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# Lived Experiences of Hmong Refugees in America

Rocky Lo  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Walden University  
2019

Abstract

Lived Experiences of Hmong Refugees in America

by

Rocky Lo

MA, Walden University, 2016

BS, Central Michigan University, 2014

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Psychology

Walden University

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## Abstract

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Hmong refugees immigrated to the United States and have since experienced cultural differences that challenged their traditional way of living. The research problem for this study was Hmong refugees' lived experiences in America because their experience was unknown and unexplored. Addressing this research problem was significant because it provided insight into their experiences and its impact on acculturation as well as distinct cultural experiences not acknowledged or noticeable with monolithic studies. The purpose of this study was to explore Hmong refugees' lived experiences in America using Grove and Torbion's theory of sojourners as the theoretical framework to address research questions, what are the cultural experiences of Hmong refugees living in America? and how have acculturated challenges constructed Hmong refugees lived experiences? A qualitative phenomenological design with semi-structured interviews was employed to explore 8 refugees' lived experiences and coded using Giorgi's 5-step data analysis. Participants reported cultural as well as gender specific experiences that resulted in dissonance, adaptation, loss of ethnic practices, collective to independent lifestyle preferences and its impact on each participant's acculturative approach or cognitive and behavioral adjustments toward American culture. Based on these findings, possible implications for social change include researching ethnic groups separately in order to acknowledge distinct lived experiences related to specific cultural factors as well as healthy and effective methods of integrating immigrants into dominant cultural societies.

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## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to Hmong refugees who have endured war and persecution throughout Southeast Asia as well as acculturative challenges resettling in America. Their courageous journey is a reminder of the strength and resilience of the Hmong people. If not for their courage, strong will, and determination, opportunities for higher education would only be a dream to Hmong Americans like me. They are humble heroes to those who know their story, so I dedicate this dissertation in honor of preserving and acknowledging their history.

## Acknowledgments

Special acknowledgments to my family for their unconditional support, especially my parents who have sacrificed everything for my siblings and I to succeed in our fields of interest. They are my greatest motivation and the reasons behind all my accomplishments. I would also like to acknowledge my committee members, Dr. Jimmy Brown and Dr. Donna Heretick for guiding me throughout this process as well as Dr. Jesus Tanguma for his insightful wisdom and advice.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

The topic of this study is the acculturative conflicts experienced by Hmong refugees in America. With this study, I addressed a gap in research specific to acculturation among understudied Southeast Asian (SA) populations. In this study, I employed a qualitative phenomenological design to assess common themes and concepts of Hmong refugees' lived experiences gathered through semi structured interviews. Grove and Torbions' (1985) theory of sojourners was used as a theoretical framework with an emphasis on their theoretical concepts of clarity and applicability.

The need to explore understudied SA populations was significant for three main reasons. First, the generation of Hmong refugees who immigrated to America has experienced the effects and challenges of cultural change. For many approaching senior status, time is critical to study Hmong refugees while their population exists. Secondly, studying Hmong refugees will acknowledge and preserve their history and culture as well as the relationship between these factors and acculturation. The latter is significant because understanding culture and its impact on psychology can influence how public service professionals can better accommodate ethnic populations in culturally responsive ways (Sirikantraporn, 2013). Furthermore, understanding culture and its impact on psychology is important for understanding acculturative methods used by immigrants such as assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization (Berry, 1997). Social implications of the study include cultural challenges among refugees and first-generation born Americans, educational achievement, identity, and socioeconomic challenges. The

following sections in this chapter include the problem and purpose statement, research questions, theoretical framework, nature of study, definitions, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations and social significance. In the next section, I provide a brief background about the historical and present situation of Hmong refugees in America as well as a general gap and shortage of research among SA.

### **Background**

After the Vietnam War in 1975, many SAs (e.g., Hmong, Laotians, Cambodians, and Vietnamese) not willing to live under communist rule were forced to leave Southeast Asia (Lee & Chang, 2012). Hmong populations in Laos and Vietnam took refuge in Thailand where they were protected from communist Viet Cong's and Pathet Laotians (Munger, 1987). With support and funding from the United Nations, many left Southeast Asia and immigrated to America (Munger, 1987.). Ever since the mid-1970s, the Hmong population has increased to roughly 260,000, making them one of the fastest growing Asian populations according to a 2010 consensus (Pfeifer, Sullivan, Yang, & Yang, 2010)

Among understudied SA populations, what is not known is the lived experiences of Hmong refugees in America. Current literature suggests more information is needed to understand how cultural differences impact psychological, physical, mental, and emotional health as well as success and goal attainment among SA immigrants. For example, Lui and Rollock (2012) measured psychological factors, such as intentions for immigrating (e.g., reasons and goals), and their effect on psychological well-being and found that different ethnic groups utilize different goal-oriented skills to achieve personal

and professional objectives that lead to higher levels of psychological well-being, compared to language proficiency and social support which were minor predictors of psychological well-being. Bahrassa, Juan and Lee (2013) examined gender differences regarding acculturation and psychological distress among Hmong families. Their results suggested no significant differences between genders in regard to acculturative conflicts. Throughout their study, Hmong students did not mention acculturative conflicts; however, it is possible that the culture gap is so extensive that cultural conflicts are indistinguishable from noncultural conflicts. In other SA studies similar to these, researchers have addressed the effects of acculturation in relation to household conflict, psychological distress, success, goal attainment, and overall health and wellbeing (Huang, Calzada, Chenge, & Brotman, 2012; Lui & Rollock, 2013; Her & Buley-Meissner, 2012; Muruthi & Lewis, 2017; Choi, Kim, Pikelicky, & Kim's, 2013; Juan, Syed, & Cookston, 2012; Museus, 2013, Lee, 2015; Mbano, 2012; Tennen, Affleck & Armeli, 2000; Kidd & Teagle, 2012; Gartner, Kiang, & Supple 2014; Tam, & Freisthler's, 2015; Lei, & Pellitteri, 2017; Grusec, 2011; Ro, Geronimus, Griffith, & Gee, 2016). By exploring the lived experiences of Hmong refugees, the results of this study can contribute information about the importance of cultural uniqueness and its impact on acculturation as well as challenges experienced by immigrants acculturating into mainstream society.

### **Problem Statement**

The research problem in this study was the lived experiences of Hmong refugees in America. Hmong refugees have lived in the United States for about 50 years, and little is known about their acculturative experiences. Acculturation is defined as a process of cultural change between two or more groups through prolonged contact or interaction (Snauwaert, Soenens, Vanbeselaere & Boen, 2003). Acculturation is a complex process that includes social factors, such as values; social and behavioral norms; and spiritual, religious, and political beliefs as well as independent and collective influences that impact a population's psychology (Berry, 1997, 2002). The dynamics of acculturation emerge from the variety of cultural differences between groups (Doucerain, Dere, & Ryder, 2013); therefore, there is a need to explore ethnic populations separately to understand how each distinct group experiences acculturation (Lui & Rollock, 2012; Nagai, 2015; Nguyen, Wong, Juang, & Park, 2015; Sirikantraporn, 2013; Tummala-Narra, Deshpande, & Kaur, 2016)

With minimal studies exploring SA populations, what is not known are the lived experiences of Hmong refugees in America. According to Lui and Pollock (2012), understanding the reasons why people immigrate as well as the different skills, cultural values, and learning behaviors utilized by specific groups throughout cultural transitions are significant predictors of physical and mental health as well as educational attainment. Though few studies have been conducted with SA immigrants (e.g., Lui & Rollock, 2012; Nagai, 2015; Nguyen et al., 2015; Sirikantraporn, 2013; Tummala-Narra et al., 2016), many acculturative studies have been conducted with East Asians (EAs; e.g.

Korean, Japanese, and Chinese). Studies with EAs have articulated the importance of cultural differences as well as the impact these differences have on acculturation, educational attainment, socio-economic status (SES), identity, health, and well-being (Gim-Chung, 2001; Lui & Rollock, 2012; Rodriguez-Operana, Mistry, & Chen, 2017; Ying & Han, 2008). For these reasons, it is important to explore positive and effective integrative approaches into mainstream society to minimize alienation, marginalization, and social pressures of assimilation among SA populations (Rudmin, 2003). Furthermore, understanding SAs acculturative experiences can inform public service professionals about the importance of facilitating and accommodating SA in culturally responsive ways (Sirikantraporn, 2013)

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of Hmong refugees in America. The sample for this study included Hmong refugees who immigrated from Southeast Asia to America throughout the 1970s and 1980s (Lee & Chang, 2012). In the study, I employed a qualitative method and phenomenological design. Participants' responses in semi structured interviews were assessed for common themes and concepts relating to the lived experiences of Hmong refugees in America. Analyzing the common themes and concepts regarding the lived experiences of Hmong refugees provided information about the thoughts, feelings, attitudes, perceptions, challenges, and cultural changes they experienced. The interview questions were open ended, allowing participants to describe their lived experiences and overall perceptions of their acculturative experiences in detail.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the cultural experiences of Hmong refugees living in America?
2. How have acculturative challenges constructed Hmong refugees lived experiences in America?

In qualitative studies, research questions are intended to narrow the purpose to the specific questions intended to be addressed in the study (Creswell, 2013). Since the purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of Hmong refugees, I developed the research questions in attempts to explore the cognitive and behavioral transitions among immigrants in pluralistic societies. To understand the process of acculturation or intercultural adjustment involves understanding psychological changes in perception and behavioral adaptations among people in unfamiliar environments (Berry, 2003; Grove & Torbiorn, 1985). For these reasons, the research questions were constructed to explore the cognitive and behavioral process of cultural adjustments as experienced and perceived by Hmong refugees in America.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study was Grove and Torbiorn's (1985) theory of sojourners. I based my theoretical framework exploring Hmong refugees lived experiences from Gonsalve (1992) who used this theory to explore the acculturative experiences of Latin American refugees in the United States. In doing so, he delineated five additional stages of acculturation. Within the theory of sojourners, Grove and Torbiorn stated that "Culturally appropriate behavior is based on one's awareness of what is proper from a cultural standpoint (*clarity*) and performing those actions consistently

with the behavior of respected others (*applicability*)” (Gonslalve, 1992, p. 385). They suggested that this process continues over a lifetime as immigrants learn and adopt new values, social norms, and acceptable behaviors within the dominant or receiving culture. Considering the latter, I developed the research questions to focus on Grove and Torbiorn’s theoretical concepts of clarity and applicability, which will be further explained in Chapter 2.

### **Nature of Study**

In this study, I used a qualitative phenomenological design to gain a deeper understanding of Hmong refugees’ lived experiences. The objective of a phenomenological approach is to describe a phenomenon common to a population (Creswell, 2013). Since few studies have been conducted on Hmong refugees (e.g., Lui & Rollock, 2012; Nagai, 2015; Nguyen et al., 2015; Sirikantraporn, 2013; Tummala-Narra et al., 2016), not much is known about their lived experiences in America. Qualitative studies are used to explore and develop deeper insights into people’s thoughts and perceptions of their experiences (Breakwell, 2004). Qualitative researchers are not concerned with generalizing or quantifying data; instead, qualitative methods are used to explore meaning and in-depth information when minimal information is known about a given phenomenon (Giorgi, Giorgi, & Morley, 2017).

For this study, I used a purposive sample. Participants were recruited through word of mouth by family and friends as well as advertisements through local Hmong organizations. This research study was based in the western region of the United States where there is a high proportion of Hmong residents. In this area, there are two major

Hmong organizations: a Hmong cultural center and a Hmong student association organization (HSA) at a local university. Each organization plays a unique role in maintaining cultural values and activities within the Hmong community around the region. These activities include sharing local news through Hmong media, connecting and building relationships among Hmong communities, offering linguistic classes in Hmong, spreading awareness of Hmong history and culture, as well as funding and sponsoring local Hmong events. Each organization is publicly accessible and open to all individuals willing to contribute and be a part of the movement towards innovative changes for Hmong communities in the region.

To collect data, I used semi structured interviews. For data analysis, Giorgi's five-step descriptive phenomenological method was used for coding. The descriptive phenomenological method is based on Giorgi's philosophical principles for its empirical psychological implications (Broome, 2011). Each step is significant for its own contributions to coding, which I will explain in greater detail in Chapter 3.

### **Definitions**

*Acculturation*: A process of cultural change between two or more groups through prolonged contact or interaction (Snauwaert et al., 2003).

*Applicability*: Behavioral consistency of acceptable behaviors and social norms within a society (Grove & Torbiorn, 1985).

*Assimilation*: An individual acquiring and adopting new cultural values and social practices while rejecting the values and social practices of their ethnic culture (Berry, 1997).

*Clarity:* Cognitive awareness or understanding of acceptable behaviors and social norms within a society learned through accumulated knowledge and experience (Grove & Torbiorn, 1985).

*Ethnicity:* Collective identity based on ancestry, language, cultural practices, values, social norms, religion, customs, traditions, and history (Cornell & Hartmann, 2007).

*Hmong culture:* A person's collective manifestations of social values, duties, obligations, and responsibilities to their family, clan, and community (Her & Buley-Meissner, 2012).

*Immigrant:* An individual residing permanently in a foreign country (Berry, 1997).

*Integration:* A person identifying with their ethnicity, cultural values, and social practices while participating in different values and social practices of the dominant or receiving culture (Berry, 1997).

*Marginalization:* An individual rejecting any and all cultural values and social practices including those of the dominant culture and ethnic culture (Berry, 1997).

*Refugee:* A person forced to leave their country as a result of war or persecution (Dury & Williams, 2012).

*Separation:* Maintaining ethnic values and social practices while rejecting new values and social practices of the dominant or receiving culture (Berry, 1997).

*Sojourner:* An individual who relocates temporarily to an unfamiliar environment (Grove & Torbiorn, 1985).

### **Assumptions**

Assumptions in a study are necessary ideas expected to be true in order for a study to be relevant or meaningful (Simon, 2011). These ideas include beliefs, theories, and philosophical assumptions that cannot be confirmed as truths but are assumed to be true in order to inform research (Creswell, 2014). For this study, I assumed each participant was reflective enough to remember their experiences to describe them in accurate detail. Another assumption was that each participant was fluent enough in English to share their experiences confidently and accurately without any language restrictions. I also assumed that each participant was ethnically enculturated enough to describe specific cultural challenges and transitions regarding their acculturative experiences. My final assumption was that each participant was honest with their responses in order to accurately understand and capture their lived experiences.

Each assumption was necessary for understanding differences between Hmong and American culture as well as understanding how American culture influenced Hmong culture from each individual perspective. These assumptions were also necessary to capture a detailed, in-depth, and rich understanding of Hmong refugees' lived experiences in America. These assumptions allowed me to extract the psychological meaning as perceived and experienced by each participant.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The lived experiences of Hmong refugees in America were not known and could not be found in the existing literature. Since their lived experiences have not been explored before, how Hmong refugees have acculturated into American society and the

implications of these changes on ethnic values and cultural norms within the Hmong community was not known. I chose this specific research problem because previous researchers have not explored the lived experiences of Hmong refugees with considerable attention to their distinct culture, values, and social norms.

The scope of this study was limited to Hmong refugees who immigrated to the United States throughout the 1970s and 1980s who were at least 30 years of age and spoke English fluently. I delimited the study to exclude the experiences of refugees who were unable to speak English and were less enculturated into American society. Those less enculturated were not able to contribute relevant data to the topic of acculturation because they have not acquired American values and social norms. Language barriers would have also diminished and restricted the descriptive accuracy of their experiences as well as increase chances for misinterpretations. The potential transferability of the results include implementing positive integrative approaches into mainstream society by comparing Hmong people's lived experiences with other immigrant populations. Additionally, public service professionals may use the findings of this study to facilitate approaches accommodating various immigrant populations who share similar cultural values, characteristics, and social norms with Hmong people.

### **Limitations**

Employing a qualitative phenomenological study, the limitations I considered included participants' personal, ethnic, cultural biases in comparison to perceptions of American culture and values. This may have included misunderstandings of cultural differences that may have led to inaccurate responses. For instance, people from

collective cultures may perceive people from independent cultures as selfish or greedy. This is problematic because equating individual values over collective values as greedy or selfish is inaccurate and could lead to negative perceptions about independent societies and values. Language barriers may also have been an issue since each participant had their own standard of English fluency. This could have potentially affected participants' ability to describe their lived experiences, which could have distorted the detail and in-depth perceptions of their experiences. Given these limitations, I gave participants a copy of the interview questions ahead of time so they could reflect and organize their thoughts and responses. Additionally, participants were informed of the comprehensive purpose and intention of the study to provide background and context for their responses.

Possible limitations concerning researcher biases include influencing participant responses by priming questions (Foddy, 1994). To avoid priming, I developed and used questions that were open ended and neutral, asking for descriptions about participant experiences rather than their personal thoughts and opinions. Furthermore, questions were structured and worded following Grove and Torbiorn's (1985) theoretical concepts of clarity and applicability. Structuring questions aligned with the theoretical concepts helped me explore participants' personal experiences with the process of acculturation rather than confirming or reassuring any personal experiences I may have had with acculturation.

### **Significance of Study**

The results of this study are significant to the discipline because they provide insights into the importance of cultural distinction and its impact on acculturation. The importance of exploring ethnic groups separately lies in the acknowledgement of distinct experiences among ethnic populations that are not acknowledged or noticeable with monolithic studies. The significance to positive social change included contributing to healthy and effective methods of integrating immigrants into dominant cultural societies. The results of this study could be used to inform public service professionals about the importance of facilitating culturally sensitive approaches that would accommodate SA immigrants in culturally responsive ways.

### **Summary**

In Chapter 1, I introduced the topic of understudied SAs and Hmong refugees in America. The problem statement was developed to focus on the lived experiences of Hmong refugees and the significance of cultural distinction and influence on acculturation. The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of Hmong refugees as they are perceived and experienced within Grove and Torbiorn's theory of sojourners with specific emphasis on their theoretical concepts of clarity and applicability. My justification for conducting a qualitative phenomenological study included exploring the lived experiences of Hmong refugees. In this chapter, I listed and defined relevant concepts to the study as well as described the limitations, sampling criteria, and potential researcher biases. The social significance of this study included researching ethnic groups separately to acknowledge distinct lived experiences related to

their unique culture as well as healthy and effective methods for integration and professional accommodations of SA immigrants with public assistance. In this chapter, I also reviewed current literature significant to the phenomenon and purpose of the study. In Chapter 2, I will provide a full review of synthesized literature focusing on acculturation as well as the rationale for selecting Grove and Torbiorn's theory of sojourners.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

The lived experiences of SA immigrants in America were unknown; therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of Hmong refugees in America. Acculturation is defined as a process of cultural change between two or more groups through prolonged contact or interaction (Snauwaert et al., 2003). Acculturation is a complex process that involves a variety of social and psychological factors, such as societal and behavioral norms; cultural values; and spiritual, religious, and political beliefs, as well as independent and collective dispositions (Berry, 1997, 2002). These factors are major contributors to the diverse acculturative experiences among immigrants. More information was needed to understand how these factors impact social challenges such as family socialization, identity, education, health, SES, discrimination, violence, and drug abuse as well as success and goal attainment among SA immigrants. For example, Lui and Rollock (2012) measured psychological factors, such as intentions for immigration (e.g., reasons and goals), and their effect on psychological well-being. They found that different ethnic groups utilize different goal-oriented skills to achieve personal and professional objectives that lead to higher levels of psychological well-being compared to language proficiency and social support, which were minor predictors of psychological well-being. Bahrassa et al. (2013) examined gender differences and psychological distress among Hmong American families and found no significant differences between genders; however, it is possible that the culture gap between generations were so extensive that cultural conflicts were indistinguishable from

noncultural conflicts. Acculturation is also a relevant factor among immigrant decision making and SES (Lee & Chang, 2012; Rudmin, 2003; Schiller, Basch, & Blanc, 1995; Sirikantraporn, 2013). For instance, many Hmong refugees prefer traditional methods of medical treatment instead of Western methods (Nagai, 2013, 2015). On average, SAs avoid or reject Western practices of medicine, which results in higher levels of health disorders compared to EA immigrants (Ro, Geronimus, Bound, Griffith, & Gee, 2016). Many SAs are also behind on socio-economic class because of their refugee status (Lee & Chang, 2012). Goal attainment, intergenerational conflict, health, and SES are only a few of the social challenges experienced by SA immigrants, other challenges include discrimination, educational attainment, identity, violence, drug abuse, and coping methods (Huang et al., 2012; Lui & Rollock, 2013; Her & Buley-Meissner, 2012; Muruthi & Lewis, 2017; Choi et al., 2013; Juan et al., 2012; Museus, 2013, Lee, 2015; Mbanjo, 2012; Tennen et al., 2000; Kidd & Teagle, 2012; Gartner et al., 2014; Tam, & Freisthler's, 2015; Lei, & Pellitteri, 2017; Grusec, 2011; Ro et al., 2016).

Each social challenge is a distinct experience for immigrants because of specific cultural and historical differences. In the following sections of this chapter, I will discuss historical and contemporary approaches to acculturative problems as well as the strengths and weaknesses of these approaches. This chapter will begin with a section on the literature strategy, then the theoretical and conceptual framework, followed by a historical background of acculturation. Lastly, I will synthesize and examine current literature about acculturation among immigrants with an emphasis on Asians.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

I conducted the literature review for this study using the Walden University Library. The databases used to locate articles were Psycharticles, Proquest, PsychoInfo, Academic Premier, and Sage Premier. I also used additional search engines, including Google Scholar and Science Direct, for thorough research. Major concepts such as *acculturation, enculturation, assimilation, integration, Southeast Asian, migrants, Hmong immigrants, immigrants, and refugees* were used throughout the research process to locate recent and relevant articles related to the topic. A majority of the articles synthesized for the literature review were recent and published within the past 5 years; however, some outdated articles were necessary and relevant for content as well as background information. I also used older articles as references when current literature on specific constructs could not be found.

### **Conceptual Framework**

In this study, I used Grove and Torbiorn's (1985) theory of sojourners as the conceptual framework. Grove and Torbiorn's theory is a popular framework for acculturation studies because of its emphasis on cognitive and behavioral adjustment. In Grove and Torbiorn's theory, clarity and applicability are necessary constructs for cultural transition. The presumption of their theory is that acculturation starts with learning and understanding a cultural frame of reference, "that is, with all the values, attitudes, opinions, ideas and knowledge accumulated as a result of his or her experiences" (Grove & Torbiorn, 1985, p. 209). Once a frame of reference is established, behavior, "that is, habitual patterns of activity not only socially acceptable but

interpersonally effective in yielding outcomes desired by others similarly enculturated” (Grove & Torbiorn, 1985, p. 206) is practiced as normal behavior.

Grove and Torbiorn’s theory have been applied to numerous studies of immigrant experiences as the theoretical framework as well as supportive theories, such as Hafemeister’s (2014) study of Brazilian immigrants, Mbanjo’s (2012) study of African refugees, and Papademetriou’s (2015) cross-cultural training for professionals working overseas. Hafemeister and Mbanjo both mentioned the importance of Grove and Torbiorn’s concept of clarity for self-judgement and social acceptance or appropriateness. Hafemeister suggested that throughout the acculturation process of Brazilian immigrants, cultural transition accelerates because of frequent occurrences or situations that place immigrants between *native* and *host* perceptions of self-judgement. In other words, conflicting judgements between ethnic and host perceptions lead to dissonance and frustration because people innately desire to understand and be part of their environment (Hafemeister, 2014; Mbanjo, 2012; Papademetriou’s, 2015). These studies suggest an innate desire for social acceptance will accelerate the adjustment process as immigrants are quicker to adopt host perceptions to avoid dissonance. Similarly, Mbanjo showed how African immigrants felt challenged and pressured by demands within their educational environment. Though there are many reasons that affect cultural adjustment, Mbanjo argued that one of the most challenging aspects of cultural adjustment is adapting to unfamiliar values and learning about them (*clarity*) because it restricts appropriate behavior and understanding within an individual’s environment. In a study of cross-cultural training patriates, Papademetriou addressed adjustment issues with behavioral

changes and focused on *predeparture* or prepping stages of cultural adjustment before expatriates relocated abroad. The researcher found that those who gained most from the predeparture training experienced less anxiety and culture shock than those who did not. The importance of this finding aligned with Mbanjo's and Hafemeister's findings regarding Gove and Torbiorn's (1985) theoretical concept of clarity. These studies supported the assumption about dissonance and environmental challenges that make cultural adjustment difficult for reasons related to cultural appropriateness and social norms and practices.

