

Struggling Between Two Cultures: What Is to Become of the Identity of Hmong Women?

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...We're tied between the Hmong and American culture. And we're stuck in the middle of it. And it's kind of like a struggle to fight, you know, both cultures at the same time and to try to succeed. And most people don't do it. Most people fail. (Ngo, 2002, p. 171)

These are words of a young Hmong American woman expressing her view on the experience of Hmong women in the United States. Through research, focusing on different issues, both Garrity (2003) and Ngo (2002) recognized how the experiences of Hmong women seemed to challenge and shape their identity. Garrity stated, "For the Hmong women I studied, there appears to be a 'double' double standard." Through her interviews with Hmong women, Garrity heard of the extra duties and obligations that Hmong women have to fulfill as compared to most White American women.

Background

The Hmong people have been arriving in the United States since 1975. There are over 169,000 Hmong in the United States, and currently 15,000 more from refugee camps in Thailand have been permitted to enter the United States (Wisinfo, 2004). Like many Asian cultures, honor, respect, and family take precedence over individual desires in the Hmong culture. Moreover, men take precedence over women (Vang, 2003). Men and elders have more influence in family and individual matters than women (Donnelly, 1994).

"Traditionally, the daughter is prepared for the next phase of her life to be the wife of another man and the daughter-in-law of another family" (Pho & Mulvey, 2003, p. 107). The adolescence stage does not seem to exist in the Hmong culture. A woman is a child and then becomes an adult when she is married (Walker, 1991). Hmong daughters are expected to learn how to cook, clean, and sew at a young age in order to be a worthy wife in the future (Donnelly, 1994; Pho & Mulvey, 2003).

Since coming to the United States, Hmong women have found great opportunities to be educated and seek employment. Conflict and confusion among family members arise as Hmong women take the opportunities given in the United States to explore their interests and practice their rights (Pho & Mulvey, 2003). Some Hmong women have alienated their own culture in favor of the American culture (Thao, 2003); thus changing the way they view themselves and the way others view them. Additionally, many Hmong women now share the role as breadwinners, or are the sole breadwinners of the family. They break away from the idea that they are completely dependent on their husband and families for survival. Moreover, many keep traditional values while integrating western philosophies of gender equality. Yet many are still bound by traditional gender expectations (Moua, 2003). Currently, some if not most Hmong women are often viewed as irresponsible and disobedient if they do not follow traditional household roles of cooking and cleaning (Donnelly, 1994; Pho & Mulvey, 2003).

The challenging experiences facing Hmong women seems to shape their identities as women living within two cultures. Research has suggested that "when one identity is less adaptive, individuals may compensate, in part, by favoring other more adaptive identities" (Pittinsky, Shih, & Ambady, 1999, p. 507); some Hmong women in existing studies and literature have tried to break away from their culture to fit into the mainstream culture. Identity is influenced both within and outside of one's culture (Castells, 1997 as cited in Martinson & Chu, 2003). The acculturation models of both Sue and Sue (1973) and Berry (1980) show that as individuals acculturate into a mainstream culture, their views and values will change. Furthermore, works on identity development claim that a woman's sense of self is derived from her social connections with others (Gilligan, 1982; Josselson, 1987; Miller, 1976). Additionally, identity in general is believed to "shape and reshape by the unique patterns created by those personal interpretations, evaluations, and symbolic meanings of life experiences" (Anderson & Hayes, 1996, p. xiii). As for recent immigrants, Moya

(2002, as cited in Marfinson & Chic, 2003) believed that their ability to create an identity within a community will depend on their ability to learn about social and economic variables related to their position in society and their own community.

As for a woman's identity, the literature has focused on the woman's inner views, knowledge, and strengths as the basis of a woman's identity. Janet Helms believed that the new identities of women are achieved through internalizing their own views of what it means to be a woman, rather than being influenced by external factors (Boisnier, 2003). Similar to Helms's view, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1997) indicated that women are healthiest when they find their own voice or live by their own views. They believed a woman's way of knowing and self-concept are intertwined.

Proposed Hmong Women Identity Model

Similar to studies on acculturation, Asian Americans, ethnicity, and gender identity development, this proposed Hmong Women Identity Model is based on the developmental processes that oppressed individuals progressively experience in a society. Myers et al. (1991) described these developmental processes as "(a) a denial, devaluation, or lack of awareness of their oppressed identity; (b) a questioning of their oppressed identity; (c) an immersion in the oppressed subculture; (d) a realization of the limitations of a devalued sense of self; (e) an integration of the oppressed part of self into their whole self-identity" (p. 55). Since the Hmong have only resided in the United States for 28 years or less, this model pertains only to refugee Hmong women (born outside of the United States) and first generation Hmong women (children of refugee women).

