generation students, some second-generation students start skipping class because they're having academic difficulties. These students often hide their problems until it becomes apparent to teachers that their grades are dropping and they are failing exams. By that time, of course, much of the damage is already done. Some low-achieving students have internalized their shame and simply accept that they are "stupid." Jane, for example, is one year behind in school because she failed her sophomore year. When she revealed this to me she said sarcastically that it was "the Hmong way" to be at least one year behind.

Many UHS educators blame students for their own academic problems. Some members of the staff have concluded that Hmong American students simply lack motivation. One guidance counselor came to this conclusion after comparing Southeast Asian students with East Asian students.⁷ She says, "An East Asian student might be number three in the class and going to Yale, but the Southeast Asians aren't very motivated." What this counselor fails to recognize and address, however, is the possibility that the school may or may

⁷ At UHS, the Southeast Asian category includes Hmong, Cambodian, Vietnamese, and Laotian students, while the East Asian category includes Chinese and Korean students.

not be doing something to affect underachievement among some Hmong youth. The fact that some Asians are successful proves to her that success is possible for Asians at UHS. The fact that many of the East Asians are from highly educated backgrounds is not factored into the equation of their success — the perception is that their success is just an issue of motivation.

Other UHS educators assume that Hmong students' cultural differences create problems for them. Although cultural issues no doubt play a role, many educators use the cultural explanation to free themselves of responsibility for guiding these students toward achievement at UHS. According to many of these educators, cultural issues are the responsibility of the ESL department. Most second-generation Hmong are not in ESL, but as soon as they have problems they are referred there. It should be noted that this is not an official school policy, but rather an unofficial practice.

Ms. Heinemann, the chair of ESL, complained that the school often abdicates responsibility for culturally different students. She argues that

the school needs to recognize the population of students who are born and educated here and still don't feel part of the mainstream curriculum, the mainstream school activities. . . . I don't think those students should be counted as ESL students, because that makes them more different, that separates them more. They don't want that.

Ms. Heinemann's comments are echoed in the words of second-generation students themselves, who say that they do not want to be in ESL and that ESL is just for "FOBs." Kim, a senior, complained, "They always put Hmong students in ESL, which is racist. My cousin was put in ESL here and he doesn't even need it. I told him not to let them do that."

As in the 1.5-generation group, there are second-generation students who begin to skip classes in response to academic difficulties. Although second-generation Hmong students speak about the importance of education, some are beginning to question whether education is the most efficient method of achieving social mobility. In short, second-generation students' attitudes regarding education are shaped by their experiences inside and outside of school. Intergenerational relationships, experiences with racism, economic circumstances, relationships with school authorities, and academic achievement all influence their reactions to school.

Conclusions

The Hmong American students at UHS embody a complexity that challenges simplistic representations of Hmong youth as either model minorities or juvenile delinquents. Additionally, descriptions of Hmong students as either traditional or Americanized fail to fully appreciate the extent to which those who are described as traditional have acculturated and those who are described as Americanized have maintained a distinct identity as Hmong Amer-

icans. Although Mrs. Her and many Hmong students at UHS characterized Hmong students as falling into two distinct groups — 1.5-generation students, who are traditional (i.e., “good kids”), and second-generation students, who are Americanized (i.e., “bad kids”) — my data suggests a more complex picture.

Although 1.5-generation youth are characterized as being traditional, some of them embrace aspects of mainstream American society and many indicate that they will raise their children to follow both Hmong and American ways. On the other hand, while second-generation students appear to be Americanized (e.g., in their clothes and language), most continue to identify strongly as Hmong. There are high-achieving and hard-working students in both the 1.5-generation and second-generation groups, and there are chronic truants in both groups. While intergenerational conflict between second-generation youth and their parents is common, some second-generation youth, like their 1.5-generation counterparts, obey their parents’ authority with little resistance. One significant difference between 1.5-generation and second-generation students concerns their respective responses to racism. While both groups complained about the way non-Hmong people treat them, 1.5-generation students were more willing to overlook instances of discrimination and to focus on the positive aspects of life in the United States.

My ethnographic data challenges work that suggests a simplistic one-to-one relationship between the maintenance of traditional culture and high achievement, and Americanization and low achievement and delinquency (Hutchinson, 1997; Thao, 1999). Arguments regarding the positive impact of traditional culture on achievement underestimate the extent of cultural transformation in the Hmong community. Hmong culture, like all cultures, is fluid and dynamic. What researchers describe as traditional is in fact a culture that has changed and adapted in response to external conditions.

Rather than seeing the maintenance of traditional culture as being at the root of success, my data suggests that it is the practice of “accommodation and acculturation without assimilation” (Gibson, 1988, p. 24) that supports success. This strategy involves conforming to certain rules of the dominant society (i.e., accommodation) and making certain cultural adaptations while maintaining the group’s own cultural identity (pp. 24–25). The experiences of 1.5-generation and second-generation students suggest that their parents’ willingness and ability to adopt aspects of the dominant culture are directly related to their ability to maintain aspects of the Hmong culture. May (1.5 generation) and Moua (second generation), for example, accept their parents’ authority because their parents have made certain cultural adjustments. In other words, my data suggests that academic success is the result of both cultural transformation and cultural preservation.

Although Hmong culture certainly plays a role in school achievement, a sole focus on the role of culture in achievement fails to adequately consider

the impact of structural forces on students' attitudes toward education. My data supports the previous research that points to the impact of racism and economic opportunities on students' responses to school and their perceptions of life opportunities (Portes, 1995; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995). Second-generation youth, in particular, had long-term experiences with racism and poverty that challenged their faith in education. These students are not resisting school because they are Americanized, but because they do not perceive school to offer real opportunities.

Additionally, my research highlights the significance of the local school culture in the lives of these students and in their levels of school achievement. Unlike many poor immigrants and second-generation youth, the Hmong American youth in my study attend a relatively well-funded school with a reputation for academic excellence. Despite this reputation and perhaps even because of it, students of color and those from other marginal categories often fall through the cracks and fail to see themselves as part of the larger community of the school. The one major exception to this is the ESL program, which serves as a major source of support for many 1.5-generation students. For second-generation students there is no comparable source of support or inclusion.

To make these students full citizens in the schools that are intended to serve them, a number of things are necessary: educators who understand and respect their culture and the difficulties they face in their homes as they try to straddle the gulf between their culture and the larger American society; a curriculum that reflects their history; and a sense of inclusion in the school community at large. In sum, the school success or failure of 1.5- and second-generation Hmong students does not hinge on any one thing, but rather on a marriage of both external and internal forces.

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