In this study, I specifically focused on Grove and Torbiorn's theoretical concepts of clarity and applicability. The concept of clarity is the conceptual understanding of acceptable behavior and attitudes within a particular culture (Grove & Torbiorn, 1985). Applicability is the application of behavior in accordance with clarity or acceptable behaviors and attitudes within the culture (Grove & Torbiorn, 1985). Grove and Torbiorn's theoretical concepts were appropriate for my study of Hmong refugee experiences because they could be used to examine the participants' clarity, or cognitive adjustment toward American norms, and applicability, or gradual acquisition of behaviors based off American norms. The following research questions were directed toward both theoretical concepts:

1. What are the cultural experiences of Hmong refugees living in America?
2. How have acculturative challenges constructed Hmong refugees lived experiences in America?

I developed Research Question 1 to explore Hmong refugees' clarity or frame of reference about American culture. Research Question 2 was developed to explore their applicability or habitual patterns as a result of their frame of reference.

## **Review of Literature**

### **History of Acculturation**

The history of acculturation was first discussed by Plato and centered around thoughts on preserving Greek culture (Rudmin, 2003). Plato theorized that people have innate tendencies or dispositions to explore, learn, and imitate others (Rudmin, 2003). For these reasons, Plato suggested that acculturation should be avoided because of the belief that it would lead to conflict, social disorder, and the reduction of cultural identities and authenticity.

While Greek philosophers discussed acculturation, the first social scientists to study acculturation were anthropologists. The concept of acculturation was first used by anthropologists who were interested in studying cultural and societal norms as well as migration patterns of civilizations (Leah, 2016). Psychology, being recognized as a separate social science in the late 1800s with William Wundt, contributed cognitive and behavioral explanations of social and cultural norms. Part of the complexities with acculturation required understanding psychological processes that influence people's cognition and behavior. For these reasons, psychology is important for acculturative studies because it explores different aspects of human cognition, behavior, attitudes, and emotions separately from other social science disciplines.

The first acculturation studies in the Americas focused on Native American tribes in Mexico and North America as well as studies with African slaves (Rudmin, 2003; Spiro, 2009). As Westernization developed and more immigrants migrated to America, studies among various immigrant groups, such as Asians, Hispanics, Indians, and Europeans, shaped acculturation into separate disciplines of study (Gelfand, 1991; Spiro, 2009). Eventually, acculturation overlapped with various areas of academia, such as anthropology, sociology, and psychology, because of its significance to human cognition and behavior.

### **Early Approaches to Acculturation**

The first theories about acculturation were unidimensional and focused on assimilation rather than cultural modification. Gordon's (1964) assimilation theory, for example, suggested that immigrants would assimilate to dominant cultures and abandon their ethnic cultures. Gordon's theory, along with other modern assimilation theories, are not frequently used in acculturation studies because of their linear implications about cultural transitions. The shift from unidimensional theories to multidimensional theories is accredited to Berry who purposed a four-fold multidimensional theory of acculturation that focused on four acculturative approaches. In "Immigration, Acculturation and Adaptation," Berry (1997) laid out the foundation for contemporary theories and models by proposing four acculturative dimensions (e.g., *assimilation*, *marginalization*, *separation*, and *integration*) for immigrants that is used in contemporary research studies as well as therapeutic practices (Paniagua, 2013). Modern studies, such as Snauwaet et al. (2003) in their study of minorities in Belgium, have applied Berry's theory. Snauwaet et

al.'s findings suggested that immigrants preferred an integrative approach when encouraged to practice and maintain their ethnic culture but preferred a separated approach when encouraged to conform. Ward and Kus (2012) also used Berry's four-fold multidimensional theory to study the relationship between acculturation and adaptation among immigrants in New Zealand. They found that self-report behaviors are more accurate at reporting cultural adjustment than self-reports of attitudes, indicating that immigrants who integrated into society experience higher levels of life satisfaction than those who separated, marginalized, or assimilated into society.

In studies similar to these, researchers emphasized Berry's *integrative* dimension as a healthier approach for cultural transitions. Berry's integrative dimension has encouraged new theories, such as Grove and Tobriorn's (1985) theory of sojourners, Bourhis's (1997) interactive acculturation model (IAM), and Kramer's theory of cultural fusion (TCF; Croucher & Kramer, 2017) to focus on integrative processes as well as cultural modifications experienced by immigrants. Some theories combine and expand on multiple dimensions within Berry's theory of acculturation. For instance, Bourhis's (1997) IAM focused on adopted orientations or cultural ideals of different ethnic populations that form new cultures by intermixing ideals. Bourhis's IAM modified Berry's integrative dimension to focus on cultural formation among interacting groups. Bourhi's theory also expanded Berry's marginalization dimension into "two variants: anomie and individualism, to accommodate idiocentric individuals who do not lose their identities but experience cultural alienation" (Ngo, 2008, para. 21). Yu, Cheah, and Calvin (2016) used Bourhis's IAM in a study with Chinese immigrant mothers to

compare traditional and acculturated parenting methods. Yu et al. found that Chinese mothers who adopted American orientations were significantly more authoritative or nurturing than traditional authoritarian parenting. Similarly, Kramer's TCF focused on integrative pre-existing orientations with new orientations that lead to cultural enrichment or evolution. Like Bourhis's IAM, Kramer's TCF also expanded on Berry's integrative dimension but focused on changes among dominant or host cultures (Croucher & Kramer, 2017). Kramer (2017) suggested that ethnic and host cultures integrate with one another and mix or "fuse" new and old orientations or values to enrich ethnic cultural ideals. Berry and Hou (2016) conducted a study with 7,000 immigrants in Canada and found that immigrants with the highest levels of life satisfaction and positive mental health were immigrants who integrated into Canadian society by adopting Canadian ideals while maintaining ethnic ideals. Intermixing cultural ideals resulted in higher levels of satisfaction among immigrants; however, those who rejected Canadian ideals reported lower levels of satisfaction feeling separated or marginalized from Canadian culture (Berry & Hou, 2016). Berry and Hou continued to suggest that integrative methods consistently result in higher levels of life satisfaction among immigrants in pluralistic societies. Additionally, they found that immigrants who assimilated also showed higher levels of life satisfaction and mental stability but lower levels with self-esteem. Similarly, Roger-Sirin and Gupta (2012) found that immigrants who assimilate showed higher levels of satisfaction with host identities but low satisfaction with ethnic identities. Immigrants who adopted dominant ideals instead of fusing and identifying with ethnic ideals had distorted perceptions of ethnic identities (Roger-Sirin and Gupta,

2012). Identity distortion or confusion is related to feelings of group belongingness and self-perceptions (Swann, Jetten, Gomez, Whitehouse & Bastian's, 2012). For example, Swann, Jetten, Gomez, Whitehouse, and Bastian's (2012) identity fusion theory (IFT) focused on personal and group interconnectedness. The presumption of their theory suggested that:

just as highly fused persons come to view themselves through their group membership ("My group membership is a crucial part of who I am"), they also perceive the group through their personal self ("I am an important part of the group"). (Swann et al., 2012, p. 2)

Swann et al. suggested that identity fusion is based off principles of self-agency, identity synergy, relational ties, and irrevocability that support integrative concepts such as, "fused ideals" and "cultural enrichment," discussed in Kramer's CFT.

### **Contemporary Approaches to Acculturation**

Among Asian acculturation studies, many emphasize issues related to health and psychological experiences. For example, Nagai (2015), conducted a study with SAs exploring the importance of spirituality in clinical and health practices as well as similarities and differences in cultural perceptions about western medicine. Nagai's study helped inform clinicians about the importance of comforting patients rather than changing their medical beliefs about healing and treatment. For instance, one Laotian patient was permitted to keep a sacred knife under her pillow to ward off evil spirits as she believed they were the cause of her illness. Similarly, a Mien patient asked physicians to cut a hole in his cast so his ancestral spirits would have direct access to treating his

fractured limb. Other studies, such as Khuu, H. Lee, Zhou, Shin, and R. Lee, (2016), explored the effects of language and health literacy among SA immigrants. Their study found that language barriers discouraged SAs from seeking professional assistance as well as a lack of health preventative knowledge which also contributed to health disorders among immigrants and American born generations. Health as well as drugs and violence are among the few major social challenges experienced by SA in America. Given the history of SA, many relocated to America as refugees and resettled in impoverished neighborhoods. Tam and Freisthler (2015), found that among all Asians arrested in the United States, 15% of juveniles are SA with refugee parents.

Within the scope of Asian American studies, EAs (e.g. Chinese, Korean, Japanese) have been studied more frequently than SA (e.g. Hmong, Mien, Cambodian, Laotian, Vietnamese, Thai). Reasons for this disparity include earlier periods of immigration and therefore larger populations of American generations as well as community establishments and cultural recognition (Joshi & Desai, 2013; Lee & Chang, 2012). Cultural recognition is a significant contributor to understudied SA because of monolithic perceptions about SA cultures and ethnic groups (Joshi & Desai, 2013). Majority of Asian acculturation studies has explored EAs separately with consideration to their ethnicity and culture, however, studies among SA are predominantly monolithic (Lui & Rollock, 2012; Nagai, 2015; Nguyen et al., 2015; Sirikantraporn, 2013; Tummala-Narra, et al., 2016). The strengths with monolithic studies explore cultural similarities and its relation to similar experiences among different ethnic groups. The weaknesses with monolithic studies cannot explore cultural differences and its relation to specific

experiences among different ethnic groups. For example, Tam and Freisthler (2015) suggest that many SA show “downward paths of assimilation” because of their refugee status in America compared to EAs and Indian Asians (IA) who show “upward paths of assimilation” toward middle-class status. Tam and Freisthler suggest that SA immigrants as well as first and second generations experience more challenges specifically with SES and education because of their immigration status as refugees than other Asian populations.

**Socioeconomic status.** SES is the social classification of a group or individual based on occupation, education and income (American Psychological Association, 2017). With that definition, it is important to understand the history of immigrant’s and how it has impacted their social status. Historical context is a particularly important factor to consider with refugees because of its impact on goal attainment, opportunity, mental health and educational achievements.

SAs (e.g. Hmong, Laotian, Cambodian, Vietnamese) who immigrated throughout the 1970s and 1980s, are among the most recent immigrant as well as refugee populations in America (Lee & Chang, 2012). Resettlement for refugees has displaced SA into low-income neighborhoods and created dependency on welfare programs. Though low-income neighborhoods and welfare programs are better than refugee camps, they are critical contributors to social issues among SAs in America. For instance, SAs rank lower on SES in comparison to EAs for reasons relating to “goal attainment” (Lui & Rollock, 2012). Since SA were forced to immigrate as refugees, goal attainment among SA were focused on resettlement and support, whereas goal attainment among EA immigrants

focused on education and employment opportunities. Lui and Rollock (2012) found that Chinese immigrants were more career and educationally goal oriented in comparison to SAs (Mix of SA ethnic populations). Their results indicated that immigration reasons for goal attainment has strong predictions for academic and occupational achievement. Ngo and Lee (2007) also found that SA have higher high school drop-out rates than EAs and lower college attendance rates. Much of these findings correlate with Tam and Freisthler's (2015) study of criminal behavior and arrest rates among SA immigrants as consequences of low-income neighborhood. Base off these studies, social issues related to acculturation such as SES, crime, and educational achievement are consequences of immigration status and goal attainment.

In summary, SES is the classification of individuals or groups according to their occupation, income and education. Many SA refugees rank lower on the socio-economic spectrum because of their historical background and status as refugees. By settling in lower income neighborhoods, SA are challenged with different acculturative issues such as crime, low-income, educational and occupational attainment.

**Health.** Perceptions of health and health treatment varies greatly among ethnic populations. SA for example are extremely religious and spiritual with health practices and treatment (Nagai, 2015). Many still prefer traditional methods of health treatments for two main reasons. First, health and religion are central components to their culture and secondly, many SAs are uneducated about Western and modern methods of treatment. Additionally, it is important to be mindful of the fact that SA have experienced psychological, mental and emotional trauma throughout the war as well as trauma and

anxiety with resettlement processes and are not familiar with western therapeutic practices.

Until recently, social issues related to health among SAs were overlooked (Nagai, 2013). Studies comparing health perceptions among Asians has highlighted contributing factors for health disparities among different ethnic groups. For example, Nguyen and Lee (2012), found that Chinese and Vietnamese immigrants are unlikely to seek mental health treatment for fundamentally different reasons. Chinese immigrants are willing to seek mental health services in extreme cases of behavioral abnormalities, Vietnamese immigrants however are less likely to seek mental treatment because cognitive functioning is perceived as a natural deteriorating process with age. Religiously, SAs believe health is spiritually related and therefore cannot be completely treated by western medicine (Nagai, 2015). In order to encourage SA to seek western treatment, Nagai (2015) emphasized the importance of cultural accommodations among physicians and clinicians in professional services. Although SAs have different perceptions and beliefs about health, more SA Americans are utilizing professional health services compared to SA immigrants where health disparities and distrust of western medicine is still a major concern. Possible factors contributing to the latter include acculturation and education. Ro, Geronimus, Griffith, and Gee (2016) conducted a study among five Asian groups (Indian, Chinese, Korean, Pilipino, Japanese) finding that higher education and acculturation were associated with better health among all groups. The latter reflects integrative characteristics that have been shown to lead to higher levels of life satisfaction

as well as psychological well-being similar to findings in Berry et al., (2016) study with immigrants in Canada.

In summary, cultural differences as well as education and SES contribute significantly to health levels and treatment methods. Cultural beliefs regarding spirituality is an important component to SA cultures which encourages traditional practices of medicine. Many SA immigrants are also less educated about physical and mental health disorders and therefore are less likely to seek professional treatment (Nagai, 2013; Nguyen & Lee, 2012).

**Family socialization.** Family socialization is the process of familial influence on social, cultural and emotional development (Grusec, 2011). Family socialization among SA is an important factor in understanding intergenerational conflict between immigrants and American generations. Collision between ethnic and American values is important in identifying implicit and explicit conflicts within immigrant households.

Acculturation has as much of an impact on families as it does with communities of immigrants. Some of the most challenging acculturative issues are experienced at home between American born generations and immigrant parents. Studies such as Muruthi and Lewis (2017) explored Cambodian refugee's acculturative experiences with relative stressors among families. Their study found stressors among immigrant parents related to child dependency for basic information such as translating and interpreting English. Child dependency breaks traditional norms such as obedience and distorts family structure and authority (Her & Buley-Meissner, 2012; Muruthi & Lewis, 2017). Changes in family structure and cultural upbringing effects familial influences differently among

Asian groups. For example, Choi, Kim, Pekelicky, and Kim's (2013) study with Korean immigrants found that traditional parents encouraged ethnic identities among their children but varied with ethnic values. This may suggest integrative methods for cultural enrichment as implied by Kramers cultural fusion theory (2017), however, mixed results with ethnic values could reflect differences in parenting styles as well. SAs being less flexible than Koreans with ethnic values are likely to experience "acculturative dissonance" between generations (Juan, Syed & Cookston, 2012). Juan et al., (2012) defined "acculturative dissonance" as generational conflict between collective and independent values. They conducted a longitudinal study among 300 American Chinese adolescents and explored their experiences of acculturative dissonance and every day conflicts with parents. Their results showed similarities to Muruthi and Lewis's study with Cambodian refugees suggesting that everyday conflicts is directly related to acculturative dissonance and cultural separation between immigrant parents and first generation born Americans. Raj and Raval (2013) argued that independent and collective perceptions of cultural nurturing is at the center of acculturative problems related to parenting and family structure. Given the four types of parenting methods; authoritative, neglectful, permissive, authoritarian (Aunola, Stattin, & Nurmi, 2000), permissive parenting seems to be practiced and valued among American families (Lui & Rollock, 2013) which consists of leniency, negative reinforcement, forgiveness and subtle punishment or consequences. Asian families on the other hand exemplify authoritarian forms of parenting which consists of strict rules, high demands and compliance with authority and hierarchy systems. This accounts for the obedience, discipline, respect for

elders and consideration found among foreign Asians (Huang, Calzada, Chenge, & Brotman, 2012) however, American born Asians being more independent are less obedient and submissive to authority which contributes to intergenerational family conflict (Vang, Kviz, & Miller, 2012). Contrastingly, there is evidence to suggest that parental approaches and family socialization is highly influenced by other factors such as religion, SES and education (Raj & Raval, 2013) that affects parenting styles and intergenerational conflict. More information is needed to determine the degree to which intergenerational conflicts is actually a result of collective or independent values and parenting styles or SES, education and religion.

In summary, family socialization is the process of familial influence on social, cultural and emotional development. Family socialization is a particularly important area of acculturation that addresses family conflicts directly related to acculturation between family generations. Family socialization studies with immigrants reveal daily challenges and consequences of cultural dissonance. Acculturative conflicts among immigrant households result from cultural differences and parenting approaches. When traditional and collective values conflict with new and independent values, families experience cultural dissonance and cultural separation. However, the degree in which other factors such as SES, religion and education contribute to intergenerational conflict is unclear.

**Discrimination.** Immigrants of all groups experience some form of discrimination, whether that be perceived discrimination (PD) or actual discrimination (AD). PD, according to the University of Cambridge Equality and Diversity Department (2017), is defined as “differential treatment based on perceptions that an individual is a member of a protected group” (para 1). AD, according to the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (2017), is defined as “Unjust or prejudice treatment of individuals based off sex, race, sexual orientation, disability, age, religion, income and education” (para 1). Regardless of the type of discrimination, discrimination in general affects immigrant’s psychological health as well as attitudes toward acculturation.

Immigrants often face discrimination because of monolithic perceptions of culture, differences in societal values and negative attitudes toward “outgroups” (Doucerain et al., 2013; Joshi & Desai, 2013; Treas, 2014). Negative attitudes towards outgroups and monolithic perceptions of cultures are usually correlated with AD and psychological affects among immigrants (Schmitt, Branscombe, Postmes, & Garcia, 2014). For example, Kabuiku’s (2017), study with Kenyan immigrants found discrimination as a dominant and deterring factor for mental and psychological health. “Panethnic” or monolithic labels of African culture as well as emotional stress navigating between cultures caused feelings of delusion or disenchantment. Similarly, Mexican and Latino populations experience similar psychological distress from panethnic labels with immigration (Fuentes, 2007). Discrimination in relation to psychological health showed similar affects among nonimmigrant Americans as well. African Americans in particular experienced high levels of psychological distress and mental health with discrimination

in education, public housing and criminal justice systems (Ayon & Becerra, 2013; Schmitt, 2014). For instance, racial profiling is a direct form of discrimination use by police officers as sufficient reasons for suspicious criminal behavior (Weitzer & Tuch, 2002). According to Weitzer and Tuch (2002), there are few studies focused on racial profiling among American police officers, however, 29% of officers out of 1,087 acknowledge the existence of racial profiling as a “minor” problem among African Americans. Another example of discrimination in recent history is that between Muslim’s and Americans. Ever since the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Muslim Americans have faced religious discrimination as a result of adverse outgroup attitudes such as “Islamophobia” (Amer & Bagarsa, 2013). Immigrants who experience discrimination are more likely to separate or marginalize themselves from mainstream society rather than integrate (Snauwaet et al., 2003). Immigrants who integrate into society express strong social support and feelings of ethnic appreciation. For example, Brown and Chu’s (2012) study with Latino immigrants showed that peer and teacher support in schools played a significant role in how Latinos perceived discrimination. Their study found that Latinos who went to “White” schools and lived in “White” communities held positive ethnic identities and reported lower rates of discrimination in comparison to communities with higher Latino populations. It is unclear why heavily populated Latino communities reported higher levels of discrimination but what is clear is the effects of discrimination on ethnic identity, cultural separation and psychological health among immigrants and nonimmigrant communities.

In summary, immigrants often face discrimination because of monolithic or panethnic perceptions of culture and negative attitudes toward outgroups. Discrimination is a major contributor to immigrants and nonimmigrants mental health. Discrimination also enhances cultural separation and deters immigrants from positively integrating into mainstream society. Social support and ethnic acceptance are significant contributors for cultural integration among immigrants.

**Education.** Asians stereotyped as “model minorities” because of their income, occupation and education is misleading. Monolithic or panethnic perceptions about Asians assume all Asians are “model minorities”, good citizens and high achievers (Museus, 2013) without realizing the SES, educational, health and crime disparities among SAs (Museus, 2013, Lee, 2015). The disparity among SA in education, although not as low as Mexican, Latino, and African American communities, show similar attainment rates and educational challenges (Lee, 2015). For example, SAs have higher dropout rates and lower college attendance than EAs (Rodriguez, Mistry, & Chen, 2017). SAs also report higher levels of academic stress and parental exclusion because roughly 40% of SAs over 25 do not have high school diplomas themselves and over 60% have not attended college (Uy, 2015). Language and cultural challenges also contribute to lower levels of educational achievement among SA. As stated by Taras, Rowney, and Steel (2013), “Borrowing educational practices from another society implies an acceptance of cultural values” (p. 134), which are not perpetuated within SAs households (Her & Buley-Meissner, 2012; Muruthi & Lewis, 2017). Mbanjo (2012) hypothesized that one of the most challenging aspects of cultural adjustment is adapting to unfamiliar values as

well as learning about them because it restricts appropriate behavior and understanding within one's environment as well as information processing and interpretation. Mbanjo's and Taras et. al (2013) studies regarding cultural acceptance and educational attainment suggest that cultural acceptance is a necessary condition for educational progress. The concept of cultural acceptance is reflective of Grove and Torbiorn's (1985) theoretical concept of clarity which emphasizes learning and establishing a "cultural frame of reference" or understanding of appropriate values, behavior and attitudes as the first step toward cultural integration. Contrastingly, studies among EAs also show high levels of academic stress, language and cultural challenges but are consistently progressive in academia (Rodriguez et al. 2017). Educational disparities between EAs and SAs may reflect subtle differences between refugees and non-refugee immigrants (Lee & Chang, 2012) such as goal attainment and academic resilience (Lui & Rollock, 2012; Tennen, Affleck, & Armeli, 2000).

In summary, stereotypes such as model minorities and outstanding citizens are misleading because of monolithic perceptions of Asian ethnic groups and culture. Differences in educational achievement varies widely between EAs and SAs. Both populations experience similar educational challenges but yield opposite results which may imply that other factors such as SES, cultural acceptance, academic resilience, parental involvement and immigrant status (refugee vs nonrefugee) are likely to be dominant contributors to academic achievement.

**Identity.** Identity is concerned with self-perception and group association based off shared values and social norms. If we define culture as social and organizational norms within a society, identity can be defined as recognizing and classifying oneself in relation to those social and organizational norms (Kidd & Teagle, 2012). Culture and identity are influential factors that determine how immigrants acculturate into different societies (Gartner, Kiang, & Supple, 2014). Immigrants, particularly adolescents struggle with identity because divided cultural constructs distort their self-perception and group association. Cultural constructs are unconscious and automatic dispositions about behavior and perceptions that are learned and developed throughout years of nurture and experience within a society (Causadias, Telzer, & Lee, 2017). Grove and Torbiorn's (1985) theoretical concepts of clarity and applicability suggest the exact notion about cultural norms and emphasize the importance of learned constructs and behavioral patterns for cultural transition. For example, immigrants who have acculturated into plural societies show variant forms of cultural adjustments. Ferguson, Nguyen and Iturbide (2017), used the Cultural Identity Influence Measure Scale to measure cultural variability (CV) and cultural identity (CI) among 200 multi cultured participants. They found that multi cultured individuals adopted a variant form of cultural adjustment, meaning their behavior and attitudes varied depending on their interaction with different cultured people. Their findings suggest that interactions among culturally diverse individuals is associated with unconscious acceptance of cultural norms (Causadias, et al., 2017) that influence behavior and attitudes toward others.