In the Hmong Women Identity Model, it is hypothesized that traditional gender role expectations and the acculturation process cause Hmong women to choose different ways to live their lives. Based on the acculturation models and literature on Hmong women, the Hmong women will react in three ways as their identity develops: women who alienate the dominant culture, women who alienate their traditional culture, and women who integrate traditional and western cultures. Additionally, based on the Acculturation model, the Womanist Identity Model, and the Women's Ways of Knowing Model, it is hypothesized that as Hmong women become more acculturated and aware of their environment, they will become more similar in how they view themselves and their environment in the last stage of the Hmong Women Identity Model.

Additionally, in the highest stage of the Hmong Women Identity Model, women will also define their own identity based on their internal views.

The stages of the Hmong Women Identity Model are similar to Helms's Womanist Identity Model. The difference between Helms's model and the Hmong Women Identity Model is that it considers various factors. For example, in addition to women internalizing their own views, the Hmong Women Identity Model recognizes the influences of ethnic, acculturation, and thought processes on women's identity development.

Most of the stage names and progression through the stages are adopted from Helms's Womanist Identity Model. Integration is a new stage name that was put in place of Helms's immersion-emersion stage to explain the effect of acculturation on women's identity development. Additionally, the Hmong Women Identity Model has included three ways that Hmong women react in the encounter stage (e.g., alienating own culture, alienating dominant culture, and accommodating both cultures). Although the Hmong Women Identity Model stages are not named after the other models, they are equally important to the development of this model. Some of the notions of the other models have been incorporated into the stages. The following is a summary of the stages of the Hmong Women Identity Model:

Preencounter

Hmong women in the preencounter stage hold a constricted view of women's roles, conform to Hmong societal views about gender, and think and behave in ways that devalue women and esteem men as a reference group. Women in this stage are most likely to be least acculturated.

Movement to the next stage. Through their education, employment, friends, or the media, they will be exposed to women's rights and woman role models. They will begin to question the accepted values and beliefs. This will then lead them to the next stage, the encounter stage.

Encounter

In the encounter stage, Hmong women start exploring alternate ways of viewing men and women, their societal roles, and the difference between Hmong and American gender roles. They are now aware of their inner voice and views. As they become more exposed to the American culture and are constantly challenged by their acculturation process, women in this stage will either alienate their culture, alienate the American culture, or accommodate both cultures. Depending on

their experiences with their culture and the dominant culture, Hmong women will react in three different ways in the encounter stage.

Reaction one. Hmong women in this reaction will alienate their own culture. They may go against Hmong traditional gender roles and views.

Reaction two. Hmong women in this reaction are aware of the two different cultural views on gender roles. They choose to reject the Western culture in favor of the traditional Hmong culture. They will keep the traditional Hmong views on gender roles, although they may continue to question them.

Reaction three. Women who react by accommodating try to live by rules of the two cultures. They struggle between fulfilling both traditional and western expectations for women. They may feel guilty for not being able to fulfill both cultures equally.

Movement to the next stage. As the women in the encounter stage attempt to resolve issues they face in the United States, they will live their lives according to their reaction. For women in the encounter stage to move on to the next stage, they must realize that it is impossible to fulfill every expectation for women. Women in reaction one will realize that it is impossible to meet traditional expectations while living within the dominant culture. Furthermore, for women in reaction two to move onto the next stage, they must understand the importance of their culture and cultural values or feel the need to reconnect with their cultural roots. For both alienation groups (reaction one and reaction two), they may start appreciating some values from both cultures while neglecting others.

Integration

In the integration stage, in addition to understanding that it is impossible to fulfill any cultural expectations, Hmong women also realize that they have two cultures. Furthermore, they realize that it is even more difficult to fulfill expectations from two cultures. They now use objective thought or reasoning to learn and gain strength. As they become more acculturated and become more independent through their work or education, they start integrating the two cultures and take what is beneficial to their lives. In this stage, women will have thoughts of what they want and are aware of their choices but do not act on it.

Movement to the next stage. When women encounter an event or situation that pushes them to act

on their needs, they will then move on to the internalization stage. They will struggle with the traditional and dominant views as they strive to achieve their goals and sustain their views.

Internalization

Hmong women in the internalization stage will incorporate into their identity a positive definition of womanhood based on personal attributes. Hmong women in this stage are aware of the dominant culture and have incorporated some of its beliefs and views into their lives. They will pay less attention to external evaluations of both worlds and achieve an internally defined and more integrated identity. They will have knowledge of what is expected of them from both cultures as in the former stage, but in this stage, they will act on their own will and thoughts. Their personalized vision of womanhood might include some traditional behaviors and values of the Hmong culture as well as that of the American culture.

In order to fully understand the identity formation of Hmong women, one may need to consider their culture, gender, ethnic identity process, and acculturation process. Many of the identity models suggest that each woman may have different life experiences and interpret her experiences somewhat differently, leading to different identity formation; the Hmong Women Identity Model agrees with this suggestion. Understanding the identity formation of Hmong women is beneficial to professionals' multicultural awareness development as well as to these women. With an understanding of where these women are in their identity development, helping professionals will be more aware of these women's worldviews and self-evaluations. Helping professionals need to be aware of all the external and internal influences on a Hmong woman and her identity development in order to provide adequate health care, career exploration, and education.

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