Identity has also shown psychological affects related to positive self-esteem, ethnic pride and identity adjustments. Gartner, et al., (2014) found in their study with Asian Americans that “cultural socialization messages that convey cultural knowledge and pride, were prospectively linked to ethnic and American identity development” (p. 1729), however, these results were only significant to Asian American women. Other studies such as Stuart and Ward’s (2011), study with SAs in New Zealand found similar results associated with positive psychological affects but also negative psychological effects with identity formation. They found that intergenerational conflict exacerbated identity conflicts, however, family cohesion and ethnic belonging contributed to positive identity formations. Similar to these studies, majority of identity studies about Asians are monolithic and do not address specific ethnic identity formulations among specific ethnic groups. As mentioned by Kidd and Teagle (2012), identity is the process of recognizing and classifying oneself in relation to social and organizational norms within a society. Ethnic populations have unique cultures and therefore specific identity formulations within their own population. Monolithic studies about identity are therefore limited with its contributions to acculturation since majority of them focus on psychological health and family conflicts instead of cultural adjustments and identify formation.

In summary, identity is a major issue with immigrants particularly adolescents because of divided cultural constructs that distort their self-perceptions and group associations. Identity is also a significant factor in determining self-esteem and ethnic pride. Some of the approaches outlined in the literature suggest that immigrants have developed a flexible form of cultural variability depending on who they interact with.

Other studies suggest positive psychological affects and contributions to positive identity formations; however, majority of Asian identity studies are monolithic and do not focus on specific ethnic identities. Monolithic studies cannot provide acculturative challenges related to ethnic identity development because they do not focus on specific cultural norms that are important for identity development.

**Violence and Drug Abuse.** Similarly, with education, monolithic perceptions of Asians as “model minorities” and good citizens is misleading. SAs have lower SES, educational and professional attainment than EAs therefore, experience different social challenges that affects their acculturative experience. As stated by Berry and Hou (2016),

Economic status in the host society also has an impact on acculturation and wellbeing. Economic success is an important indicator of an immigrants’ full participation in the receiving society. Immigrants sense of nationhood hinges on their ability to contribute to the receiving country economically and to live a good life. Conversely, unemployment and poverty are detrimental to immigrants’ psychological adjustment (p.255).

According to Tam and Freisthler’s (2015), SA have a 15% incarceration rate which is almost doubled that of EAs, however, the factors that contribute to incarceration rates is unclear. For instance, Sue, Cheng, Saad, and Chu (2012) examined drugs and violence abuse among various ethnic groups and found low rates among SAs but high rates of psychiatric disorders. Among SA refugees, over 70% reported some form of traumatic disorder such as posttraumatic stress disorder and chronic depression because of their experiences with war, refugee camps and resettlement (Lee & Change, 2012; Sue,

et al., 2012). Relocation as refugees has forced SAs to resettle in less developed neighborhoods with higher rates of violence and gang activity (Lee & Change, 2012; Tam and Freisthler's, 2015). Hunt and Laidler (2012) studied gang violence among various ethnic and racial groups and found higher rates of criminal and gang related activity with SAs, Latino and African Americans but lower rates of violence among SAs. Furthermore, Hunt and Laidler found that the reason SAs adolescent youths joined gangs were not for drug distribution or turf control, but for protection against harassment from rival ethnic gangs. These studies suggest that drug and alcohol abuse as well as gang related activities seem to be major factors contributing to high incarceration rates among SAs. SAs involved in gangs, pride ghetto culture or the appropriation of violence and crime for personal gain as well as appropriation of substance abuse and distribution for profits (Stuart, 2016). Dinh, Roosa, and Weinstein (2013) found mediating factors for acculturative and enculturated behavioral problems among Cambodian adolescents. Mediating factors internalizing and externalizing problematic behaviors for enculturation (immersion into ethnic culture or Berry's dimension of "separation") were associated with depression, gang affiliation and substance abuse. Mediating factors internalizing and externalizing problematic behaviors for acculturation (immersion into dominant culture) were associated with school attachment and parent-child relationships. Yang and Yang, (2017) also found that weak social bonds significantly contributed to nonmedical prescription drug use (NMDU) among young adults but strong social bonds such as family and parent relationships significantly reduced young adult risks of NMDU. These studies as well as Brown and Chu's (2012) study about education, Gartner, et al., (2014),

Stuart and Ward's (2011) study about identity suggest that social support including family cohesion is important for cultural integration. Contrastingly, SAs involved with crime or gangs tend to show lower levels of acculturation and higher levels of ethnic separation (Dinh, Roosa, & Weinstein, 2013; Hunt & Laidler, 2012; Tam & Freisthler, 2015).

In summary, incarceration rates as well as drug and violence abuse among SAs is socio-economically related. SAs share similar experiences with other race and ethnic groups such as Latino, Mexican and African Americans living in low-income neighborhoods. SAs involved in gangs also have assimilated to "ghetto culture" showing excessive ethnic pride and rejection or cultural separation from American culture.

**Coping methods.** Given the social challenges involved with acculturation, many SA had to learn how to cope independently without professional or educational support. Okrainec, Booth, Hollands, and Bell (2015) found that language barriers contributed significantly to immigrants avoiding professional treatment. Studies examining coping practices among SAs found various approaches of emotional tolerance and resilience. Coping methods varied from staying goal-oriented, having strong beliefs about life, religion and purpose, disengagement and meditation as well as exercise and social support (Berzengi, Berzenji, Kadim, Mustafa, & Jobson, 2017; Lei & Pellitteri 2017; Rivera, Lynch, Li, & Obamehinti, 2016;). Lei and Pellitteri (2017) examined coping methods among Asians and found similar results with resiliency and health adjustments. Lee and Cifti (2014) suggest that major coping methods used among Asians are disengaged methods. Disengaged coping methods is the process of altering emotional

response toward life stressors rather than solving them. Coping methods among other immigrants such as Berzengi et al. (2017) study with Muslims suggest disengagement as a popular method for coping. Disengaged coping methods are common approaches to life stressors among immigrants because of language barriers, scarce cultural support and understanding (Lei & Pellitteri, 2017; Okrainec et al., 2015; Rivera et al., 2016). Among factors that contribute to acculturation, social support is continuously a reoccurring factor among integrative immigrants.

In summary, immigrants in general seem to cope with acculturative conflicts by disengaging or changing their emotional response to problems rather than solving them. Reasons for disengaged coping methods include scarce social and cultural support as well as language barriers. Among factors that contribute to acculturation, social support is continuously a reoccurring factor with integrative immigrants.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Acculturation is a complex process that includes a variety of social and psychological factors such as societal and behavioral norms, cultural values, spiritual, religious and political beliefs as well as independent and collective dispositions. These factors are major contributors to diverse acculturative experiences among immigrants. Culture as well as history are critical components to cognitive and behavioral development that are manifested through cultural constructs. Grove and Torbiorn's theory of sojourner emphasizes cognitive and behavioral development with their theoretical concepts of clarity and applicability. Their theory suggests that acculturation starts with clarity or learned values, attitudes, opinions, ideas and knowledge

accumulated throughout experiences with host cultures establishing a psychological frame of reference. Once a frame of reference is established, applicability, or habitual patterns of activity socially acceptable and desired by others similarly enculturated, is practiced as normal behavior. Research questions are directed towards these concepts in order to explore Hmong refugees lived experiences in America.

Acculturation has a long connection to history and academia in disciplines of philosophy, anthropology, sociology and psychology. Early theories and approaches to acculturation were unidimensional suggesting that acculturation was a linear process of assimilation, however, these theories did not account for the cultural dynamics among immigrant's acculturative experiences. Berry purposed his four fold dimensional theory of acculturation which suggest four different dimensions of acculturation experienced by immigrants; assimilation, separation, marginalization and integration. New emerging theories since have branched off or extended on one or more dimensions outlined in Berry's theory of acculturation. Many studies suggest that immigrants who integrate into society rather than assimilate, marginalize or separate, experience higher levels of satisfaction and overall positive results. Contemporary approaches to acculturation are focused on integrative approaches to society with attention to specific social challenges experienced by immigrants such as identity, SES, health, coping methods, family socialization, education, violence and drug abuse. Weaknesses related to contemporary approaches among SAs are associated with monolithic or panethnic perceptions of cultures and ethnicities. Limitations with monolithic studies do not address ethnic differences and its relation to acculturation. Ethnic groups have distinct cultures, values,

norms, traditions, religion, politics, collective and independent dispositions that effect specific social challenges related to acculturation. In opposition to limitations, strengths with monolithic studies provide information about cultural similarities and its relation to common experiences among different ethnic groups. Monolithic studies with Asians and other immigrants found common themes among immigrants with similar SES as well as experiences with discrimination and violence. Common themes related to acculturation methods were also found. Factors relating to high levels of discrimination, cultural acceptance and scarce social support contributed to cultural separation or rejection of dominant cultural norms. Strong social support was found as a consistent factor in integrative or cultural acceptance among immigrants.

In conclusion, for this study, I explored the lived experiences of Hmong refugee immigrants. Doing so contributed knowledge and information about understudied SA populations as well as specific lived experiences among Hmong refugees in America. Semistructured interviews were used to explore their lived experiences and adaptations to American society. In Chapter 3, I provide a full description of the methods employed to code, collect and analyze data.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

My review of literature revealed a need to explore understudied SA immigrants in America. The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of Hmong refugees living in America. I employed a qualitative phenomenological design in this study. The sample criteria for this study was Hmong refugees above the age of 30 who spoke English fluently. Semistructured interviews were used for data collection and Husserl's phenomenological psychological reduction (PPR) was used for analyses.

This study is significant to the discipline because the results can be used to raise questions about the importance of cultural distinction and its impact on acculturation. The importance of exploring ethnic groups separately is an acknowledgement of distinct experiences among ethnic populations not acknowledged or noticeable with monolithic studies. The significance to positive social change includes healthy and effective methods of integrating immigrants into dominant cultural societies. The results of this study could be used to inform public service professionals about the importance of facilitating culturally sensitive approaches that would accommodate SA immigrants in culturally responsive ways. In the following sections of this chapter, I will explain the rationale for the selected design as well as the role of the researcher, threats to validity, purposive sampling, ethical considerations, instrumentation, and analysis procedure for replicative and validating purposes.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

Qualitative studies are conducted when a problem or issue needs to be explored and the variables being explored are not easily measurable. Qualitative studies explore lived experiences in depth to find meaning and sense about complex issues (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative studies also empower people to share their stories and experiences. Creswell (2014) stated that “qualitative methods are used to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 44). By exploring the lived experiences of Hmong refugees with a qualitative method in this study, participants were able to provide knowledge about acculturative issues and unknown variables about their experiences as well as feel empowered to share their stories.

In this study, I employed a phenomenological design to find common meanings among Hmong refugees with similar experiences regarding acculturation. The objective of phenomenological studies is to capture meaning within a population of shared experiences (Breakwell, 2004; Creswell, 2013). Phenomenology is concerned with lived experiences and the role of the researcher is to capture that experience as accurately as described (Giorgi, 2012). For example, contemporary scholars such as Kumar, Seay, and Karabenick (2015) and Thommessen, Corcoran, and Todd (2015) have used phenomenology to capture lived experiences among different Middle Eastern ethnic groups in America. According to Giorgi (2012), phenomenology derived from the philosophy of Husserl’s “logical investigation” of human consciousness. Wundt, being the first psychologist to pursue human consciousness through empirical methods, shaped psychology into an empirical discipline (e.g., using sensory and measurable

observations); however, phenomenology has been able to contribute nonsensory or measurable data to psychology providing more accuracy and comprehensive explanations of human behavior and consciousness through experiences (Broome, 2014; Giorgi, 2012).

Within phenomenology, there are two main approaches and philosophies: hermeneutical phenomenology (Heideggerian philosophy) and transcendental phenomenology (Husserlian philosophy; Creswell, 2013; Lavery, 2003). Both approaches are concerned with human experiences as they are perceived; however, hermeneutical phenomenology focuses on the essence of “being human” and how our perceived lived experiences reflect our “humanity” or “humanness” (Lavery, 2003). Heidegger’s philosophy suggested that human consciousness is not separate from phenomena, events, or people; rather, consciousness is shaped by phenomena, events, or people revealing the essence or nature of humanity (Smith, 2013). Contrastingly, transcendental phenomenology suggests consciousness is separate from phenomena as they exist only as they are perceived by people (Lavery, 2003). Husserl’s philosophy suggested that what matters is not the essence of human beings shaped by phenomena but how people perceive phenomena as they experience it (Smith, 2013). Since the purpose of this study was to explore Hmong refugees’ lived experiences, Husserl’s PPR approach was used for data analysis to provide scientific inquiry about lived experiences as they were perceived and described by participants.

I used semistructured questions (see Appendix A) to collect data about Hmong refugees’ lived experiences. I developed the following research questions to address

Hmong refugees' perceived experiences about acculturation in America. Research Question 1 was directed toward Grove and Torbiorn's (1985) theoretical concept of clarity, which concerns the participants' cognitive frame of reference or perceptions of American social norms, values, and culture. Research Question 2 was directed towards Grove and Torbiorn's (1985) theoretical concept of applicability or encultured patterns of behavior.

1. What are the cultural experiences of Hmong refugees living in America?
2. How have acculturative challenges constructed Hmong refugees lived experiences in America?

### **Role of Researcher**

The role of researchers in phenomenological studies is to collect data through semistructured interviews and analyze participant responses for common themes and concepts (Breakwell, 2004). In this study, I conducted the interviews and coded the responses for common themes and concepts. Participants consisted of volunteers recruited from local Hmong organizations in a western region of the United States as well as word of mouth through family and friends. All participants were new acquaintances with no history of supervisory, professional, or personal relationships with me. Participants gave verbal and written consent and were also within the criteria specified on the flier that qualified them to participate in the study. Lastly, I gave all participants equal rights, treatment, and protection under the same principles of ethics.

To avoid researcher bias, it is important to develop good rapport with participants. In qualitative research, rapport pertains to the level of comfort, trust, and communication

between participants and researchers (Zakaria & Amal, 2014). Having good rapport with participants is important because it enhances the quality of data. Participants who are trusting and comfortable with the researcher are more likely to be descriptive and open about their experiences (Zakaria et al., 2014). In this study, building good rapport consisted of respecting participant boundaries and autonomy; ensuring their rights and authority; as well as refraining from personal biases, judgements, thoughts, and opinions (see Breakwell, 2004). Ways of building comfort and trust included implementing ice breaker questions such as “Can you tell me how you felt when you first arrived to the United States” to ensure a comfortable transition to the interview (see Breakwell, 2004; Englander, 2012). Interviews were also anonymous and conducted at locations selected by participants. I disclosed information regarding the role of participants in relation to the purpose of the study to avoid confusion and skepticism. Interview questions were also broad to encourage elaborative and genuine responses.

To avoid researcher bias with questioning, such as priming, I developed the questions to be open ended and neutral, asking for descriptions about participant experiences rather than their personal thoughts and opinions. Questions were also structured and worded according to Grove and Torbiorn’s theoretical concepts of clarity and applicability. Structuring questions so they were aligned with the theoretical concepts allowed me to explore participants’ personal experiences with the process of acculturation rather than confirming or reassuring any personal experiences I may have had with acculturation.

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection Logic**

The population studied were Hmong refugees who immigrated to the United States in the 1970s and 1980s. I used a purposive sampling strategy because the phenomenon was specific to a particular sample. Phenomenology explores the lived experiences of a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2014); therefore, participants were purposely selected for this study. As stated by Creswell (2014),

it is essential for phenomenological studies that all participants experienced the phenomenon and can articulate their experiences. The more diverse the characteristics of the individuals, the more difficult it will be for the researcher to find common experiences, themes and overall essence of their experiences. (p. 150)

### **Instrumentation**

With phenomenological studies, data collection is usually obtained through interviews conducted by the researcher (Creswell, 2013). Researchers conduct interviews to collect data but are not part of the instrumentation of the study. Phenomenologists are simply researchers exploring a phenomenon as experienced by participants without any consideration to measuring or interpreting it (Broome, 2011). According to Giorgi (2009), phenomenology is a subject to subject relation and not a subject to object relation, meaning phenomenology is not concerned with objects or objectifying experiences with a measurable instrument. Doing so makes “psychological knowledge very narrow and limited, as determined by what is measurable” (Englander, 2012, p.24).

In this study, I used semistructured interviews to collect data. Interviews are best used to explore experiences because of its direct interaction with participants and flexibility with follow-up questions for clarification, detail, and depth (Breakwell, 2004). With semistructured interviews, questions are preset to guide interviews but not necessarily asked in a particular order (Broome, 2011). Probing questions are also spontaneous but not interruptive (Broome, 2011). Questions in phenomenology are mainly open ended; however, close-ended questions are acceptable to probe additional open-ended questions as well as clarify ambiguous responses (Roulston, 2010).

I developed interview questions for this study to explore Hmong refugees' lived experiences using Grove and Torbiorn's theoretical concepts of clarity and applicability. Questions were developed to probe information regarding refugees frame of reference or perception about American culture (e.g., clarity) as well as behavioral patterns as a result of learned information about American culture (e.g., applicability). With the questions, I asked for descriptive information about specific situations and experiences (see Giorgi, 2009). According to Girogi (2009), the first questions should address descriptive explanations of the phenomenon and additional questions should follow up with responses focused on the phenomenon without shifting consciousness or subject. Qualitative questions should address particularities and move researchers toward specific situations to better inquire about lived experiences (Agee, 2009). Agee (2009) also stated that "qualitative questions are evolving. First iterations of questions are tentative and exploratory but give researchers a tool for articulating the primary focus of the study..... Good qualitative questions should invite a process of exploration and discovery" (pp.

433-434). Given the importance of descriptive explanations, the following was a list of criteria I used to develop exploratory questions regarding Hmong refugees' lived experiences aligned with Grove and Torbiorn's theoretical concepts:

- Questions addressed specific situations related to interviewees lived experiences.
- Questions inquired about Grove and Torbion's theoretical concepts of clarity (e.g., realization of socially acceptable norms) and applicability (e.g., behavioral change consistent with clarity) by asking participants about specific situations that explored their cognitive frame of reference and behavioral adjustments.
- Questions were open ended for detailed elaborations.
- Questions moved the interview toward research questions. (Each research question has a specific focus relating to Grove and Torbion's theoretical concepts).
- Spontaneous probing questions were asked for clarity, elaboration, comprehension, and further inquiry when it was necessary.

The interview began with "ice breaker questions" and lead into general questions about acculturation. The main questions focused on lived experiences asking participants to describe specific situations that reflected their "frame of reference" (clarity) and behavioral adjustments (applicability). Follow up questions probed information addressing general abstracts of both concepts rather than particular or specific parts of the

concepts in order to explore cognitive and behavioral changes experienced by Hmong refugees.

Ice Breaker Questions:

- Can you describe your first thoughts about America and how you felt when you first arrived?
- In your own words, what does American culture and Hmong culture mean to you, how are they similar, and how are they different?
- When would you say you started feeling comfortable or at home in America?

Research Question 1: What are the cultural experiences of Hmong refugees living in America?

- Can you explain how American culture has played a role in your perception about Hmong culture?
- Do you think culture plays a significant role in decision making? If so, could you describe how Hmong culture and American culture as you understand it played a role in your decision making?
- Being a Hmong refugee and living in America, how do you view your identity as a Hmong American citizen?
- Can you share how you feel around Hmong people and how you feel around non-Hmong people?
- Please share how life was in Southeast Asia and how life is now for you in America.

- What was it like growing up in America for you?
- Can you describe any major differences you see between Hmong culture and American culture?
- Can you describe any traditional practices or customs that you do not practice but see older generations practicing?
- Base off your conception about Hmong culture and values, what values do you have that you would consider more Hmong than American?
- Base off your conception about American culture and values, what values do you have that you would consider more American than Hmong?
- What does acculturation mean to you? Base off your experiences living in America, how can you relate to acculturation?

Research Question 2: How have acculturative challenges constructed Hmong refugees lived experiences in America?

- What social norms do you think are different between Americans and Hmong people?
- Do you think you conduct yourself differently around Hmong and non-Hmong people? If so, can you explain why?
- What role do you think culture plays in shaping behavior and social norms?
- Base off your conception of values and social norms, how do you think values and social norms shaped your behavior?

- What do you think your life would have been like if you chose to fully retain your Hmong culture here in America?
- Can you describe any social norms about Americans that you think would be considered strange to Hmong people?
- Can you describe any social norms about Hmong people that you think Americans would find strange?
- How do you think culture and environmental factors play a role in people's behavior?

These questions are open ended and allowed participants to describe their experiences as they perceived it. These questions were also developed particularly to explore Grove and Torbion's theoretical concepts of clarity and applicability. As stated by Englander (2012), the point of phenomenological studies is not to explore participants but the phenomenon as described by participants. By asking questions about specific situations or experienced moments of cultural clarity and applicability, responses provided context and meaning about how these experiences were perceived and experienced by participants.

To ensure content validity and accuracy, follow-up questions asked for clarification and elaboration (Breakwell, 2004). These questions asked for definitions or additional information regarding ambiguous phrases or frequent concepts. Follow-up statements were also used to confirm accuracy by rephrasing participant responses as interpreted by the researcher to confirm exact meaning and comprehension.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

Participants were recruited through local Hmong organizations throughout the western region of the United States, as well as by word of mouth through family and friends. Family and friends passed out fliers with information about the study with my contact information. The same flier was also publicly advertised through local Hmong organizations and social media for additional recruitment. Interested participants contacted the researcher by phone and e-mail for additional information regarding the study and their interest in participation. The criteria for eligible participants included the following:

- Any male or female Hmong refugee who immigrated to America throughout the 1970s and 1980s.
- Participants must be at least 30 years of age to ensure a few decades of acculturation.
- Participants must speak English well enough to describe their experiences regarding acculturation.
- Volunteers only

The rationale for the number of participants was contingent on interviews and data quality. Because the objective of phenomenology is to provide an accurate comprehensive description of a phenomenon, recruitment and interviews had to continue until this criterion was satisfied. This criterion was satisfied when additional participants could not contribute any new information about the phenomenon. As stated by Morse (1994), there is no specific number for sample size in phenomenological studies because

sample size depends on “the quality of data and the number of interviews per participant to determine the amount of useable data” (p. 4).

I conducted interviews and collected data myself. Interviews were conducted in preferred locations selected by participants. Recording tools included a high-quality USB broadcasting microphone connect to a personal laptop. Interviews were recorded on a free downloadable software program (Audacity). Follow up procedures included contacting participants by phone, e-mail, or social media. Interviews were concluded when participants had nothing further to add or share regarding their lived experiences. Debriefing procedures included asking participants for final comments and thanking them for their participation.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

For data analysis, NVivo was used to analyze major and frequent concepts or phrases commonly expressed by participants throughout interviews. Coding involved identifying common themes among all participants. Any discrepant case continued as normal but would not be used or included in the study, however, there were no discrepant cases.

### **Husserl Approach**

Husserl’s PPR approach was used for data analysis following Giorgi’s five-step coding process described by Broome (2011, 2014). The first step to psychological reduction involved bracketing or assuming the proper phenomenological attitude. Bracketing involved removing the researchers own personal interests, thoughts, experiences, opinions and assumptions about the phenomenon to ensure an unbiased look

at the data. Secondly, descriptions from participants were read comprehensively in order to understand participant experiences as a whole. The third step included drawing boundaries between “units” or meaningful data where meanings were shifted and relevant to the phenomenon. These shifts in meanings reflected conscious transitions that revealed essential aspects related to the phenomenon understudied that may relate or connect to other “units” (Giorgi, 2012). The fourth step transformed these data units into psychological descriptions in third person while keeping original content and meaning. By psychological descriptions, Broome (2011) referenced Giorgi’s “Imaginative variation” which “means that one imaginatively varies different aspects of the phenomenon to which one is present in order to determine which aspects are essential to the appearance of the phenomenon and which are contingent” (Giorgi, 2007, p. 64). This step separates significant units relevant to the phenomenon from nonsignificant units and describes the significant units from a psychological perspective in third person. Lastly, the final step included structuring the units in a logical connective way in order to explain the phenomenon as experienced and perceived by participants.

The following steps highlight the data analyses process that was used to code, structure and organize data for common themes.

- Step 1: Bracketed bias information and assumed the proper phenomenological attitude throughout the whole analysis process.
- Step 2: Listened to each interview recording and transcribed each interview verbatim into Microsoft Word (Title each interview by numerical interview order and name such as: P1 Rocky Lo). Once interviews were transcribed,

each transcript was read along with the audio to ensure transcript accuracy as well as comprehension. Transcripts were then uploaded into NVivo for coding. Each interview was coded separately by first identifying and color-coding frequent words using “text search query” for future coding steps.

- Step 3: “Noding” or gathering and separating related information for each transcript using NVivo’s “mind map” to visualize and organize data. This step helped separate significant information from nonsignificant information relevant to the phenomenon.
- Step 4: Once significant data or “units” was separated, significant data were transcribed in third person extracting psychological meanings as perceived and experienced by participants. This step involved Giorgi’s (2009) imaginative variation, describing data as experienced and perceived by participants with no concerns about truth or interpretation (*Taking phenomenological data and explaining it through the psychological perspective of participants*).
- Step 5: Once each transcript was coded individually in NVivo, all transcripts and frequent concepts were compared and matched with one another and structured for common themes. This step focused on the whole or general psychological experience by the summation of individual data collected by each participant.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

To ensure credibility (internal validity) and transferability (external validity), cautious steps were taken to ensure interpretive accuracy and content validity. Triangulation, clarifying potential biases and member checking processes were utilized to ensure credibility. By using triangulation, results and findings were analyzed for comparisons and similarities with other studies as well as theories regarding acculturation and responses from participants. Member checking included following up with participants about the results and data. Doing so provided them the opportunity to evaluate and assess the quality of the data as well as the accuracy of the themes. To ensure transferability, double checking transcripts was necessary to avoid minor errors with translation and data organization throughout coding. To ensure dependency (reliability) with interviews, documentation as well as coding processes and original data were saved for review and replicable purposes to ensure common themes and concepts are valid results.

### **Ethical Procedures**

When conducting social research involving people, there are three main principles that need to be considered: respect for persons, beneficence and justice (U.S. Department of Human Services, 2016). Respect for persons included professional treatment of participants, respect for participant autonomy, informed consent and exclusion of researcher deception. The beneficence principle involved my intentions of doing no harm, minimizing risks to participants and maximizing benefits gained from the research. Lastly, the justice principle focused on fairness of distribution. Fairness of distribution

concerns the population that will receive the benefits of the study and the population that will receive the potential risks.

In order to ensure these principles were upheld, each participant was informed about their rights and roles as participants. The latter included informing participants about the purpose, intention and social significance or potential gains of the study as well as the authority to break or withdraw participation at any time without question. Written and verbal consent was given before interviews were conducted by signing a consent form (see Appendix C). The form was also signed by me to validate my agreement with participants. The consent form covered the general principles of ethics, participant roles and rights, agreement of participation as well as acknowledgement and the Universities IRB Approval number.

Specific American Psychological Association (APA) standards that needed to be considered included multiple relations, third party requests for services and advertising/recruitment (American Psychological Association, 2017). Since I recruited participants through family, friends and local Hmong organizations, potential friendships may develop out of this connection and impair my objectivity or performance. To mitigate this issue, I clearly stated my professional relationship with all participants informing them that no contact will be made unless related to the study until the research is completed. Third party requests and advertisement issues may interfere with confidentiality as local Hmong organizations may publicly acknowledge participants and their role in the study. To ensure complete confidentiality, interested participants had the option to contact me directly without any additional mediator. Organizations were only

used as a medium for advertisement and recruitment with no connection or other involvement with the study.

For data treatment and security, all collected data and information was kept confidential, anonymous and stored on a personal password safe laptop. All stored data included transcripts from interviews, consent and dissertation documents, interview recordings and results/analyses. Personal laptop is password secured and free from public or recreational use. Upon completion of dissertation, all information will be terminated.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study explored the lived experiences of Hmong refugees living in America. A qualitative method was used to explore the lived experiences of Hmong refugees and identify complex issues related to acculturation. A phenomenological design was employed to study this phenomenon by exploring the lived experiences of Hmong refugees as they were perceived. Participants were recruited through local Hmong organizations as well as word of mouth through family and friends. Semistructured interviews were used to collect data about Hmong refugees lived experiences. Interview questions were structured within Grove and Torbiorn's theoretical concepts of clarity and applicability to probe information regarding refugee's frame of reference or perceptions about American culture (*clarity*) as well as behavioral patterns as a result of learned information (*applicability*). All interviews were verbally recorded and transcribed on a secured password safe laptop for confidential and coding purposes using NVivo. For data analysis, Husserl's PPR approach was used to code and provide scientific inquiry about lived experiences.

Issues for trustworthiness such as credibility, transferability and dependability (reliability, internal and external validity) was managed through triangulation, member checking, clarifying responses and double checking each process to ensure accuracy and reliability. Dependency was ensured by documenting the coding processes and saving original data for review and replicable purposes to ensure common themes and concepts are valid results.

Ethical principles to consider included respect for persons, benevolence and justice. To ensure these principles were upheld, each participant was informed about their rights and roles as participants as well as giving verbal and written consent. Results and findings from this study is outlined in Chapter 4 along with additional information about data collection and analysis.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of Hmong refugees in America. The sample for this study was Hmong refugees who immigrated from Southeast Asia to America in the 1970s and 1980s. In this study, I employed a qualitative phenomenological design. Semistructured interviews were used to collect data and descriptive information regarding participants' experiences as Hmong refugees living in a dominant American cultural society. Data were then separated and grouped for common themes and frequent concepts relating to most or all of participants' lived experiences.

The theoretical framework for this study was Grove and Torbiorn's (1985) theory of sojourners. Grove and Torbiorn's theoretical concepts of clarity and applicability were appropriate to use in this study with Hmong refugees' experiences because the concepts allowed me to examine the cognitive adjustment toward American norms (e.g., clarity) and gradual acquisition of behaviors (e.g., applicability) based off American norms experienced by Hmong refugees. I developed the following research questions, which guided the interview questions about participants' experiences adjusting to American society:

1. What are the cultural experiences of Hmong refugees living in America?
2. How have acculturative challenges constructed Hmong refugees lived experiences in America?

With Research Question 1, I explored Hmong refugees' clarity or frame of reference about American culture. Research Question 2 was directed at their applicability or adjusted habitual patterns as a result of their frame of reference.

The results of this study regarding Hmong refugees' lived experiences in America are presented in this section. The participants, their demographics, and the setting in which data were collected and analyzed are also presented. I also discuss the evidence of trustworthiness, including credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability, in relation to validity and reliability along with the major themes and subthemes found within the study.

### **Demographics**

The population for this study were Hmong refugees who immigrated in the mid-1970s and 1980s. As I stated on the flier, all participants had to meet the criteria of being a Hmong refugee, at least 30 years of age, and speak English well enough to articulate their experiences.

The participants totaled to eight volunteers: four men and four women. I collected relevant demographic information from each participant, including their age, gender, country of origin, arrival date, age of arrival, and number of years residing in the United States. Participants were between the ages of 30 and 72, all of which arrived at different ages ranging from a month old to teenagers and young adults in their 20s and 30s.

Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

Participants	Age	Gender	Country of birth	Arrival Date	Arrival Age	Years in the United States
P1	39	M	Thailand	1980	1	38
P2	72	M	Laos	1976	30	42
P3	68	F	Laos	1976	27	42
P4	34	F	Thailand	1995	12	23
P5	41	M	Thailand	1976	1	41
P6	30	F	Laos	1992	4	26
P7	33	F	Thailand	1989	4	29
P8	44	M	Laos	1989	14	29

**Data Collection**

I collected the data for this study from eight participants who volunteered to share their experiences living in the United States. Using semistructured interviews, I asked participants open-ended questions for descriptive and elaborative details regarding their lived experiences as Hmong refugees in the United States. Locations for participant interviews varied from their work offices to their home, with one participant requesting a phone interview. The length of interviews varied from half an hour to an hour and 20 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded and saved on a personal, password-protected laptop using a high-end, frequency microphone and software recording program.

I conducted and transcribed the interviews in this study. Interviews were recorded through Audacity, a free, downloadable audio software program with a USB microphone. Interviews were then played back slowly for transcription into Microsoft Word. Once transcripts were typed word-for-word to match the audio, I read the Word documents

along with the audio to ensure accuracy and comprehension of the participants' experiences. Once the interviews were transcribed, they were e-mailed to participants for review. Participants were instructed to read their transcripts and verify that it was an accurate reflection of their experiences. All eight participants responded through e-mail and text messaging stating that the transcripts were an accurate reflection of their experiences.

### **Data Analysis**

After recruiting and interviewing participants, I coded the data using Giorgi's (2009) five-step coding procedure based off of Husserl's PPR analysis method. The following steps were taken to code the data into results. For Step 1, I bracketed my biases and assumed the proper phenomenological attitude throughout the whole analysis process. This step cleared my mind of any potential biases by removing any personal thoughts, feelings, and experiences about the phenomenon so I could view the data in their natural essence.

For Step 2, once I assumed the proper phenomenological attitude, each interview was saved and transcribed verbatim into Microsoft Word. I titled each interview by numerical interview order and name, such as P1 Rocky Lo. Once interviews were transcribed, each transcript was read along with the audio to ensure transcript accuracy as well as comprehension of the participant's experiences in its entirety. Transcripts were then uploaded into NVivo for coding. Each interview was coded separately by first nodding or gathering and separating information. This process is called *contextual description* (Cronin & Armour, 2017), where significant information was separated from

nonsignificant information relevant to Hmong refugee's lived experiences in the United States. Nodes or significant information were then separated into two themes or categories under clarity and applicability. These two themes or categories were centered around Grove and Torbiorn's theory of sojourners acculturative processes as a guide to cognitive (e.g., clarity) and behavioral (e.g., applicability) adjustment or adaptation.

In the theme of clarity, I separately coded any relevant statement or response reflecting participants' cognitive framework, as described by Grove and Torbiorn (1985) as,

Feelings of confidence that his understanding of the way the world works is accurate, complete, clearly perceived and positively useful in guiding his behavior. He recognizes that his habitual pattern of activity is consistent with his mental model of the functioning society. (p. 206)

For example, Participant 2 stated,

I would say that right now I don't know if I fully feel that I'm comfortable here. I still feel like I'm adjusting and assimilating to this culture and that's because I'm still kind of traditional. A lot of things here in America I can't really fully accept it yet and maybe that's..... I don't know, like for example, interracial marriage. I can't fully accept that idea yet and I don't know when I will be able to fully accept that.

For applicability, I separately coded any relevant statement or response reflecting participants behavioral pattern of change, as described by Grove and Torbion (1985) as, "Behavior, that is, habitual patterns of activity, is not only socially acceptable but also

interpersonally effective in that it very often yields the outcomes desired in interactions with others similarly enculturated” (p. 206). For example, Participant 3 stated,

You need to make your life better by learning how to survive a better way. But Hmong refugees is different. You are from a culture that you have not seen much, so a culture that helps you to have a better life, change to match what is the best one.

For Step 3, after separating significant phrases or responses for each transcript and categorizing them under each node (e.g., clarity and applicability), I identified frequent words using the “text search query” in NVivo. Within each individual participant categorical nodes, I used Word Cloud in NVivo to find the most frequent words in each node. Finding frequent words used by participants under each node provided me with specific words that were helpful in understanding the process of their cognitive and applicable changes. For example, words, such as “collective” and “independent,” were commonly used in response to interview questions, such as “Can you describe any differences you see between Hmong culture and American culture?” regarding participants’ clarity or cognitive framework. Variations of these words were helpful in showing how participants perceived cultural differences and how it impacted their lives. For instance, many participants described their personal desire for independent decision making or decisions benefiting themselves over collective decisions considerate of their families as a contributing factor to their discomfoting experiences at home. For example, one participant described how his family disapproved of his first choice in marriage, so he ended up marrying someone else out of collective

considerations to his family. Knowing what words participants used frequently to describe their experiences was helpful in extracting the psychological meaning perceived and experienced by participants in the next step of data analysis.

The Word Frequency Criteria in NVivo were as follows:

- All words with one or more letter.
- Top 100 most frequent words used.
- Broad search with Word Generalizations in NVivo instead of exact words with exact meanings. For example, Participant 1 used general variations of the word “community” 107 times and “individual” 95 times within his categorical node of clarity to describe his cognitive perception about Hmong and American culture. Within applicability, Participant 1 used variations of the word “change” 113 times to describe his behavioral adaptation.

For Step 4, after significant data were separated and frequent words were calculated, I transcribed the significant data in third person, extracting psychological meanings as perceived and experienced by participants. This step involved Giorgi’s (2009) imaginative variation, which the act of describing data as experienced and perceived by participants with no concerns about truth, generalization, or interpretation. This step simply takes phenomenological data and explains it through the psychological perspective of participants, giving meaning to their experiences (Giorgi, 2009).

Lastly, for Step 5, after coding each transcript individually up to this point, I compared all significant data and frequent concepts and grouped them together for emerging themes. In this step, I focused on the whole or general psychological

experience by the summation of all individual data collected from each participant. By separating and grouping similar phrases and concepts together, six major themes emerged along with 23 subthemes.

### **Emerged Themes and Subthemes**

I asked Hmong refugees to describe their experiences living in America in response to interview questions that were directed toward both research questions that were focused on Grove and Torbiorn's theoretical concepts of clarity and applicability.

1. What are the cultural experiences of Hmong refugees living in America?
2. How have acculturative challenges constructed Hmong refugees lived experiences in America?

Research Question 1 explored Hmong refugees' clarity or frame of reference about American culture. Emerging themes under Research Question 1 included: (a) Cultural Dissonance, (b) Environmental Adaptation, and (c) Gender Roles along with 12 subthemes. Research Question 2 explored participants applicability or adjusted habitual patterns as a result of their frame of reference. Emerging themes under Research Question 2 included: (d) Loss of Traditional Practices and Participation, (e) Collective to Independent Lifestyles and (f) Acculturative Approaches along with 11 subthemes, each of which is explained in further detail in the results section.

## **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

### **Credibility**

To ensure credibility for this study, two techniques were used, member checking and triangulation. With member checking, I double checked the transcripts while listening to them along with the audio recording to ensure transcript accuracy. Transcripts were then sent to each participant to look over and verify its accuracy and reflection of their experiences. After data analysis and coding, interpreted meanings applied to participant experiences were also sent to participants for review to ensure interpreted meanings were strong reflections of their lived experiences. Secondly, triangulation was used to support participants responses relating their experiences to other theories that have been applied to other studies regarding immigrants' acculturative experiences such as Berry's theory of acculturation (1997) as well as Croucher and Kramer's theory of cultural fusion (2017).

### **Transferability**

Even though phenomenological studies are not meant to generalize experiences or establish any objective understanding or representation of the phenomenon, it can provide a conscious understanding of people's psychological experiences in relation to a particular phenomenon (Giorgi, 2017; Smith, 2013). Having focused on Hmong refugees lived experiences adjusting to American society, useful data can be applied to future studies with other SA refugees such as Cambodians, Mien, Laotians and Vietnamese immigrants, who share similar historical experiences as Hmong refugees who immigrated to the United States. Furthermore, the process of acculturation can be applied to other

immigrant groups with different historical and cultural backgrounds. Even though culture does have a significant role in explaining different acculturative challenges experienced by immigrants as well as immigrant's acculturative method or approach (e.g., assimilation, integration, separation, marginalization), the general process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact with another group is still relatively similar with respect to learning and accumulating knowledge of a new culture and its impact on individuals adjusted behavior (Grove & Torbiorn, 1985).

### **Dependability**

To ensure dependability, a step by step analysis was documented to ensure exactly how I coded and interpreted data as well as the tools used to do so. Following Giorgi's five-step-data analysis and using NVivo's Word Cloud and Memo Link tools to code and separate relevant information from nonrelevant information is also documented for replicable purposes. Determining relevant and nonrelevant information was guided by Grove and Torbiorn's theory of sojourner as a framework to determine frequent concepts, statements or phrases related to their theoretical concepts and definition of clarity and applicability. Additionally, demographics and eligible criteria were documented to ensure sampling and participant accuracy for replicable purposes.

### **Confirmability**

To ensure confirmability, raw data including audio recordings, interview questions and transcripts were saved and preserved exactly as used in this study. A detailed explanation of the coding process and concluded themes are explained to show how I strictly worked with information provided by the data without internal biases or

other factors that could have influenced the results. Preserving raw data as well as a detailed documentation of the coding and analysis process will allow other researchers to use the same exact materials to work with as well as compare results for any future purposes and provide a rational explanation between the raw data and emerging themes.

### **Results**

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of Hmong refugees living in America. Using Grove and Torbion's theory of sojourners as a guiding framework, the research questions attempted to explore cognitive and behavioral transitions among Hmong refugees in America to better understand the process of intercultural adjustment and psychological changes in perception and behavioral adaptations among people in unfamiliar environments (Berry, 2003; Grove & Torbiorn, 1985). For these reasons, the research questions were constructed to explore the cognitive and behavioral process of cultural adjustments as experienced and perceived by Hmong refugees in America.

Using Grove and Torbiorn's theoretical concepts of clarity and applicability, Research Question 1 was constructed to explore Hmong refugee's clarity or frame of reference about American culture and Research Question 2 was constructed to explore Hmong refugees applicability or habitual patterns as a result of their frame of reference. The emerging themes resulted in six main themes and 23 subthemes highlighted in the following tables.

Table 2

*Research Question 1: Themes and Subthemes for Clarity*

<b>3 Themes for clarity</b>	<b>12 Subthemes for clarity</b>
Cultural Dissonance	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Realization of Independent and Collective Differences</li> <li>2. Realization of Differences in Family/Community Values</li> <li>3. Realization of Differences in Respect with Elders</li> <li>4. Feelings of Disconnect with Language Barriers</li> </ol>
Environmental Adaptation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. Interaction and Exposure to American Culture</li> <li>6. English Proficiency</li> <li>7. Education</li> <li>8. Religion</li> </ol>
Gender Roles ( <i>Female Participants Only</i> )	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>9. Being Independent and Self-reliant</li> <li>10. Expectations of a Traditional Housewife.</li> <li>11. Submissive and Obedience</li> <li>12. Lack of Academic Support or Encouragement</li> </ol>

Table 3

*Research Question 2: Themes and Subthemes for Applicability*

<b>3 Themes for applicability</b>	<b>11 Subthemes for applicability</b>
Loss of Traditional Practices and Participation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>13. Converting to Christianity</li> <li>14. Speaking English as a Primary Language</li> <li>15. Female Preferences for Independence</li> <li>16. Loss of Ritual and Ceremonial Understanding and Conduct</li> <li>17. Disinterest in Cultural Participation and Preparations with Rituals, Ceremonies and Social Gatherings.</li> </ol>
Collective to Independent Lifestyles	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>18. Making Individual Decisions</li> <li>19. Self-Expression</li> <li>20. Equality with Women</li> </ol>
Acculturative Approach	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>21. Assimilation</li> <li>22. Marginalization</li> <li>23. Integration</li> </ol>

Note: These themes reflect the behavioral changes of Hmong refugees as a result of their cognitive framework having learned about American culture.

**Theme 1: Cultural Dissonance**

The first three themes that emerged focused on Research Question 1 which explored the cultural experiences of Hmong refugees living in America regarding participants clarity or cognitive framework. This theme addressed Hmong refugees lived experiences in America by exploring how participants perceived Hmong and American culture and its impact on their lived experiences. Many reported experiences that reflected dissonant feelings because of cultural differences between Hmong and American culture. For instance, when participants were asked about Hmong and American culture and their experiences in relation to both, majority of participants elaborated on four major subthemes that revealed their dissonant feelings as a Hmong refugee living in America and its impact on their psychological perception. The most salient subtheme was the distinction between collective and independent cultures. This included responses about decision making, social responsibilities to community members and cultural conformity. Participants also described Hmong culture as collective, family, clan and community oriented compared to American culture where individuality and independence is encouraged over the family or group. Participants also mentioned language barriers and its impact on their ability to adjust and be comfortable within their environments outside of home. Some of the older participants stated how isolated and disconnected they felt at school or anywhere else outside of home because they were not able to understand or communicate with others who did not speak Hmong. Additionally, many of the younger participants stated feeling more comfortable in school after having learned English and becoming more proficient at it. Overall, majority of participants

expressed the importance of language for comfort, understanding, learning and interacting in mainstream society. Other subthemes included cultural differences with family and community values as well as respect for elders. Majority of participants expressed the importance of social hierarchy within the Hmong community as well as respecting that hierarchy with elders compared to American culture which “challenges authority” as some participants mentioned. Participants also expressed differences in cultural values within family, caring for elders, respecting elders and closeness or unity within the Hmong community as part of Hmong culture. The following quotes exemplify these subthemes in relation to cultural differences and its impact on their psychological perceptions and dissonant feelings:

P1: I think in terms of that social reason to move or you can call it social or cultural reasons, it's not for jobs like how most people move for jobs or opportunities, a lot of Hmong people don't move for those reasons they moved for cultural pride because they have social events so for my parents they were definitely good to be closer to relatives you know when they do things every weekend like all the funerals, weddings, celebrations, for them they need that because that's their social network but for us as a kid, that was not good because we were always moving and for me I felt like I finally adjusted to that suburban school where I felt like I started to fit in then we were already moving so I left a school like that in the suburbs to come to Stockton and start middle school with all minority students and I'm back into this urban or low income environment

where the school isn't good so I think I continued to be isolated so it's kind of like restarting.

P2: I would say that right now I don't know if I fully feel that I'm comfortable here. I still feel like I'm adjusting and assimilating to this culture and that's because I'm still kind of traditional. A lot of things here in America I can't really fully accept yet.

P2: To be Hmong it would be to respect the elder's decisions or respect anyone who's older than you and that you value your traditional practices for example funerals, weddings how the bride prize, if you value all of those, to me that's Hmong. To be an American is someone who thinks of themselves before everyone else. Like you're very independent. You only think about yourself.

P3: Yes, this is very important. Well Hmong people consider themselves as brothers and sisters to me. Even you I would never call you a stranger, I would call you son. Because Hmong is considered a family to me so I always want to relate meaning with everyone.

P5: American culture means independence, it means having more rights, it means more flexibility versus Hmong culture which to me is very rigid. I know that as a female I have limited rights, its extremely clan oriented so the individual doesn't really matter its about the prosperity and honor of the clan.

P5: I am proud of the values we have in like loving our elders and respecting others and being a good person so I love all of that and loving family and being there for family is so important to me.

P5: Well.....again the whole theme would go back to valuing family above everything else because I know that.....well I've heard stories that some people are just like so annoyed. Like some of my American friends are like "I'm so annoyed with my family, can't wait to get away from them, I don't care and I don't care to contact them" and to me I'm like "I would never do that, I would never abandon my family". The same thing goes back to respecting your elders, I would never in a million years put my parents in a retirement home because that goes against every fiber of my being and all my values, so respecting the elders and respecting authority I think is something that I think a lot of Americans challenge authority and that's still something I don't do very well.

P5: "But just wrapping around to the point that even in first grade when that happened, I didn't understand English at all because of my inability to effectively communicate with the people around me."

P6: So, the main points I would understand about the two cultures is that the American culture only focused on me, myself and I. It's all about me, me, me. All these promotions all these managers, it's all about me, me, me. So, the American society is mainly, now that I understand it more is mainly about the individual. What can the individual get, how far can they go in life, it's all about them.

P7: The Hmong culture you know is definitely, to me when I think about Hmong culture I think about family. I think about the Hmong clan, American culture in comparison in my opinion is more of the individualistic self, its more about you as a person, so that's how they are different in my opinion.

P7: Yea, I think it's because when you're from a different culture or coming to America, English being a second language, for me it was a lot of lack of self-esteem it was very poor self-confidence. I didn't feel like I belonged, I felt really lost growing up so in that sense I always felt like I had to defend myself if that makes sense so I didn't feel connected if that makes sense.

P8: Well, it was pretty confusing, you know when I first arrived, you don't speak the language and you don't know the culture so it's really confusing and I might say that for example, you're just put in the dark and you don't know what to do so it's really tough.

P8: Well, these two cultures are really different. The difference is that, in American culture, you can see that its individualistic and in the Hmong culture is kind of family oriented and something like that. For example, the Hmong culture, you make decisions even though you're 18 years old but the decisions always come back to the family to make decisions but Americans, you can make your own decisions. So that is the differences. Individual and family oriented so that's the difference that I see, other than that, there are many things but that is something very important for the cultures for example, for Hmong culture, we often respect our elders.

P8: Well, a lot of times you get lost.....it is pretty tough because you want to maintain what you have and have to study what you have to study here in this country to sustain ourselves and support ourselves and that's pretty tough because at the same time you have to live in two worlds you know you just can't go to the

Hmong way or the American side, you have to live in the middle to sustain that so you have to live in the middle to grasp both sides or work with both sides so it's pretty tough.

## **Theme 2: Environmental Adaptation**

The second theme to emerge under Research Question 1 exploring cultural experiences of Hmong refugees living in America is environmental adaptation. This theme addressed the research question by exploring participants cognition or perceptions about their lived experiences that helped them adjust more comfortably to American society. Given that participants realized how different Hmong and American culture is, they also reported how they were able to adjust or reconcile their dissonant feelings and perceptions in order to adjust to their environment outside of home. Interview questions such as “What does acculturation mean to you? Base off your experiences living in America, how can you relate to acculturation?” or “How do you view your identity as a Hmong American?” These questions lead to participants expressing how they were able to adjust to American culture as well as the experiences that helped them acculturate. Four additional subthemes were commonly found among all participants revealing the impact of the experiences in relation to their acculturative process. Salient factors such as religion, education, language, a professional career, time and exposure learning and interacting with Americans contributed to alleviating their dissonant feelings expressed in the first theme.

P1: I struggled a lot but during the struggle I was able to find my circle of friends and with Hmong and other students and was able to connect with a few professors

who understood a lot of questions about identity, these questions of not knowing who I am, not understanding my history. So, a lot of this began to change and also for the first time in my classroom I got the chance to learn about who Hmong people are in my anthropology and ethnic studies classes. I learned about who I am and about other people who share my experiences and other people of color who have been through these kinds of oppression, having to deal with poverty, learning about racism and I thought “yea, I’ve learned a lot about this, I just never understood it”. So, I found a space for me to reconnect with my identity to relearn who I am.

P1: My professor use to joke that he created this American Hmong and Hmong American categories and asked us to identify ourselves and I was like “I think when I came to college, I was an American Hmong” but I moved towards, like today, I’m both but its kind of like this cycle having to assimilate. You have to lose who you are in order to find success. So whether we think about it or not I think a lot of minority children go through that process of having to lose who you are like lose your culture, lose your language because to be successful you have to speak English like the overall society like English like American which is what I was trying to do but could never do that so for me it wasn’t until like my 3rd year in college that I really changed.

P2: Yea, so at work definitely more Americanized than at home. At home its very traditional Hmong, typical Hmong woman. So, actually, I guess you can say it depends on where I am at. Like I say when I’m at work I’m this leader this

professional that students look up to for advice and when I'm at home I'm a different person. Even though right now I'm separated even when I'm at home I'm just a mother to the kids and my role doesn't change.

P3: "Now back in 1962, 63, I got into Catholicism and had the chance to be baptized and become catholic, since then I completely changed my Hmong way of life."

P4: When I married my husband, we became Christians and I felt like people respected me. Even when I talked to a priest, they respect me and would spend time to help you with your problems. When I was younger, I had to ask an older lady to go with me to seek a Shaman before he would even talk to me, so I had enough of that.

P5: But just wrapping around to the point that even in first grade when that happened, I didn't understand English at all because of my inability to effectively communicate with the people around me. I think there was a lot of challenges and it wasn't until the second grade where I read my first chapter book and I was so proud and after that it just clicked and I just continued to accelerate in my ability to speak the language so when I really think about it, it would have to be when I was able to confidently comprehend, understand and speak the language that it was then I felt like I was comfortably able to navigate in American society.

P5: Even though we were in America we were super Hmong like it was such a heavily Hmong populated area that we didn't feel the need to change as much so it wasn't until I reached college and I moved out here that I realized that "Oh

wow, the way we grew up is not like how other people grew up” and that’s when I felt like when I started needing to acculturate myself more and I felt like it was fine because again I do like American culture too.

P5: Not only did it open up my mind but now theres more pressure to change because.....like for example growing up I never cared for Starbucks or anything like that because we just didn’t drink it but when I went to college everyone was drinking it so I was like “okay” and now I love it so exposure to it and a little bit of pressure or more pressure to change and fit in.

P6: “You weren’t really immersed in American culture besides holidays and stuff like that and then you weren’t really immersed in Hmong culture because my parents were Christian.”

P6: Yea, I think for you to assimilate or be adaptable, you have to learn the skills and the basics and also, in a sense, you have to get out of the Hmong community, not every single second but you kind of have to get out of the Hmong community at your leisure time and go join something else.

P7: Yea, I think that goes back to what we were saying earlier, I think after your time in college you just feel more confident and maybe that comes with age too that you just come to this phase of acceptance but for me, I think education had a lot to do with me just building up that confidence level.

P8: I think we need more education to both the elders and younger generations. Right now, we can see that we have a gap between the elderly and the younger generation. For example, smaller communities in certain areas, the gap is not that

huge but for the larger Hmong population in other areas there's a large gap because lots of Hmong people for example here tend to have a social life together and they tend to do things together so they adapt to the new culture easier but it's pretty hard for those city areas that have a larger community to adapt.

P8: In high school I didn't interact much because I had the language issue and have been new to this country without any educational background that was pretty hard for me so after 4 years in high school I didn't have much interaction because you really don't have the language and you don't really have the culture so its kind of like trying to focus on your course and focusing on trying to pass all the classes and move on so that's what I tried to do in high school so not much interaction with my colleagues or other people at that time but going to college I was able to join other clubs and other nationality clubs and other student or Asian clubs and joining those clubs I was able to express myself.

### **Theme 3: Gender Roles**

The final theme that emerged under Research Question 1 exploring cultural experiences of Hmong refugees living in America was significant only to female participants. With subthemes regarding gender roles, nothing common was found among male participants, however, with female participants, four subthemes emerged from their responses regarding challenges and experiences with cultural expectations of Hmong women. Many of the women expressed cultural challenges unique to their gender that impacted their lived experiences. Three of the married women expressed in the following statements specific challenges related to cultural expectations of a married woman as well

as traditional roles and responsibilities of a daughter in-law. All of the women acknowledged specific challenges regarding social status and inequality within the Hmong community as well as conflicts at home with family socialization or nurturing expectations of a housewife. This theme addressed Research Question 1 by exploring specific challenges Hmong women experienced because of their gender in relation to cultural expectations and responsibilities as Hmong women.

P2: At work I'm a leader, people look up to me because I'm a professional. But at home, my in-laws and their dads' kids are the leaders and I'm just their servants. I have to do their work for them, cook for them, clean for them and take care of their kids.

P2: So, education will be one of the things I feel that we wouldn't have had the opportunity to go to school if we were to stay in Thailand or Lao especially for women. Women don't have the opportunity to go to school or parents are not supportive of females going to school at least that's my experience with my parents in Thailand.

P2: Okay, so if I was just to be in the Hmong ways, it would be to marry young like my dad says, to have kids and that's it. Your husbands supposed to support you so you shouldn't go to school because your job is to just have kids.

P2: So, my culture has taught me that I have to be very polite, very respectful and that I should know how to cook, clean, kill chickens, get up early in the morning to go cook and help others as much as I can so when it's my turn, they will come help me.

P4: "I see that in the old days back in the old country, women don't make decisions. Women are supposed to be silent, not share their opinion or say anything, they are expected to just go along with whatever."

P4: I have to know my role that when I'm with Hmong people I have to act differently. Even the way I dress I have to dress to the appropriate situation and my role, I have to remember to shut up and not say much.

P5: I remember in high school I was open to marriage in high school because culturally half of my best friends were married before they graduate high school. So, to me I was like "Yea it's just something we do." But now that I'm older and moved away from that, I would never agree with my daughters getting married before 18. Second to that, I didn't move away to college because I culturally I was expected to stay home like close by. I mean culturally Hmong women don't strive for higher education

P5: The funny thing is naturally I have the personality of an American. So that's from birth personality wise because growing up I got a lot of rebuttals from people especially my parents about how I was not behaving like how an appropriate Hmong young lady should be behaving. I was very out spoken and loud and opinionated and had a big imagination so I was shut down a lot.

P5: I would never be okay with "Oh I'm a Hmong wife so I should go immediately home after work" if I did worked. I would hate it if I had to cook and clean up after everyone all the time so yea my whole life would be completely different.

P6: We still have curfew so if you're a girl and you're not married you shouldn't go out too late and spend the night or that if you're not married you shouldn't be living by yourself and you should be living with the family.

P6: "Our family thinking women are submissive and quiet but I am quite the opposite."

All of the women reported specific challenges related to traditional expectations of a Hmong woman that contrasts equal and independent qualities encouraged in American culture. All of the women desired independence, higher education and employment as well as equal social status with men as is valued in American culture. The women expressed the latter as part of their American identities and the cultural challenges they experienced within the Hmong community as a result of rejecting traditional roles of Hmong women and adopting American values of equality and independence.

#### **Theme 4: Loss of Traditional Practices and Participation**

The next three emerging themes were focused on participants applicability or habitual behavioral patterns based off their cognitive framework or learned experiences about American culture. They emerged in response to Research Question 2 exploring how acculturative challenges have constructed Hmong refugees lived experiences in America. The fourth emerging theme revealed participants loss of traditional practices and participation due to assimilated factors such as converting to Christianity, being more proficient in English, women being more independent, loss of cultural understanding and cultural practices. This theme addressed Research Question 2 by exploring how

participants experiences with Hmong and American culture influenced their daily lives as Hmong refugees living in America. Given participants acculturative experiences as well as their perceptions about those experiences outlined in the previous themes (e.g., Cultural Dissonance, Environmental Adaptation, Female Gender Roles), all of the participants expressed how they have adopted or assimilated certain American values and practices into their daily lives. These practices include converting to Christianity and attending Sunday mass as well as participating in church related activities and no longer practicing traditional shaman rituals. Secondly, though many are still fluent in speaking Hmong, English has become their primary language of communication within the household particularly with younger generations as well as among peers. All of the female participants expressed preferences in living an independent life rather than conforming to traditional roles and social expectations of a housewife who is expected to be submissive, obedient and dependent on their husband for financial security and decision making. Many of the participants also expressed not understanding cultural meaning behind traditional practices and rituals as well as how to properly conduct them. Lastly, many participants expressed their disinterest in participating in collective cultural practices because of its inconvenience to their independent lifestyles and work schedules as well as a general disinterest in practicing Hmong culture because of its cultural complexity.

P1: As an American Hmong, you are rejecting a lot of who you are as a Hmong person like you're thinking American first, like "I'm American so why do I have to do all this stuff, why do I have to follow this part of our culture, why do I have

to go to all these cultural events and things right? Why do my cousins call me every weekend to go do this or do that, or why my in laws call me to go do this or do that?”

P1: I can't go to the funerals for 3 days or weddings for 2 full days, things like that. It might hurt them at first but they understand that I'm different. They can't expect me to come at 5 in the morning and chop meat like other people. I can't chop meat, I'm not the ideal son in-law, I know my in-laws see me as a lazy son in-law.

P1: even our language has changed a lot because we have a lot of words for example Hmong trying to produce certain Hmong-Lao words or words in Vietnam. In Hmong America we have a lot of English words but if you go back to these places and only speak Hmong to them, they might not understand you.

P1: “I mean Hmong Christians are Hmong too so I think Hmong today is very different.”

P2: Another thing is that because I was pressured to marry at a young age. I don't want to pressure them to be married at a young age, I want them to finish high school, get at least a 4-year degree and find somebody then marry. So, I want them to be independent and financially independent before they marry unlike me how I did everything the opposite. I got married, had kids then went to college later on.

P2: “I feel like our traditions like our funerals and marriage ceremonies and the songs we sing at weddings and funerals, I think we will eventually lose that.”

P2: What's American about me is that I am a professional, a leader and that I.....let's see what else.....that I am very big on education. But I'm more American in a way that I want to be a leader and that I want be independent.

P3: I believe that nothing outside of this I don't practice Hmong way, only marriage. I don't practice calling soul, I don't practice ua neeb (*Hmong Ritual*) because I don't believe any of this happens in any particular way of the ancestors.

P4: "I use to be traditional when I was living with my parents. We did the hu plig, ua neeb (*Hmong rituals*) we did all these things."

P4: I think that now a days, sometimes I feel like, I would just stay home and take care of the children and I would had a bunch of children. Right now, I don't think I would be as independent as my man today.

P5: Oh yea, a lot. One thing is the "ua noj" (*dinner parties*) I'm going to erase that 100%. I already told my husband that we are only doing this as long as our parents are alive, again because I respect my elders so much I will never ever not go to those parties and help out but the moment they no longer require it, I won't do it because I don't think its productive for our lifestyles at the moment because it was designed for a time when people didn't work 8-5 on weekdays.

P5: "I just want to sleep in, I don't want to wake up at 5 in the morning and cook rice". So those things I think funeral rituals I don't think I will follow to the T. So just a lot of ritual stuff, first of all I don't comprehend them so that's why I don't think they mean as much to me and secondly, I just don't think its very practical anymore.

P5: "I'm a working wife. I don't live with my in-laws, I'm not submissive to my husband we are partners, I'm very independent I have my own car, credit card and do whatever I want when I want."

P6: "So, the very simple one that I don't follow because I'm Christian, that we don't do is shamanism."

P8: Yea, I think something we have not practices is called the Lu Shu practice for example towards the end of the year the families and groups come together, its not the new year its Lu Shu for example that is something over the past 20 or 30 years we have not practiced and that's supposed to be practiced once a year but we haven't practiced that. I think we don't have a convenient space or facility that would hold that so that's why we don't practice that because we don't have a facility that is suitable to practice those ceremonies.

P8: If you really retain straight to the traditions of the Hmong culture that would be pretty tough because sooner or later, we will drop or not practice some of the culture that we use to practice. We would not talk the way we use to talk back in Lao or Thailand or something like that so right now I can see that we lost some culture and some values that the parents valued at their time but our time theres no value of that at all.

For this theme, participants expressed how their behavior has changed as a result of their experiences and understanding of American culture. Religion played a major role in traditional beliefs about shamanism and spirituality which are no longer practiced for those who converted. English becoming a primary language particularly for the younger

Hmong refugees is spoken more often at home and among peers at social gatherings as the preferred language of communication. The women are more independent and less reliant on their husbands. They are also of equal status and do not follow traditional roles of being submissive or obedient. Women also work and focus on their careers oppose to traditional expectations of staying at home as a housewife and looking after their in-laws and children. Participants also mentioned not fully understanding traditional rituals or how to practice and conduct them. One participant in particular mentioned feeling like an “outsider” because he did not understand why certain rituals were conducted the way that they were. Lastly, majority of participants expressed how impractical Hmong culture can be in America because of its complexity and dependency on collective participation. The collective aspect can be difficult to maintain because of conflicting hours with people’s jobs or careers or general lifestyle and interest. A couple of the female participants mentioned how they were not interested in waking up early to help prepare food for social gatherings or large dinner parties. Some of the male participants also expressed how they did not understand or know how to conduct traditional ceremonies and rituals as is traditionally expected of men. Additionally, not having a facility or permanent location to conduct cultural practices limited Hmong people’s ability to participate or conduct annual rituals that use to be commonly and collectively practiced by the community. Most are now practiced privately at home with friends and relatives but on a much smaller scale than is traditionally practiced.

**Theme 5: Collective to Independent Lifestyles**

The fifth theme to emerge under Research Question 2 exploring acculturative challenges that constructed Hmong refugee's lived experiences, is the adjustment of collective lifestyles to independent lifestyles. When participants were asked about how they see themselves as Hmong Americans, many responded by saying they preferred to be more independent and make independent decisions as well as express themselves as individuals rather than conforming to cultural norms, conventions and expectations of behavior and personal conduct. They all associated independence as part of their American identity as well as their preference for independent practices, that is, focusing on their own personal interests over collective practices or cultural responsibilities to their family and community. All of the women specifically expressed equality and independence as part of their American identity as well as their preferences for independence as a desired aspect of social equality. This theme addressed the research question by exploring how Hmong refugees prefer to live independently, that is, focusing more on themselves and their personal interests rather than sacrificing personal time and efforts to participate in collective responsibilities within the Hmong community such as helping relatives with social gatherings or conducting rituals and being part of cultural ceremonies. Additionally, it also showed Hmong refugees preferences for individualism, that is, behaving and expressing oneself as he or she prefers rather than suppressing their individuality in order to conform to collective norms of behavioral conduct.

P2: "But I'm more American in a way that I want to be a leader that I want be independent."

P2: When I'm around Americans, people say I have a lot of confidence and a strong personality because I'm not afraid to voice my opinion.....when somethings wrong and I'll say something right, I'm not afraid to say "hey this is wrong"

P3: So, then I learned, "I wasn't dumb I can make good decisions" and from that point on I started to question and voice my opinion and that's when I came into conflict because I wasn't like that before. But now I feel like, if I am going to make a decision I am going to say yes or no rather than before, so I can see that change

P4: "I an American group I feel more free to talk, more free to be myself and talk like I am talking to you."

P5: I'm very independent I have my own car, credit card and do whatever I want when I want. We have a lot of respect for each other but the idea is "Honey I'm doing this tonight, how's your schedule? All good? Okay I'll see you later" you know.

P6: I was all about myself when I went to college. I did everything, I didn't ignore all my duties at home to help with chores and baby sit and stuff but I was all about myself I didn't do community too much.

P7: Seeing my colleague and my peers very vocal and having strong opinions and they aren't afraid to share it, for me it was different so going to college and going to school taught me how to do that, that "Hey it's okay for me to be vocal, it's

okay for me to speak out”. Because in my culture at least in my family when I was brought up, we weren’t allowed to be so vocal.

P7: In terms of American culture, I think being more outspoken, learning how to be more, trying to be more not so gender bias because as you know how in Hmong culture, we are always raised up to believe Hmong men are more dominant per se than Hmong women and then I think in American culture for me is all about equality.

P8: After high school I was able to give feedback. When somebody talked, I was able to give feedback after somebody talked and be like “Yes” I would like to question and critique and stuff like that. So that’s something I felt more comfortable when I started college.

P8: “The American value I like is being independent, being who you are and making your own decisions and something like that so I think that’s the value I like on the American side.”

All the participants stated their personal interest toward independent lifestyles as it is more practical and beneficial for their personal lives as well as general happiness. Some saw the collective lifestyle too complicated to maintain as well as too traditional and rigid. Some participants mentioned feeling restricted from being themselves and having to sacrifice their individuality out of respect for cultural demands and expectations. Participants enjoyed expressing themselves as individuals and saying how they feel and think without being criticized or judged for it. They associated these

qualities with American values and feeling more confident and inspired to “be themselves unapologetically” as one participant stated.

**Theme 6: Acculturative Approach:**

The final theme to emerge under Research Question 2 exploring how acculturative challenges has constructed Hmong refugees lived experiences in America, focused on participants responses regarding questions about their life in America and how they perceived their own identity and personal development based off their experiences adjusting to American society. This theme addressed the research question by showing the different ways or approaches in which Hmong refugees acculturated into American society. Berry’s Acculturation Theory (2003) suggests four different ways or approaches e.g., assimilation, integration, marginalization, and separation, immigrants use to acculturate into different societies. Numerous theories since has branched off Berry’s theory of acculturation in attempts to explain the process of acculturation, that is, how immigrants acculturate into different societies. With that said, for this study, I used Grove and Torbiorn’s theory of sojourner to explore how Hmong refugees acculturated into American society. The findings showed different approaches Hmong refugees used to acculturate or adjust to American society given acculturative challenges they have experienced as Hmong refugees as well as their perceptions about American life and American culture. The following responses reveal three subthemes showing participants acculturated preferences assimilating, marginalizing and integrating into American society based off Berry’s different dimensions of acculturation (2003).

P1: We see that so many Hmong women marrying out, they are not marrying Hmong men we know that our community is going to change and the future of our community might not be Hmong. I mean Hmong Christians are Hmong too so I think Hmong today is very different.

P1: Well for me, I feel like serving or being a voice allowed me to reconcile and not have to choose because I felt like I was in the middle for both. Even today when I teach my Hmong American class, most of my students are not Hmong in that class, a class that cannot happen without Hmong students. When we started that class I was a student and we started with all Hmong students but today like 18 years later we've kept the class going and usually out of 25 students we have like five that are Hmong and I think we are to that point where we have to teach others who we are too so that's why I feel like I've been able to reconcile and not have to choose and understand that you can be both at the same time.

P2: So, I being me is like I said, I talked a lot about having different masks on so when I'm at home I know what mask to put on and so I'm automatically act a certain way but when I leave the house to go to work and once I get to work I automatically change my mask and now I'm a different person.

P3: Yes, each and every one of us has to grow, so when you need to grow you cannot stick to your own family. You have to make sure that, whoever can help you grow, that's why you have to be better related to the outside people.

Assimilation is very important to me.

P4: I don't see or put that much on culture because culture is different. When I took a class in college, I felt like culture sometimes is ridiculous, it's just human made and its different and it doesn't have to be different but people make it different.

P5: "If people who want to hold onto Hmong culture and refuse to bend and evolve with time, I will turn my back completely on it."

P5: "If none of you are willing to change with me then, again my happiness matters and I'm going to leave you all miserable where you're at and I'm going to be something else and I'm okay with that."

P6: "I don't really even think I have a judgement in my mind that I'm this and that, I just know how to act and how to be in both worlds or in any world. So I developed that."

P7: "I'm happy with the way that I am and I think that kind of goes more toward the American system of being individualistic and just being self-reliant."

P8: I often share experience with the elderly that often the elderly wants the kids to change but I think as the elders we can change with them because now a days majority of people live that life style and for the elder generation, it would be good if we can change instead of having the younger generation change and adapt to what we would like them to adapt to in our culture, it might be good if we can adapt to their culture so we can live together instead of having conflict and instead of having issues.

Participants varied in terms of their acculturation approach. One participant stated how it was best to assimilate into American culture as it would be beneficial to all Hmong people as it was for him. American values and practices are “universal” as he stated, meaning American culture is about change and improvement rather than following ancient traditions, beliefs and practices. Another participant expressed how she marginalized into American society or chose to not follow any particular culture simply because culture is a “human construct that complicates the good things in life.” According to her, whatever is “peaceful, nice, and good” is more important than whatever social standards dictated by culture. As for majority of participants, most have integrated into American society by holding onto their ethnic integrity and strong ethnic values while adopting some American values they found beneficial to them and their personal happiness. For instance, one participant identified as both Hmong and American and expressed how he did not have to pick between one or the other because he is proud to be Hmong and values certain aspects of his ethnicity but also values certain aspects of being an American as well. Similarly, many participants expressed the importance of retaining the Hmong language as well as strong family values, respect and care for elders but also being independent, self-sufficient, and individualistic.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of Hmong refugees living in America. The study included eight participants, four of which were male and four of which were females, all ranging from different ages between 30-72 as well as immigration times and time spent in the United States. I collected data at their place of

employment and house along with one phone interview all ranging between 30 minutes to 120 minutes. The research questions were based off Grove and Torbiorn's theory of sojourner (1985) and their theoretical concepts of clarity and applicability focusing on the adjustment process of immigrants in a different cultural environment. Giorgi's five-step data analysis approach was used to analyze and code data. The emerging themes consisted of six major themes; three of which focused on Grove and Torbiorn's theoretical concept of clarity and the other three which emerged from Grove and Torbiorn's theoretical concept of applicability along with 23 subthemes that were grouped together to create the main themes. Results and findings will be further discussed in Chapter 5 along with the interpretation of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations, implications, and conclusion of Hmong refugees lived experiences.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of Hmong refugees in America. The nature of this study was qualitative, and the research design was phenomenological. I used phenomenology to explore and understand Hmong refugees' experiences living in a different cultural environment as well as shared psychological and behavioral changes among them. This study was guided by two main research questions: The first directed towards Grove and Torbiorn's theoretical concept of clarity and the second towards their theoretical concept of applicability. Using semistructured interviews, I asked the participants interview questions to gather descriptive and detailed information about their lived experiences regarding cultural differences between Hmong and American culture as well as their changed or adjusted behavior based on these cultural differences. Data were analyzed using Giorgi's (2009) five-step data analysis approach of Husserl's PPR. In this chapter, I will explain the key findings, my interpretations of the data, the limitations of the study, my recommendations, and the implications, before concluding the study.

### **Key Findings**

After interviewing eight participants about their lived experiences in America, the key findings included 23 subthemes and six main themes in response to Research Questions 1 and 2. With Research Question 1, I explored the cultural experiences of Hmong refugees living in America through Grove and Torbiorn's theoretical concept of clarity or cognitive framework. Research Question 2 was directed at how acculturative

challenges constructed Hmong refugees' lived experiences in America with respect to Grove and Torbiorn's theoretical concept of applicability or behavioral patterns consistent with their cognitive framework.

In response to Research Question 1, three themes emerged along with 12 subthemes that reflected participants' perceptions about Hmong and American culture as well as its impact on their lived experiences. The first theme to emerge revealed participants' experiences with cultural dissonance (e.g., feeling and experiencing discomfort and challenges specifically related to cultural differences). The four subthemes clustered together to generate this theme included: (a) independent and collective cultural differences, (b) differences in family and community values, (c) differences in respecting elders, and (d) language barriers that lead to feelings of disconnect and isolation to life outside of home. Theme 2 revealed participants' process of environmental adaptation (e.g., experiences that contributed to participants adjusting to American society). The four subthemes clustered together to generate this theme included: (e) exposure and interaction with Americans and American life outside of home, (f) becoming proficient in English, (g) being educated in American schools as well as having a career, and (h) converting to Christianity. The final theme to emerge in response to Research Question 1 was specific to female participants in relation to cultural differences with gender roles. The four subthemes clustered together to generate this theme included: (i) women's preferences to be independent and self-reliant; (j) free from additional responsibilities and duties as a traditional housewife; (k) preferences for equal

social status, meaning they should not be dependent, submissive, or obedient to their husbands; and (l) a lack of support and encouragement for educational attainment.

In response to Research Question 2 exploring how acculturative challenges constructed Hmong refugees lived experiences in America, three themes emerged along with 11 subthemes that reflected how participants' experiences changed their behavioral and livelihood preferences as a result of their clarity or cognitive framework. The first theme to emerge was participants loss of traditional practices and general interest in cultural participation. The subthemes clustered together to generate this theme included: (m) converting to Christianity and attending church and church events and no longer practicing traditional shaman or religious rituals, (n) speaking English as the preferred language for communication, (o) females being independent and socially equal to men, (p) loss of ritual and ceremonial understandings as well as cultural knowledge about how to properly practice and conduct them, and (q) disinterest in culturally participating in collectives practices because of its inconvenience and contrast with independent lifestyles. The second theme to emerge under Research Question 2 was the behavioral changes in collective lifestyles to independent lifestyles. The subthemes clustered together to form this theme included: (r) making individual decisions in pursuit of personal interests over collective interests of the family or community; (s) independently expressing oneself as an individual rather than conforming to social norms and expectations of personal conduct; and (t) women being independent and equal to men, that is, being able to make household decisions as an equal counterpart to their husbands, maintain a steady career as well as being financially independent. The final theme to

emerge from the data in response to Research Question 2 revealed how participants acculturated into American society given Berry's (2003) four dimensions of acculturation. The subthemes generating this theme included: (u) assimilation, that is, Hmong refugees who have adopted American culture and rejected Hmong culture; (v) marginalization, or Hmong refugees who reject Hmong and American culture and lives accordingly to their own values and beliefs regardless of cultural influences; and (w) integration, or Hmong refugees with ethnic integrity and values as well as adopted American values beneficial to them and their personal happiness as individuals.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

In this study, I addressed two research questions:

“What are the cultural experiences of Hmong refugees living in America?”

“How have acculturative challenges constructed Hmong refugees lived experiences in America?”

With the first research question, I addressed Grove and Torbion's (1985) theoretical concept of clarity, which they defined as a cognitive frame of reference, that is “with all the values, attitudes, opinions, ideas and knowledge that the person has accumulated as a result of their experiences” (p. 209). The second research question addressed Grove and Torbion's theoretical concept of applicability, which they defined as a person's habitual patterns, consistent with their cognitive framework, that is, “a well-adjusted and socially adept person operating within the environment in which he or she was enculturated. The person's behavior is not only socially acceptable but also interpersonally effective in that it often yields outcomes desired in interactions with

others similarly enculturated.” (p. 206). In the following sections, I provide a detailed explanation of the subthemes and how they emerged into major themes as well as informative contributions to the discipline in relation to previous literature synthesized in Chapter 2.

### **Theme 1: Cultural Dissonance**

The first theme emerged from the following four subthemes: (a) realization of independent and collective differences, (b) realization of differences in family and community values, (c) differences with respect to elders, (d) feeling isolated and disconnected because of language barriers. All participants mentioned major differences between Hmong and American culture and how those differences lead to dissonant feelings or feeling out of place with their environment outside of home. For example, Participant 2 stated:

I would say that right now I don't know if I fully feel that I'm comfortable here. I still feel like I'm adjusting and assimilating to this culture and that's because I'm still kind of traditional. A lot of things here in America I can't really fully accept yet..... To be Hmong it would be to respect the elder's decisions or respect anyone who's older than you and that you value your traditional practices for example funerals, weddings how we do the bride prize, if you value all of those, to me that's Hmong. To be an American is someone who thinks of themselves before everyone else. Like you're very independent. You only think about yourself.

Similarly, Participant 8 stated:

You want to maintain what you have and have to study what you have to study here in this country to sustain yourself and support yourself and that's pretty tough because at the same time you have to live in two worlds you know you just can't go to the Hmong way or the American side, you have to live in the middle to sustain that so you have to live in the middle to grasp both sides or work with both sides so it's pretty tough.

These types of findings reflect dissonant experiences Hmong refugees had to overcome living in two cultures, which supports the findings in previous studies like Causadias et al. (2017) who suggested that interactions among culturally diverse individuals are associated with unconscious acceptance of cultural norms, which could explain the dissonant or inconsistent feelings experienced at home and outside of home. In other words, by unconsciously accepting different cultural norms, whether that be Hmong or American, a person may feel out of place if they are not in a cultural environment that is consistent with their unconscious accepted norms. So, a Hmong person who accepts certain American norms might not feel comfortable at a Hmong gathering or social event where Hmong norms are more traditionally practiced and vice versa. Through interactions with Americans and unconscious acceptance of American values and social norms, these findings support acculturative dissonance between generations especially among SA ethnic groups that tend to be more traditional (see Juan et al., 2012). In a study of Cambodian refugees, Muruthi and Lewis (2017) found that everyday conflicts are directly related to acculturative dissonance and cultural separation

between immigrant parents and first-generation born Americans. This information supports the data found in this study regarding participants' realization of cultural differences between Hmong and American cultures, particularly with female participants and their experiences overcoming traditional roles and expectations of being women. Mbano (2012) argued that for African immigrants learning and adapting to dominant cultural values and norms is most challenging because it requires years of exposure and time to cognitively comprehend and understand the culture and its connection to acceptable behavior. Similarly, many participants in this study mentioned how their college experience contributed significantly to their understanding about American culture because many of them moved away to college and were more exposed to a life different from what they were use to living at home.

Mbano's (2012) findings seem to be consistent with Joshi and Desai's (2013) work regarding Asian Americans, particularly with differences in generations. Joshi and Desai pointed out that EAs (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans) have acculturated more comfortably into American society (e.g., becoming more American because of earlier periods of immigration), whereas SAs being fairly recent immigrants are still enculturated to their ethnic culture. Many of the participants being refugees expressed the challenges of realizing cultural differences between Hmong and Americans during their adult years and raising their children to be more American than Hmong.

Language was another salient factor. Not speaking English was a major contributor to dissonant feelings because of limited communication and, therefore, understanding and interaction with Americans. As Participant 8 stated,

it was pretty confusing, when I first arrived, you don't speak the language and you don't know the culture so it's really confusing and I might say that for example, you're just put in the dark and you don't know what to do so it's really tough.

This feeling of isolation is consistent with the results of Okrainec et al.'s (2015) study, who found that language barriers contributed significantly to immigrants avoiding professional treatment for reasons that made them feel uncomfortable around people who they could not communicate with. Language has shown to be a deterrent factor for negative or "downward paths" of assimilation (Tam & Freisthler, 2015). Recent SA immigrants have shown higher levels of enculturation and, therefore, lower levels of English proficiency compared to other EA groups who have been here for many generations (Joshi & Desai, 2013; Lee & Chang, 2012). In this study, participants' experiences were consistent with the latter given their statements about comfort, communication, and overall understanding of American life and culture once they became proficient in English.

In regards to cultural differences with respect to elders. All participants acknowledged cultural differences between Hmong and Americans and how these differences impacted their lived experiences. Many expressed feeling restricted or unable to express themselves as individuals and having to make collective decisions out of considerations to elders such as their parents and grandparents. Challenging authority as one participant expressed is very confrontational and opposite from Hmong culture which is consistent with Muruthi and Lewis (2017) study regarding intergenerational conflicts and related stressors that contribute to household problems. They found that cultural

differences in family structure where parents were dependent on their children for certain tasks such as translating English, providing income and other daily things distorted traditional family structures and cultural ideas of respect for elders. Studies such as Huang, et. al., (2012) found that cultural ideas of respect toward elders contributed to obedience and discipline, however, American born Asians being more independent showed less respect and obedience toward their elders. This contrasts with findings in this study given that many participants expressed respecting elders even though they desire to be independent. However, participants in this study are refugees and therefore more enculturated than American-born generations which might contribute to their cultural obtainment with respecting elders. Similarly, Vang, Kviz, and Miller (2012) study showed how more American-born Asians deviated from traditional aspects of elderly respect which is consistent with findings in this study with Hmong refugees being more respectful toward their elders compared to American-born Hmong generations. These findings seem to support similar factors among other acculturative studies emphasizing cultural dissonance as a result of cultural differences in values, social norms, beliefs, practices and language.

## **Theme 2: Environmental Adaptation**

Theme 2 emerged from the following four subthemes (a) Interaction and exposure to American culture, (b) becoming fluent in English, (c) education and (d) religion. This theme focused on the process of learning and accumulating information about American culture as perceived by Hmong refugees. After experiencing dissonance and realizing the differences between Hmong and American culture in the first theme, participants reported

how they were able to adjust or reconcile their dissonant feelings and perceptions in order to adjust to American society. For example, Participant 1 mentioned the importance of college and his experiences learning about himself and other ethnic groups that helped him changed. He stated:

My professor used to joke that he created this American Hmong and Hmong American categories and asked us to identify ourselves and I was like “I think when I came to college, I was an American Hmong” but today, I’m both. It’s kind of like this cycle having to assimilate. You have to lose who you are in order to find success. So whether we think about it or not, I think a lot of minority children go through that process of having to lose who you are like lose your culture, lose your language because to be successful you have to speak English like the overall society like English like American which is what I was trying to do but could never do that so for me it wasn’t until like my 3rd year in college that I really changed.

Similarly, Participants 3 and 4 mentioned how they changed their way of living after converting to Catholicism. Additionally, Participant 6 stated,

Yea, I think for you to assimilate or be adaptable, you have to learn the skills and the basics and also, in a sense, you have to get out of the Hmong community, not every single second but you kind of have to get out of the Hmong community at your leisure time and go join something else.

These findings show how influential dominant cultures can be in shaping cultural perceptions, that is; beliefs, values, attitudes and feelings through exposure and interaction overtime (Berry, 1997; 2002).

The importance of cultural exposure and interaction overtime has shown to change or shape how people perceive things from those who are less exposed. For example, Brown and Chu's (2012) study with Latino immigrants showed that peer and teacher support in schools played a significant role in how Latinos perceived discrimination. Their study found that Latinos who went to "white" schools and lived in "white" communities held positive ethnic identities and reported lower rates of discrimination in comparison to communities with higher Latino populations. As for education, Mbanjo (2012) suggested that one of the most challenging aspects of cultural adjustment is adapting to unfamiliar values as well as learning about them. For majority of participants, most of them mentioned the importance of their college experience in helping them transition or adjust to American society because they learned how to think and process their experiences as a Hmong refugee and was more exposed to American culture as an independent college student which pressured them to adjust. For instance, Participant 5 stated:

Even though we were in America we were super Hmong like it was such a heavily Hmong populated area that we didn't feel the need to change as much so it wasn't until I reached college and I moved out here that I realized that "Oh wow, the way we grew up is not like how other people grew up" and that's when I

felt like when I started needing to acculturate myself more and I felt like it was fine because again I do like American culture too.

She also stated, “Not only did it open up my mind but now there’s more pressure to change”. These findings are also consistent with Mbanjo’s (2012) findings with African immigrants feeling challenged and pressure by demands within their educational environment to change in order to accelerate the adjustment process and eliminate dissonant feelings within their environment. Other studies such as Hafemeister (2014) with Brazilian immigrants suggest that throughout the acculturation process, cultural transition accelerates because of frequent occurrences or situations that placed immigrants between “native” and “host” perceptions of self-judgement. Through cultural interaction and exposure, subtle changes occur overtime unconsciously that constructs how people perceive the world. Many of these findings support Causadias, et. al., (2017) idea about cultural constructs as unconscious and automatic dispositions about behavior and perceptions that are learned and developed throughout years of nurture and experience within a society.

### **Theme 3: Gender Roles**

Theme 3 emerged when participants were asked to share their experiences about culture and its influence on their lives. This theme is only relevant to female participants since no common themes were found among male participants. However, among the female participants, four subthemes emerged: (a) being independent and self-reliant, (b) challenges related to expectations of a traditional Hmong woman, (c) personal conduct of submission and obedience and a (d) lack of academic encouragement. All the female

participants expressed their challenges overcoming traditional expectations of a Hmong woman in comparison to American women. For example, Participant 2 stated,

Okay, so if I was just to follow the Hmong ways, it would be to marry young like my dad says, to have kids and that's it. Your husbands supposed to support you so you shouldn't go to school because your job is to just have kids.

Participant 5 reported,

So, my culture has taught me that I have to be very polite, very respectful and that I should know how to cook, clean, kill chickens, get up early in the morning to go cook and help others as much as I can so when it's my turn, they will come help me.

With reports such as these, they reflect dissonant feelings specific to gender and cultural expectations supporting findings from previous Asian American studies such as Gartner, et al.'s (2014) study about ethnic socialization and identity. Their findings suggested that ethnic socialization conveying cultural knowledge and pride were linked to self-esteem and ethnic and American identity development which was only significant to women. Positive ethnic socializations lead to stronger levels of ethnic development and higher levels of self-esteem. Negative ethnic socializations lead to lower levels of ethnic development and higher levels of depression symptoms. Much of the latter supports the direction of female participants developing their American identity because of negative ethnic socialization about Hmong women's traditional roles. Beyond this bit of information, not much has been explored regarding SA gender roles and its impact on acculturation. However, such findings support Kidd and Teagle's (2012), idea regarding

ethnic populations having unique cultures and therefore specific identity formulations within their own populations. Furthermore, a lack of academic encouragement for Hmong women could be a major factor in low socio-economic and academic attainment among SAs as found in Tam and Freisthler (2015) study's with SA refugees. Though their study did not look at gender specifics, the numbers would still reflect low levels of SES as well as academic attainment since their study included men and women.

However, according to Leadbeater and Way (2007), more Hmong women have surpassed Hmong men in terms of education, occupation and income. Base off these findings, future studies should avoid monolithic studies of acculturation and explore specific ethnic groups with their own culture as well as gender differences between males and females.

Grusec (2011) noted in his study the importance of identifying implicit and explicit conflicts within immigrant household for reasons that may reveal specific problems related to household conflicts. For this study, this theme is specific to Hmong women only as all women expressed additional challenges separate from the men because of cultural expectations of gender roles. As mentioned by Grusec, children learn values and social conventions mainly through their parents, however, when independent values and social conventions conflict with cultural values and social conventions, this can have negative consequences between parent and child relationships and overall child development. For instance, Participant 2 mentioned several times about having different "masks" or personalities given her life at home and work. Her experiences are consistent with Ferguson, et. al., (2017), having used the Cultural Identity Influence Measure Scale to measure cultural variability and cultural identity, finding immigrants in plural societies

showing variant forms of cultural adjustments. Participant 2 expressing her different “masks” or personality is a reflection of her variant personality, meaning her behavior and attitudes vary depending on her interaction with different cultured people. However, her experiences contrast with Causadias, et. al., (2017), notion that interactions among culturally diverse individuals are associated with unconscious acceptance of cultural norms given that she acknowledged and realized her different “masks” and considers that not as two separate identities but two distinct personalities that make up the whole of her individual self. In other words, she is conscious of how she behaves around different cultured people and chooses to behave that way as she finds it part of her individual unique identity.

#### **Theme 4: Loss of Traditional Practices and Cultural Participation**

Given the previous three themes regarding participants clarity or perception about Hmong and American culture, the next 3 themes addressed participants applicability or habitual patterns that have changed as a result of their perception. Theme 4 emerged from the following 5 subthemes: (a) converting to Christianity, (b) proficiency in English, (c) independent women, (d) loss of ritual and ceremonial understanding and conduct, (e) disinterest in traditional cultural participation and preparations for rituals, ceremonies and social gatherings. These subthemes revealed how participants daily lives have been shaped by their experiences. Majority of participants mentioned the impact of religion and how it has shaped their beliefs and spiritual practices such as going to church rather than participating in traditional shamanistic rituals. Other participants mentioned the importance of speaking English and its impact on their self-esteem as well as comfort

level communicating and navigating throughout American society. All of the women stated their preferences for equality and independence moving away from traditional roles and expectations of Hmong woman. Additionally, most of the participants stated that they did not understand certain practices or how and why it is traditionally conducted, neither did they find it practical in their present lives. For example, Participant 1 stated,

I can't go to the funerals for 3 days or weddings for 2 full days, things like that. It might hurt them at first but they understand that I'm different. They can't expect me to come at 5 in the morning and chop meat like other people. I can't chop meat, I'm not the ideal son in-law, I know my in-laws see me as a lazy son in-law.

Participant 3 stated:

Oh yea, a lot. One thing is the "au noj" (*making dinner parties*) I'm going to erase that 100%. I already told my husband that we are only doing this as long as our parents are alive, again because I respect my elders so much I will never ever not go to those parties and help out but the moment they no longer require it, I won't do it because I don't think its productive for our lifestyles at the moment because it was designed for a time when people didn't work 8-5 on weekdays.

These findings show a loss of cultural participation due to cultural impracticality or inconvenience with American lifestyles as well as a loss of cultural understanding and meaning of certain practices. The following statements are additional examples that summarizes this theme.

I just want to sleep in, I don't want to wake up at 5 in the morning and cook rice. So those things I think funeral rituals I don't think I will follow to the T. So just a lot of ritual stuff, first of all I don't comprehend them so that's why I don't think they mean as much to me and secondly, I just don't think it's very practical anymore (Participant 5).

“So, the very simple one that I don't follow because I'm a Christian, is shamanism” (Participant 6).

In regards to language and applicability, studies such as Khuu, et. al., (2016), explored the effects of language and health literacy among SA immigrants. Their study found that language barriers discouraged SAs from seeking professional health assistance because of their inability to properly communicate with professionals. Like many of the participants in this study, most mentioned being more comfortable in the United States when they were able to fluently speak English and communicate with others which suggest language barriers as a significant deterrent for comfort and social inclusiveness. In regards to previous literature and religion, Nagai's (2015) study found that most SAs are very spiritual with health practices and prefer traditional herbal and animal sacrificial rituals over western medicine. Data with participants mentioning the importance of practicality seems to suggest that effectiveness and convenience is a major factor in acculturation for Hmong refugees. Since important rituals within the Hmong culture is practiced for medicinal purposes, the practicality of it seems less effective compared to western medication as well as psychological and emotional happiness. Participant 3 and 4 specifically mentioned converting to Catholicism because they no longer believed in the

spiritual and ancestral aspect of Hmong Shamanism as well as the complicated process of traditional treatments. With that said, participants in this study showed preferences toward assimilation compared to Nagai's study with SA immigrants who preferred traditional practices of health and medicine. Though this study did not focus on health preferences, it did show participants interest toward assimilation whereas Nagai's study showed SA immigrants preferences toward traditional practices of health treatment, however, his study focused on numerous ethnic groups with participants who were mostly elderly and immigrants who lived fewer years in America.

In relation to cultural changes, numerous participants identified part of themselves as Americans because of their professional careers, religion and educational background. Kidd and Teagle (2012) defined culture as social and organizational norms within a society and classifying oneself in relation to those social and organizational norms. When it came to religion, most of the participants converted to Christianity and focused on advancing their careers and associated these factors as part of their "American identity". Furthermore, majority of participants also mentioned how inconvenient a collective lifestyle is in comparison to an independent lifestyle. Participants disinterest in collective cultural participations is consistent with Gartner, et. al., (2014), findings with Asian Americans that cultural socialization has positive ethnic and identity development, meaning, positive identity formations in relation to identity development. This study with Hmong refugees showed how participants formulated healthy identities as Hmong refugees given cultural socializations about family values and respect for elders however participants also mentioned rejecting ethnic values that conflicted with American values

that they adopted into their personal life. Gartner, et. al., study was not clear on what values contributed to positive ethnic and American identity development but this study seems to suggest that immigrants prefer to hold on to ethnic values that do not interfere or conflict with their independent American values.

### **Theme 5: Collective to Independent Lifestyles**

The fifth theme that emerged reflected participants independent life styles contrasting traditional or collective lifestyles of Hmong people. The following subthemes were grouped together to show how participants preferred: (a) making independent decisions, (b) expressing themselves as individuals and lastly (c) having equality with women. For example, Participant 4 stated, “In an American group, I feel free to talk, free to be myself and talk like I am talking to you.” Participant 7 for example expressed how her American peers influenced her to be vocal and not ashamed to voice her personal thoughts and opinions,

Seeing my colleague and my peers very vocal and having strong opinions and they aren't afraid to share it, for me it was different so going to college and going to school taught me how to do that, that “Hey it's okay for me to be vocal, it's okay for me to speak out”. Because in my culture at least in my family when I was brought up, we weren't allowed to be so vocal.

All the women expressed the importance of equality and independence rather than dependence on their husband like traditional expectations of Hmong women. Participant 5 for example stated,

I'm very independent I have my own car, credit card and do whatever I want when I want. We have a lot of respect for each other but the idea is "Honey I'm doing this tonight, how's your schedule? All good? Okay I'll see you later" you know.

The struggle between independent and collective preferences in behavior and decision making has shown to lead to parenting problems as well as general daily household problems among immigrants from collective societies (Raj & Raval, 2013). Though this study did not focus on parenting or household problems, its relatable to the experiences that participants have expressed with concerns to challenges of being independent. For example, Participant 2 stated,

when I'm around Americans, people say I have a lot of confidence and a strong personality because I'm not afraid to voice my opinion.....when somethings wrong, I'll say something right, I'm not afraid to say, hey this is wrong.

Most participants expressed some form of anxiousness or discomfort around Hmong people given collective differences with social norms in comparison to independent social norms of expression. Part of this conflict arises out of conflicting values between collective and independent societies that lead to dissonant feelings mentioned earlier in Theme 1. This finding aligns well with Juan et. al., (2012) definition of "acculturative dissonance" as generational conflict between collective and independent values.

Findings with participants personal desire for self-expression is also consistent with Markus and Kitayama (2010) notion of independent and interdependent schemas or patterns of thought. As outlined in Themes 1 and 2 regarding participants experiences with cultural dissonance and adaptation, participants adapted toward an independent schema which Markus and Kitayama described as self-organizing behavior, where the primary referent is the individual's own thoughts, feelings, and actions. Alternatively, when an interdependent schema of the self organizes behavior, the immediate referent is the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others, however, it is not clear that interdependent schemas or patterns of thought implies collective schemas because it is not clear that they are the same thing.

In relation to equality among women, all female participants expressed personal preferences for independence compared to traditional expectations of dependency on their husbands for financial support and decision making. Female participants reported the importance of having a career as part of them being independent. Berry and Hou (2016), found that economic status in the host society has an impact on acculturation and wellbeing. They mentioned that "Economic success is an important indicator of an immigrants' full participation in the receiving society. Immigrants sense of nationhood hinges on their ability to contribute to the receiving country economically and to live a good life" (p. 255). These findings are consistent with women in higher positions in the work place in independent societies compared to women in collective societies. For instance, women in executive positions in the United States amounts to 15% as well as in Singapore which has westernized its culture drastically with western contact compared to

9% in China and 3% in India where women are culturally viewed as inferior (Peus, Braun, & Knipfer, 2015).

### **Theme 6: Acculturative Approach**

The final emerging theme showed the different ways in which participants have acculturated into American society. Based off Berry's theory of acculturation (1997), the participants have acculturated in the following three subthemes: (a) assimilation, (b) marginalization and (c) integration. For participants that have assimilated, they have expressed rejecting most of Hmong culture and adopting more American values as they find it beneficial to their lives. For example, Participant 3 mentioned how important assimilation is to him because he sees how it would lead to a better life. He also mentioned the importance of interacting with Americans in order to grow and learn what it means to be American. For marginalization, some participants rejected cultures in general and practice only what they find enjoyable and valuable to them personally. For example, Participant 4 stated,

I don't see or put that much on culture because culture is different. When I took a class in college, I felt like culture sometimes is ridiculous, it's just human made and its different and it doesn't have to be but people make it different.

Lastly, participants who have integrated choose to maintain some level of ethnic integrity while participating and being an integral part of American society. For example, Participant 1 stated:

I feel like serving or being a voice allowed me to reconcile and not have to choose because I felt like I was in the middle for both. Even today when I teach my

Hmong American class, most of my students are not Hmong in that class, a class that cannot happen without Hmong students. When we started that class I was a student and we started with all Hmong students but today like 18 years later we've kept the class going and usually out of 25 students we have like five that are Hmong and I think we are to that point where we have to teach others who we are too so that's why I feel like I've been able to reconcile and not have to choose and understand that you can be both at the same time.

With participants expressing how they have adjusted or acculturated into American society, they all seemed to have acculturated in three of the four approaches outlined in Berry's acculturation theory. This study with Hmong refugees disproves original acculturation theories such as Gordon's assimilation theory (1964) which states that immigrants will eventually assimilate or adopt all values of the dominant culture. Given the findings outlined in this study, some participants have assimilated for the most part but still retained certain aspects of Hmong values such as Participant 3 who stated, "Oh, just the marriage way of life because Hmong people like to have dowries. Anything Hmong outside of this I don't practice" when asked if there were any Hmong practices he no longer follows.

Other participants have integrated and marginalized into American society however no participant separated themselves from American society as Berry states as a 4th method or approach to acculturation. Contrastingly, Kramer's theory of cultural fusion (2017) states that ethnic and host cultures integrate with one another and mix or "fuse" new and old orientations or values to enrich ethnic cultural ideals. Given the

results of this study, the findings do not seem to support Kramer's theory of cultural fusion given that participants did not express enhancing either cultures, instead participants reported balancing cultural values separately depending on their acculturative approach. However, Kramer's theory of cultural fusion emphasizes enriching processes with the dominant culture mixing with minority cultures and less of an emphasis with immigrants (Croucher & Kramer, 2017).

In relation to acculturative approaches and life satisfaction, overwhelmingly contemporary studies with immigrants show integrative approaches into dominant societies having higher levels of life satisfaction (Snauwaert, et. al., 2003; Berry, 2003; Berry & Hou, 2016; Roger-Sirin & Gupta, 2012; Ward & Kus, 2012). Since this study did not measure participants levels of satisfaction, it cannot be determined which participants were happier with their acculturative approaches however majority of the participants who integrated into American society reported having positive ethnic and American identities compared to participants who assimilated or marginalized who only described their experiences that made them reject Hmong or both Hmong and American culture. According to Berry and Hou (2016) study with 7,000 immigrants, they found that immigrants with the highest levels of life satisfaction and positive mental health were immigrants who integrated into Canadian society by adopting Canadian ideals while maintaining their ethnic integrity. Contrastingly, Roger-Sirin and Gupta (2012) found that immigrants who assimilated showed higher levels of satisfaction with American identities but lower satisfaction with ethnic identities. This seems consistent with participants responses given that the assimilated participant expressed negative reasons about Hmong

culture and therefore why he assimilated to American culture. The participant that marginalized or rejected Hmong and American culture showed similar responses to Amer and Bagarsa (2013) study with Muslim immigrants who experienced discrimination and were likely to separate or marginalize themselves from mainstream society. This participant in particular mentioned how she focused less on culture because of her experiences with Hmong and American culture complicating her personal values and perceptions about what is good and peaceful to her.

### **Interpreted Findings in Relation to The Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study was Grove and Torbiorn's theory of sojourners (1985). Grove and Torbiorn's theory outlined the process of acculturation among sojourners, refugees or any other type of immigrant adjusting to a different cultural environment or society. Their theory suggests that immigrants go through a two-step process of acculturation. The two steps are clarity and applicability. Clarity as defined by Grove and Torbiorn is the cognitive framework of reference; that is, "with all the values, attitudes, opinions, ideas and knowledge that a person has accumulated as a result of their experiences" (p. 209). Applicability is the second step where

a well-adjusted and socially adept person operating within the environment in which he or she was enculturated. The person's behavior is not only socially acceptable but also interpersonally effective in that it often yields the outcomes desired in interactions with others similarly enculturated. (p. 206)

In other words, their behavior adjusts or aligns with their "clarity" or cognitive frame of reference.

In relation to clarity, the first three themes outlined the cognitive process of acculturation as experienced by immigrants. For Theme 1, participants mentioned how they experienced dissonance because of cultural differences they experienced between American culture and Hmong culture. Cultural dissonance is the feeling of discomfort, disconnect, confusion and internal confliction experienced by people in relation to an unfamiliar environment. Salient cultural differences that contributed to dissonant feelings with participants included independent and collective differences, differences in family and community values, differences with respect to elders and language barriers. All participants expressed American culture as individualistic, that is, placing a greater emphasis on individual freedom, identity, achievement and interests above others and Hmong culture as collective or cooperative, that is, conforming to social conventions and expectations within the culture for the benefit of the group as well as interdependent responsibilities to others over the individual. Participant 1 described his experience as a child moving from school to school because his parents wanted to be closer to relatives compared to Americans who usually move for employment purposes or for better opportunities. The constant moves made him feel like he had to “restart and relearn” how to fit in among his peers at school and readjust to his environment. He mentioned going from “two extreme settings” living and attending school in a low-income neighborhood, then moving to a “White suburban” area where he was adjusting well to, then his parents relocated again to be closer to their in-laws and he was back in a low-income neighborhood and poorly funded school. Similarly, Participant 5 expressed her dissonant struggle with her parents because she wasn’t behaving how a “proper Hmong lady”

should behave. She mentioned how she was outspoken, hyper, loud, opinionated and adventurous and was constantly “shutdown” and reminded by her parents to act calm, obedient and attentive. Feeling guilty for her parents, she decided to be as her parents expected her to be but was personally unhappy and unsatisfied with herself. These types of experiences are reflections of the dissonance participants experienced because of cultural differences in independent and collective values.

In relation to cultural differences in family and community values as well as respect for elders, majority of participants reported Americans challenging authority and neglecting care for their elders. Most participants mentioned being proud of the strong family and community values within the Hmong community. Participant 3 stated that he considers “all Hmong people as family” and “respects Hmong culture” even though he no longer follows it. He respects Hmong people enough to participate in cultural practices that he cannot escape from, meaning he acknowledges the collective aspect of the culture and participates out of respect for other Hmong people. For example, when his sons married, he followed the traditional practice of the dowry or payment for the bride. He understands that it is not up to him to decide whether or not he wants to pay the bride for his son, he understands that if his daughter in-laws’ parents request the dowry, he has to pay it regardless of how he feels or thinks about this custom. Participant 5 similarly stated her only reason for participating in certain cultural events such as “dinner parties” is out of respect for her parents. She mentioned when they no longer require it, she will no longer participate in those social gatherings because they can be an inconvenience to her personal life. She described how she constantly felt pressured to say “yes” when she was

called to participate and help out with large social gatherings even though she did not want to. She felt that she could not say no because it would look bad on her and her parents and did not want people thinking that her parents raised a selfish lazy daughter.

Another common factor among all participants dissonant experiences was linguistically related. Participants expressed social challenges and feelings of disconnect or “isolation” because of their inability to speak English. Participants experiences with language barriers lead to poor self-esteem and isolation with others. Participant 2 described how she had no confidence because of her inability to communicate to anyone at school that she would be hesitant and nervous to even ask teachers for help because she did not understand anything when they tried to help or explain things to her. Additionally, her inability to speak English made it difficult for her to make friends or learn the materials in class. She was constantly socially withdrawn and felt like she did not belong in school and was always looking forward to going home and even mentioned crying after school at times because of how uncomfortable and lonely she felt away from home. Similarly, Participant 7 expressed similar feelings of disconnect and isolation. His exact words describing his high school experiences was “feeling like I was in the dark” because he was not able to communicate with anyone. He mentioned the only time he spoke at school was with the teacher to make sure he was doing well in class and even then, it was hard for him to do so. He did not make many friends and the friends he did make were more like acquaintances and mentioned how it was not until college that he began feeling comfortable around Americans because he was able to communicate better in English.

These experiences reflect the challenges participants experienced as Hmong refugees living in America that made them realize how different Hmong and American cultures are and how these differences impacted them. Because of strong family and community values as well as respect for elders and Hmong customs to language barriers and independent and collective values, participants expressed their dissonant experiences as Hmong refugees living in America and the challenges they experienced with acculturation. Grove and Torbiorn's theoretical concept of clarity suggests that immigrants realize cultural differences when their cognitive framework is not consistent with their environment and therefore is not trusted to guide their behavior since they are unfamiliar with the acceptable and social conventions of their surroundings. This phenomenon is what creates dissonance as a result of cultural differences in values, beliefs, customs, and language.

For Theme 2, participants described their experiences that helped them adjust or adapt to American society. Through time, interaction, and exposure, participants accumulated knowledge about Americans and American culture, as well as developed their proficiency in English. Participant 1 described how his early childhood experiences were negative because he did not know or understand anything about Hmong people and the problems he was dealing with, neither did he think anyone else understood him. He mentioned his college experience helped him learn about acculturative issues and identity problems and finding a group of friends or "support group" who also went through similar experiences was helpful to him and made him feel more comfortable as a Hmong American. Additionally, Participant 6 mentioned how his college experience taught him

to be very independent because he left home and got away from his usually collective lifestyle and was more exposed to American life as a college student. He stated how he joined a college program that was intended for first generation college students and minorities which provided him a strong support group that made him feel more comfortable as a “Hmong minority.” Participant 5 similarly mentioned the importance of her college experience in helping her acculturate into American society. She responded by saying she grew up in a “very ethnic community surrounded by Hmong people” and it was not until college where she got out of that community and realized how much she had to change and wanted to change because she enjoyed how free and empowered, she felt to be herself. She stated specifically that American culture made her feel more comfortable to be herself and express herself without judgement or social expectations of how she should be. She also mentioned how her English improved throughout her college years and how significant that was to “boosting” her self-esteem and professional as well as personal relationships with people who were not Hmong.

Another salient factor that helped participants adjust to American society was their religious transition. Most participants converted to Christianity and expressed education as a mediating factor in reconciling their Hmong and American identities. When asked, “What values do you consider more American than Hmong?” Numerous participants mentioned religion and its influence on their values. For example, Participant 3 described Hmong culture as “complicated” because many spiritual shaman rituals require a lot of work, time, planning and help to conduct. He mentioned how he did not believe in shaman healing practices because of past experiences in treating some of his

physical illnesses and saw that most people like him often got worse rather than better. Once he saw the effectiveness of western medicine, he converted to Christianity partly because of his negative experiences with shaman healing practices. Additionally, Participant 4 expressed her positive experience as a Christian woman. She felt respected and part of a group and equal to everyone else compared to her experience as a young lady back in Laos. She described how inferior she felt when she tried to find a shaman to treat her mom since she was not feeling well and as a little girl, was rejected and ignored. Since she was a child and a girl, it was hard for her to find a shaman even willing to speak to her. She described how she had to find an adult to accompany her so a shaman would speak to her and afterwards still declined to help. She described how upset she felt and stated that she was never mistreated or disrespected by her church so she converted to Christianity because it made her feel more inclusive and important.

In relation to the theoretical framework, these experiences described by participants were contributing to their comfort and adjustment toward American society. Given their dissonant experiences outlined in the first theme, these experiences slowly helped them transition or acculturate into American society by exposing them to American culture which contributed to their accumulation and understanding about American culture allowing them to be more interactive with Americans and American life. Converting to Christianity as well as attending college and becoming fluent in English all contributed to participants feeling comfortable and confident as themselves. Having these mediating experiences contributed to mitigating their dissonant experiences which slowly changed their cognitive and psychological constructs.

Theme 3 was specific to female participants because it showed how female participants experienced distinct challenges as Hmong women. Under this theme, female challenges are an extension of their clarity or perception about females and their role within the culture. Female gender roles are additional dissonant experiences women described having that were unique to cultural factors regarding women's social status, responsibilities and behavioral conduct. For instance, Participant 2 described her personality as "having two masks" because of how she conducts herself differently at home around Hmong people and at work. She stated that her life at home when she was married was "very traditional" meaning she was expected to live and care for her in-laws as well as cook and clean and maintain the house while her husband worked and made family decisions. She mentioned how she was brought up to understand that she is first a housewife and her responsibilities are to her family before herself. Her second mask she described as "more American" being independent and focused on herself, her career and education. She stated at work feeling valued as a leader and appreciated rather than a "servant" who was expected to be submissive and obedient at all times. She also stated how she was not encouraged to pursue higher education because her job was not to have a career but to have children. Lastly, she expressed how unsupportive her family was when she decided to work full-time and commit to her studies. When asked why, she responded by saying, "because Hmong people don't value women, that's why."

Participant 4 similarly stated that in Laos, many women were discouraged to pursue higher education and instead were brought up to be "good housewives" because that is what makes them valuable and attractive to Hmong men. When asked, "How do you feel

around Hmong people?” she replied, “I have to know to shut-up around Hmong people because culturally women are considered to be lower in social status than men.”

Furthermore, Participant 5 stated how she “naturally has the personality of an American” and decided in high school to “fit the mold” of a Hmong woman because of the constant pressure from her parents. She described her experience in high school as quiet, shy, submissive and calm. She mentioned how her teachers in middle school use to call on her to lead the class in academic exercises because of how outgoing and ambitious she was but when she went to high school her parents told her to behave as a “mature” Hmong woman which was completely opposite of how she felt she was as a person. Similarly, Participant 6 stated that her parents were strict about her moving away or staying out late because she was a woman. She did not have the leniency her brothers had and was expected to be home if she was not at school or work. She also stated having disagreements with her parents about how she should behave and what she should focus on in life. She stated how “unequal” women are compared to men in Hmong culture and how challenging it was for her parents to understand that.

All of the female participants described very distinct challenges related to cultural perceptions about Hmong women. One participant even mentioned how American women are “looked down upon” in Hmong culture because of their refusal to live up to their contributing roles as mothers. These dissonant feelings were additional challenges specific to women causing additional dissonance on top of the shared experiences with male participants. In relation to the theoretical framework, all of the female participants

expressed dissonant challenges regarding how they should behave with respect to Hmong and American cultural standards.

In relation to applicability, the last three themes outlined the behavioral changes of Hmong refugees rather than their cognitive perceptions. Theme 4 showed how most participants converted to Christianity and no longer practiced shamanism as well as a general loss of interest in collective cultural participation because of its impractical and inconvenience to independent lifestyles. For instance, Participant 1 described how he does not know how to butcher a cow and prepare it at funeral ceremonies to feed all the guests. He stated that funerals and weddings which traditionally can last for a week but has shortened to weekends in America, is something he could not fully commit to because of the length and complexity of traditional ceremonies. Participants 3, 4, and 6 described how they no longer practiced shamanism because they have converted to Christianity and therefore attend church and church events on a weekly basis. Participant 3 specifically stated how “complexed Hmong culture is” and how much it has changed over the years to be simplified for future generations to understand and practice. Participant 5 similarly stated that she will discontinue practicing certain social conventions such as helping relatives with big social gatherings because it’s an inconvenience to her. She stated that she did not want to wake up early at “5 in the morning to make rice” and food prep all day for guests. Furthermore, Participant 8 described how an annual new year blessing ritual is no longer practiced by him or Hmong people at large because they have no facility for families and clans to gather and do a community blessing. He stated how collective Hmong culture is and how inconvenient it

is to practice it in an independent culture because everyone is so independent and focused on themselves that they do not have the time to commit or participate in collective responsibilities.

As for gender roles regarding traditional expectations of Hmong women, all of the women described how they preferred to live an “American lifestyle,” that is, independent and career driven. Participant 4 stated how she use to be very traditional when she lived with her parents but when she married, she worked full time, was independent and was equal to her husband meaning they consulted one another about family decisions and shared financial and household responsibilities. Similarly, with careers, Participants 2 and 7 stated how independent they are and how important a career is to them as Hmong Americans.

In relation to changes with language, majority of participants stated that English is spoken as their primary language even at home with their children and among other Hmong individuals. Participant 5 mentioned how she only speaks Hmong to elders because many of them do not speak or understand English but for those who do, she always communicates in English to them. Participants 1 and 2 mentioned sending their kids to Hmong school to learn how to read and write Hmong because at home they primarily spoke English.

In relation to the theoretical framework, participants have expressed how their daily lives have changed as a result of their experiences learning about American culture. Many of the women are living independent lives, English has become their primarily language spoken at home, participants who converted to Christianity are no longer

practicing shaman rituals and are attending church and church related events.

Furthermore, all participants expressed preferences for an independent life, that is, free from collective responsibilities and participation in communal events as well as becoming uninterested and unknowledgeable about traditional practices, rituals and ceremonies that they no longer practice.

With that said, theme 5 revealed how all participants adopted an independent lifestyle compared to traditional collective lifestyles of Hmong families. According to participants, Hmong culture expects individuals to conform to the cultural conventions of collectivism. All participants expressed varying forms of enculturation but also acculturation towards independence. Salient behavioral changes among participants included self-expression or speaking out as individuals, making individual decisions and encouraging independent and social equality for women. For instance, Participant 2 described how challenging it can be to be herself around other Hmong people. She mentioned feeling more confident around Americans to “voice her opinion” because it is more acceptable in American culture compared to feeling shy and timid around Hmong people. Similarly, Participant 8 described his challenges in high school “giving feedback” to his teachers and sharing his thoughts in class because he was not used to sharing his thoughts or encouraged to do so. He described his confidence changing in college as he was encouraged more and more to share his own thoughts and express himself compared to his experiences around Hmong people where self-expression is not tolerated and viewed as confrontational and negative. Similarly, Participant 7 mentioned how her change happened over gradual exposure seeing her colleagues and peers from work and

school being very vocal and challenging to authority. She associated being vocal as an American norm since she was not brought up to talk back to those in authoritative positions especially to her parents and eventually became confident enough to “speak her mind” without feeling guilty or wrong for doing so.

With regards to independent decision making, Participant 3 described how her experiences at work encouraged her to be more independent when she was complimented by her colleagues for doing a good job. She said she felt appreciated and confident to make her own decisions whereas before she felt as if she needed to be told what to do because she did not want to make any mistakes. She explained how her mindset changed because she was raised to just do as she was told and never question it. Once she learned that she was capable of making her own decisions she started doing so at home without asking her husband or in-laws for permission. Participant 6 stated how he was “all about himself” when he went to college and did not go home very often to see or help his family with social gatherings or family events. He mentioned neglecting much of that part of his life because he enjoyed his freedom doing what he wanted without having to always go home on weekends and constantly be around his family in case they needed him for anything. Given participants experiences with independence, all of the participants expressed personal happiness rather than sacrifice as a favorable American value.

As for equality with women, all of the female participants emphasized employment and equal treatment as an American value important for an independent lifestyle. Participant 5 described how her and her husband both agreed before marriage to

be partners rather than a traditional household. She stated how she did not want to be a “Hmong wife” dependent on her husband for permission and financial support. She stated how important it was to clarify that between her and her husband before she got married because they both grew up in a very ethnic community and wanted to avoid any potential future problems. Similarly, Participant 7 described how she was expected to learn how to be a “good wife” at a young age and should learn to be useful around the house. She was taught at a young age how to cook and clean as those were desirable traits for a wife. She described American culture as valuing and treating women equal to men and refused to continue doing everything around the house. She eventually pursued higher education and decided to work fulltime and be independent and self-reliant.

In relation to the theoretical framework, these behavioral patterns described by Hmong refugees showed how their personal interest toward independent lifestyles is more practical and beneficial to their personal lives and general happiness. It shows that participants adopted behavioral patterns that are socially acceptable within American culture as they described having learned many of them through their experiences with Americans. This is consistent with Grove and Torbiorn’s theoretical concept of applicability which states changes in immigrant’s behavior to those “similarly enculturated” which in this case would be Americans.

Lastly, Theme 6 showed the different ways in which participants have acculturated into American society supporting Berry’s theory of acculturation (1985) as well as Grove and Torbiorn’s theory of sojourner showing how their two-step process of acculturation was applicable to Hmong refugees acculturative experiences. According to

Berry's theory of acculturation, there are four ways (e.g., assimilation, separation, marginalization, integration) in which immigrants adjust to the dominant or receiving culture. The results of this study showed participants acculturating in three of the four approaches. Participant 3 assimilated into American society by acquiring, adopting and replacing American values with his ethnic values. He stated how important assimilation was to him because of his experiences with Americans that improved his life. He shared a personal memory about his life back home in Laos during the communist takeover after the Vietnam War about his experiences seeing communism force conformity and control over people and thought similarly of Hmong culture. He found collective values and responsibilities really restricting of personal freedom and growth although not as extreme as communism. His experiences in America showed him how diverse, convenient and free independent societies are and decided it was best to assimilate into American society because "life was better."

Other participants such as Participants 4 and 6 marginalized themselves from both cultures, that is, rejecting any and all cultural values and social practices including those of one's ethnic culture. Even though they both converted to Christianity and preferred their independence, they did not consider themselves assimilated immigrants because they mentioned only accepting what they found personally enjoyable to themselves regardless of cultural influences. Participant 6 described how his parents did not really "immerse them into Hmong culture or American culture" because they did not understand much about American culture and were too busy trying to make a living to participate in collective practices within the Hmong community. He stated how his

parents did not raise him around a lot of Hmong people so he did not grow up acquiring or experiencing Hmong culture like other Hmong refugees and therefore never really felt part of the Hmong community or American community because he did not understand much about either. Similarly, Participant 4 described how she liked certain American holidays such as Christmas and Thanksgiving but hated Halloween. She described a particular time where her co-worker invited her to a Halloween party which she disliked very much because of the drinking, loud music and juvenile behavior she witnessed and ever since, hated American parties. Additionally, she also distanced herself from Hmong culture because of her past experiences as a Hmong woman and constantly feeling inferior to men. Given her experiences with both cultures, she stated how culture only complicates “good things in life” and therefore prefers what she finds enjoyable regardless of cultural influences.

As for majority of participants, most of them showed an integrative approach to acculturation, that is, identifying with ethnic values and social practices while participating in different values and social practices of the dominant culture. For instance, Participant 1 shared his experiences as a teacher teaching younger Hmong generations about Hmong history, culture and Hmong American problems. His class started out mainly consisting of Hmong students but eventually he was able to reach out to more American students and teach them about Hmong culture as well. His experiences as a teacher allowed him to “be a voice” for Hmong Americans which made him “realize that he didn’t have to pick one or the other, he could be both.” Similarly, Participant 2 also integrated into American society by explaining how both her “masks” are part of her as

an individual. She acknowledges her behavioral differences around Americans and Hmong people given her environment at work and home. When asked if that was uncomfortable for her, she responded by saying both her “masks” or personalities is just part of her identity as a Hmong American.

Given participants experiences outlined in previous themes, Grove and Torbiorn’s (1985) theory of sojourner seems to be consistent with Hmong refugees acculturative transitions or adjustments to American culture. The results of this study clearly showed Hmong refugees acculturating to American culture but in different ways. Berry’s theory suggests four different acculturative approaches (e.g., integration, assimilation, separation, marginalization) used by immigrants to acculturate into different cultural societies but does not explain how that process occurs. Grove and Torbiorn’s theory of sojourners provided a guiding framework as to the process of learning, adapting and habituating immigrants into dominant cultural societies given their theoretical concepts of clarity and applicability which seems to align with participants acculturative experiences in this study. Their psychological constructs showed how Hmong refugees accumulated knowledge about American culture and experienced dissonance because of cultural differences that was not consistent with their cognitive thoughts of acceptable norms and behavior. Overtime through years of accumulated knowledge, experience and exposure to American culture, all of the participants adjusted their lifestyles showing consistent behavioral patterns with their perception about American culture.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The limitations for this study included participant validation, participant demographics and generalization. For generalization, the sample for this study included eight participants ( $N = 8$ ) which is not a large enough sample to reflect or represent all among refugee's lived experiences in the United States. Though qualitative studies are intended to explore perceptions and experiences of a phenomenon, it is not intended to generalize results or findings because of the sample size and nature of the method. As for participant validation, age and refugee status was not confirmed or validated. Participants responded to the flier or was contacted through family and friends with prior knowledge of the criteria and was reminded by the researcher again about the study and participant qualifications. After verbal and documented assurance and consent, it was assumed that participants were being honest about their age as well as their refugee status and experiences. Lastly, the final limitation included participant demographics of the study. Given the qualifications for participants, many refugees were left out of the study particularly refugees who could not speak English and therefore could not share their experiences. Those who could not speak English could have provided a different story about their experiences compared to those who were more proficient and acculturated into American society. Additionally, setting the minimum age to 30 years or older included participants who immigrated at a very young age and therefore is more acculturated than those who immigrated as teenagers or young adults. Given these factors, the results of this study can only reflect broader shared experiences of

participants rather than specific experiences of all Hmong refugees who vary in age, language, cultural acquisition and experiences.

### **Recommendations**

Recommendations for future studies should include more qualitative studies to explore specific populations of Hmong refugees in America. Since there are not many studies with SAs let alone Hmong refugees in America (Lui & Rollock, 2012; Nagai, 2015; Nguyen, et. al., 2015; Sirikantraporn, 2013; Tummala-Narra, et. al., 2016), this study is a good foundation to expand on specific Hmong populations. For example, this study showed different challenges between men and women. Two separate studies should be conducted to explore the lived experiences of Hmong men and women separately. Bahrassa, et al. (2013), conducted a study examining gender differences in parent-child acculturation conflicts with Hmong college students and did not find significant differences, however, it is possible that the culture gap was so extensive that cultural conflicts were indistinguishable from noncultural conflicts. With such limitations in their study, conducting a qualitative study to explore separate issues with genders could provide a better foundation for future gender studies with Hmong people. Additionally, a separate study should explore Hmong refugees lived experiences in Hmong allowing many refugees who cannot speak English to share their experiences. It would be important for future studies to look at different generations between Hmong refugees and focus specifically on elderly refugees who are more traditional and ethnically enculturated compared to younger generations who are more acculturated to American culture than Hmong culture. The latter would allow future quantitative studies to measure

acculturation factors that are expressed in this study among these participants such as outside exposure, language and education. Future recommendations for quantitative studies could include regression analyses analyzing relationships between variables that influence acculturation such as Hmong refugees who went to college or lived in neighborhoods away from heavily dense or populated Hmong communities. These studies focusing specifically on Hmong people will contribute to specific literature of SA groups rather than monolithic studies of SA groups that cannot explore or measure the impact of cultural differences on acculturation among different ethnic groups (Joshi & Desai, 2013; Lee & Chang, 2012).

### **Implications**

This study provided insights into the importance of cultural distinction and its impact on acculturation as well as challenges and adaptive processes of Hmong refugees living in America. The importance of exploring ethnic groups separately acknowledges distinct experiences among ethnic populations that are not acknowledged or noticeable with monolithic studies. For instance, by studying Hmong refugees, the findings suggest that Hmong women face particular cultural challenges different from men given traditional roles and expectations of Hmong women. Additionally, the complexity of Hmong culture and its dependency on collective participation and spiritual beliefs played a significant role in how participants chose to acculturated into American society.

The implications of this study could have positive social change with Hmong refugees or immigrants who share similar experiences outlined in the study. The significance to positive social change includes processes of cultural adjustment as well as

experiences that contributed to cultural adjustment. Having this information can contribute to healthy and effective methods of integrating immigrants into dominant cultural societies. Professional contributions of this study could inform professionals in public services about the importance of facilitating culturally sensitive approaches that would accommodate SA immigrants in culturally responsive ways. The findings in this study showed the cognitive and behavioral processes of acculturation for Hmong refugees which can be useful information for programs that are implemented to help immigrants adjust to American society. By understanding cultural differences in values, language, religion, beliefs, gender and social norms as well as their relation to challenges experienced by immigrants and their experiences that helped them adjust, can be useful in helping other immigrants integrate into American society as well. Given that many cultures around the world are still collective and traditional with specific cultural values that could conflict with independent values, this study can contribute to current literature about acculturation and balancing independent and collective differences for immigrants who find themselves in a different cultural atmosphere as well as inform future researchers about the importance of studying ethnic groups separately rather than monolithically.

### **Conclusion**

Though there is limited research on Hmong people and SAs, this study can contribute to existing literature of Hmong people and other SA groups that immigrated as refugees after the Vietnam War about their lived experiences in America. This study was designed to understand the lived experiences of Hmong refugees and how they

acculturated into American society. The findings suggest a consistent alignment with Grove and Torbiorn's theory of sojourner (1985) outlining the process of acculturation as experienced by people in a different cultural environment. The first stage in this process is dissonance. This stage showed the disconnect or uncomfortable feelings experienced by participants because they did not understand or know what was socially acceptable, neither did they know how to behave consistently within their environment outside of home. The second stage involved exposure and accumulation of knowledge overtime. This stage slowly changed participants perception and understanding about acceptable norms in American culture making them confident that their understanding was useful in guiding their behavior. Lastly, with a new cognitive framework guiding their behavior, participants felt confident adjusting their lives toward an independent American lifestyle as they found it socially acceptable as well as effective in yielding interpersonal satisfaction as well as contributing to their general happiness as individuals.

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## Appendix A: Using Semi-structured Interviews

- Semi-structured interviews are commonly used in phenomenological studies to understand the psychological reality as experienced by participants. Semi-structured interviews also allow flexibility for the interviewer to probe questions toward the explored phenomenon as well as allowing flexibility with interviewee responses (Breakwell, 2004).
- Semi-structured interviews offer more detail and depth about lived experiences pertaining to a phenomenon (Giorgi, Giorgi, & Morley, 2017).
- For phenomenological studies, interviews are best used for data collection because it allows individuals to articulate their experiences as they perceived it (Creswell, 2013; Giorgi, Giorgi, & Morley, 2017).
- When using semi-structured interviews, questions should be open ended and probed toward descriptive experiences in relation to the phenomenon (Broome, 2011; Giorgi, Giorgi, & Morley, 2017; Groenwald, 2004).
- Self-report methods of data collection (e.g. questionnaires and interviews) are always subjected to “memory decay, alterations or participant response errors... but descriptions are obtainable with psychological meanings to be analyzed” (Broome, 2011, p. 10).

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## Appendix B: Codebook

Table D1

*Frequent Words and Phrases for Clarity*

Words and Phrases	Notes	Notes on Emerging Codes
Family, Community, Respect	These are frequent words used by majority of participants when they were asked to describe what they think about Hmong culture.	By using these words to describe Hmong culture, it reflects the values of a collective culture. Decisions should be considerate of others besides yourself.
Language	Majority of participants expressed language as a disconnecting or isolating factor. Some expressed feeling more confident and comfortable when they began to pick up English.	Communication is very important for communicating and connecting with others making participants feel more inclusive with their surroundings.
Independence, Education	These are frequent concepts participants used when describing American culture. All the women used these words in some form or another relating to their American identity.	Women in particular emphasized education and independence as an adopted American quality. Some of the men pointed out the impact higher education had on their comfort levels and exposure to American culture. All participants mentioned independence as an American quality.
P8: Well, it was pretty confusing, you know when I first arrived, you don't speak the language and you don't know the culture so its really confusing.	Unfamiliar with the culture and unable to communicate with others made him feel disconnected. Other participants reported similar experiences with language and cultural differences.	Many Participants reported similar feelings of dissonance because of cultural barriers such as language, family values, respect for elders, independent vs collective decision making and social norms.

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<p>P3: Now back in 1962, 63, I got into Catholic and I had the chance to be baptized and be catholic and since then I changed completely my Hmong way of life.</p>	<p>Majority of participants stated that they have converted to Christianity.</p>	<p>Religion seems to be a big factor in cultural changes and religious practices.</p>
<p>P7: Yea, I think with the values in terms of being more Hmong I am very family oriented so I think a lot of the decision making for me involves my family. In terms of American culture, I think being more outspoken, learning how to be more, trying to be more not so gender bias because as you know how in Hmong culture, we are always raised up to believe Hmong men are more dominant per se than Hmong women and then I think in American culture for me is all about equality.</p>	<p>All the women reported culture factors of inferiority such as being dependent on their husband, obedient, submissive and forbidden to voice their opinion although some of the men expressed the latter as well.</p>	<p>Living up to cultural expectations seemed more challenging to women than men.</p>

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*Note.* Frequent words and phrases that represent similar experiences regarding RQ1 about participants clarity or perception about Hmong and American cultural differences.

Table D2

*Frequent Words and Phrases for Applicability*

Words and Phrases	Notes	Notes on Emerging Codes
Change, Assimilation, Independence	These are frequent words used by majority of participants when they were asked to describe how they reconciled Hmong and American culture.	Participants used change mostly to describe what they liked and adopted in American culture. Independence was used a lot as a preferable cultural adjustment. Assimilation was used interchangeably with change to show how participants were Americanized.
P3: I believe that nothing outside of this I don't practice Hmong way, only marriage. I don't practice calling soul, I don't practice auh neng ( <b>Hmong Ritual</b> ) because I don't believe any of this happens in any particular way of the ancestors.	Many participants expressed how they don't practice traditional rituals anymore because of beliefs, inconvenience and practicality.	Religion played a big role in assimilating to American cultures and values. Impracticality and inconvenience also deterred participants from understanding and conducting traditional rituals.
P2: But I'm more American in a way that I want to be a leader that I want be independent.	All participants emphasized and independent life as something beneficial to their happiness.	Independent lifestyle was consistently a desirable American factor among all participants.
P4: I don't see or put that much on culture because culture is different. When I took a class in college, I felt like culture sometimes is ridiculous, its just human made and its different and it doesn't have to be different but people make it different.	Participants varied in responses regarding culture. Some emphasized, assimilation, some marginalization and some integration into American society.	Participants reported different ways in which they have adjusted to American culture.

Note: Frequent words and phrases that represent common experiences regarding RQ2 about participants "applicability" or adjusted behavior as a result of their "clarity" or cognitive framework.

Table D3

*Codebook*

Code	Definition	Example
Clarity	<p><b>Clarity</b> – Cognitive frame of reference; that is “with all the values, attitudes, opinions, ideas and knowledge that the person has accumulated as a result of their experiences.” (Grove &amp; Torbiorn, 1985, p.209)</p>	<p>P5: American culture means independence, it means having more rights, it means more flexibility versus Hmong culture which to me is very rigid. I know that as a female I have limited rights, its extremely clan oriented so the individual doesn't really matter its about the prosperity and honor of the clan.</p> <p>P6: You weren't really immersed in American culture besides holidays and stuff like that and then you weren't really immersed in Hmong culture because my parents were Christian.</p> <p>P7: Yea, I think with the values in terms of being more Hmong I am very family oriented so I think a lot of the decision making for me involves my family. In terms of American culture, I think being more outspoken, learning how to be more, trying to be more not so gender bias because as you know how in Hmong culture, we are always raised up to believe Hmong men are more dominant per se than</p>

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Hmong women and then I think in American culture for me is all about equality.

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Applicability

**Applicability** – “A well-adjusted and socially adept person operating within the environment in which he or she was enculturated. The person’s behavior is not only socially acceptable but also interpersonally effective in that it often yields the outcomes desired in interactions with others similarly enculturated.” (Grove & Torbiorn, 1985, p.206)

P1: I cant go to the funerals for 3 days or weddings for 2 full days, things like that. It might hurt them at first but they understand that I’m different. They can’t expect me to come at 5 in the morning and chop meat like other people.

P5: “I just want to sleep in, I don’t want to wake up at 5 in the morning and cook rice”. So those things I think funeral rituals I don’t think I will follow to the T. So just a lot of ritual stuff, first of all I don’t comprehend them so that’s why I don’t think they mean as much to me and secondly, I just don’t think its very practical anymore.

P5: I’m very independent I have my own car, credit card and do whatever I want when I want. We have a lot of respect for each other but the idea is “Honey I’m doing this tonight, how’s your schedule? All good? Okay I’ll see you later” you know.

P1: We see that so many Hmong women marrying out, they are not marrying

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Hmong men we know that our community is going to change and the future of our community might not be Hmong. I mean Hmong Christians are Hmong too so I think Hmong today is very different.

P3: Yes, each everyone of us has to grow, so when you need to grow you cannot stick to your own family. You have to make sure that, whoever can help you grow, that's why you have to be much better related to the outside people. Assimilation is very important to me.

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*Note.* The two codes are “Clarity” and “Applicability” both defined as Grove and Torbiorn defined it in their Theory of Sojourners. The examples show how participants responses fall into each code showing reflecting the process of cultural adjustment or transition.

Table D4

*Inductive Themes for Clarity*

Themes	Examples
<p>Cultural Dissonance – Experiences of disconnect or discomfort with ones environment.</p>	<p>P2: I would say that right now I don't know if I fully feel that I'm comfortable here. I still feel like I'm adjusting and assimilating to this culture and that's because I'm still kind of traditional. A lot of things here in America I can't really fully accept yet.</p> <p>P5: But just wrapping around to the point that even in first grade when that happened, I didn't understand English at all because of my inability to effectively communicate with the people around me.</p> <p>P6: So, the main points I would understand about the two cultures is that the American culture only focused on me, myself and I. It's all about me, me, me. All these promotions all these managers, it's all about me, me, me. So, the American society is mainly, now that I understand it more is mainly about the individual. What can the individual get, how far can they go in life, it's all about them.</p> <p>P8: Well, a lot of times you get lost.....it is pretty tough because you want to maintain what you have and have to study what you have to study here in this country to sustain ourselves and support ourselves and that's pretty tough because at the same time you have to live in 2 worlds you know you just can't go to the Hmong way or the American side, you have to live in the middle to sustain that so you have to live in the middle to grasp both sides or work with both sides so it's pretty tough.</p>
<p>Environmental Adaptation – Experiences that helped participants learn, understand and adjust to American society mitigating their dissonant feelings.</p>	<p>P1: My professor use to joke that he created this American Hmong and Hmong American categories and asked us to identify ourselves and I was like "I think when I came to college, I was an American Hmong" but I moved towards, like today, I'm both but its kind of like this cycle having to assimilate. You have to lose who you are in order to find success. So whether we think about it or not I think a lot of</p>

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minority children go through that process of having to lose who you are like lose your culture, lose your language because to be successful you have to speak English like the overall society like English like American which is what I was trying to do but could never do that so for me it wasn't until like my 3<sup>rd</sup> year in college that I really changed.

P3: Now back in 1962, 63, I got into Catholicism and had the chance to be baptized and become catholic, since then I completely changed my Hmong way of life.

P4: When I married my husband, we became Christian's and I felt like people respected me. Even when I talked to a priest, they respect me and would spend time to help you with your problems. When I was younger, I had to ask an older lady to go with me to seek a Shaman before he would even talk to me, so I had enough of that.

P5: Not only did it open up my mind but now theres more pressure to change because.....like for example growing up I never cared for Starbucks or anything like that because we just didn't drink it but when I went to college everyone was drinking it so I was like "okay" and now I love it so exposure to it and a little bit of pressure or more pressure to change and fit in.

P6: Yea, I think for you to assimilate or be adaptable, you have to learn the skills and the basics and also, in a sense, you have to get out of the Hmong community, not every single second but you kind of have to get out of the Hmong community at your leisure time and go join something else.

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Gender Roles (*Females Only*)-  
The additional challenges  
experienced by Hmong  
women adjusting to American  
society.

P2: At work I'm a leader, people look up to me because I'm a professional. But at home, my in-laws and their dads' kids are the leaders and I'm just their servants. I have to do their work for them, cook for them, clean for them and take care of their kids.

P2: So, my culture has taught me that I have to be very polite, very respectful and that I should know how to cook, clean, kill chickens, get up early in the morning to go cook and help others as much as I can so when it's my turn, they will come help me.

P4: I see that in the old days back in the old country, women don't make decisions. Women are supposed to be silent, not share their opinion or say anything, they are expected to just go along with whatever.

P5: The funny thing is naturally I have the personality of an American. So that's from birth personality wise because growing up I got a lot of rebuttals from people especially my parents about how I was not behaving like how an appropriate Hmong young lady should be behaving. I was very out spoken and loud and opinionated and had a big imagination so I was shut down a lot.

P6: Our family thinking women are submissive and quiet but I am quite the opposite.

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*Note.* These 3 main themes for "Clarity" reflect participants perceptions about their experiences living in two cultures and how they were able to adjust or transition into American culture.

Table D5

*Inductive Themes for Applicability*

Themes	Examples
<p>Loss of Traditional Practices and Participation – Loss of ethnic or traditional practices as a result of their experiences living in America.</p>	<p>P1: As an American Hmong, you are rejecting a lot of who you are as a Hmong person like you're thinking American first, like "I'm American so why do I have to do all this stuff, why do I have to follow this part of our culture, why do I have to go to all these cultural events and things right?, why do my cousins call me every weekend to go do this or do that, or why my in laws call me to go do this or do that?"</p> <p>P1: I can't go to the funerals for 3 days or weddings for 2 full days, things like that. It might hurt them at first but they understand that I'm different. They can't expect me to come at 5 in the morning and chop meat like other people. I cant chop meat, I'm not the ideal son in-law, I know my in-laws see me as a lazy son in-law.</p> <p>P2: I feel like our traditions like our funerals and marriage ceremonies and the songs we sing at weddings and funerals, I think we will eventually lose that.</p> <p>P3: I believe that nothing outside of this I don't practice Hmong way, only marriage. I don't practice calling soul, I don't practice auh neng (<b><i>Hmong Ritual</i></b>) because I don't believe any of this happens in any particular way of the ancestors.</p> <p>P4: I use to be traditional when I was living with my parents. We did the hu plig, ua neeb (<b><i>Hmong rituals</i></b>) we did all these things.</p> <p>P5: "I just want to sleep in, I don't want to wake up at 5 in the morning and cook rice". So those things I think funeral rituals I don't think I will follow to the T. So just a lot of ritual stuff, first of all I don't comprehend them so that's why I don't think they mean as much to me and secondly, I just don't think its very practical anymore.</p>

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P6: So, the very simple one that I don't follow because I'm Christian, that we don't do is shamanism.

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Collective to Independent Lifestyles – Behaviors that reflect decisions and actions in consideration to oneself over others.

P2: But I'm more American in a way that I want to be a leader that I want be independent.

P4: I an American group I feel more free to talk, more free to be myself and talk like I am talking to you.

P5: I'm very independent I have my own car, credit card and do whatever I want when I want. We have a lot of respect for each other but the idea is "Honey I'm doing this tonight, how's your schedule? All good? Okay I'll see you later" you know.

P6: I was all about myself when I went to college. I did everything, I didn't ignore all my duties at home to help with chores and baby sit and stuff but I was all about myself I didn't do community too much.

P8: The American value I like is being independent, being who you are and making your own decisions and something like that so I think that's the value I like on the American side.

Acculturative Approach – Base off John Berry's Theory of Acculturation, participants have adjusted in 1 of the 4 ways outlined in his theory.

P1: Well for me, I feel like serving or being a voice allowed me to reconcile and not have to choose because I felt like I was in the middle for both. Even today when I teach my Hmong American class, most of my students are not Hmong in that class, a class that cannot happen without Hmong students. When we started that class I was a student and we started with all Hmong students but today like 18 years later we've kept the class going and usually out of 25 students we have like 5 that are Hmong and I think we are to that point where we have to teach others who we are too so that's why I feel like I've been able to reconcile and not have to choose and understand that you can be both at the same time.

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P2: So, I being me is like I said, I talked a lot about having different masks on so when I'm at home I know what mask to put on and so I'm automatically act a certain way but when I leave the house to go to work and once I get to work I automatically change my mask and now I'm a different person.

P3: Yes, each and every one of us has to grow, so when you need to grow you cannot stick to your own family. You have to make sure that, whoever can help you grow, that's why you have to be better related to the outside people. Assimilation is very important to me.

P5: If people who want to hold onto Hmong culture and refuse bend and evolve with time, I will turn my back completely on it.

P7: I'm happy with the way that I am" and I think that kind of goes more toward the American system of being individualistic and just being self-reliant.

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*Note.* These 3 main themes for "Applicability" reflect how participants behavior has changed as a result of their "clarity" or perception about Hmong and American culture showing how Hmong refugees have acculturated into American society.

## Coding Process and Code Book

When coding data, all transcripts were uploaded into NVivo and coded individually then compared to one another for emerging themes. All transcripts were read along with the interview audio multiple times to ensure accuracy and comprehension of participants experiences in its entirety. The next step involved separating important phrases or full responses into two separate categories; “clarity” and “applicability”. “Clarity” and “applicability” are the theoretical concepts used in my Grove and Torbiorn’s Theory of Sojourner (1985) to describe the process of acculturation among immigrants. Responses and phrases were separated under each code if it pertained to the theoretical concepts. Once each transcript was coded for “clarity” and “applicability”, I used NVivo’s “Word Cloud” to search for frequent words under each code. This ensured that frequent words used in response to questions about “clarity” and “applicability” would be counted separately. After separating significant phrases and responses and calculating frequent words, meaning was attached to the phrases and responses. Once each transcript was completed up to this point, the final step included comparing all coded and analyzed transcripts with one another. Whatever common phrases with similar meanings among all participants, those units or significant data relevant to the phenomenon were grouped together for subthemes. Main themes were then extracted from the grouped subthemes given its collective meaning. Frequent words were also compared with all participants in order to find the most frequent word or words used to describe their experiences in relation to “clarity” and “applicability”. After comparing all transcripts, 6 main themes emerged along with 23 subthemes.