Hmong Elders and Coping with Acculturation Stress

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ABSTRACT

This study explored how Hmong elders in the United States cope with acculturation stress. Six Hmong elders (two males and four females between the ages of 60 and 71 living within the Sacramento County area) were interviewed regarding acculturation stress and coping mechanisms used to manage that stress. A hierarchy analysis was used to analyze the interview responses. Interview themes revealed that Hmong elders often described assimilation and integration strategies of acculturation. Themes of acceptance and lack of control over their lives also emerged from the interview data, which seemed to better explain the participants’ views of assimilation.

The Hmong people came to the United States as refugees seeking asylum from the Communist Pathet Lao (Tatman 2004; Xiong 2000; Yee and Cerhan 1990). During the Vietnam War, Hmong men were recruited by the United States to fight against Northern Vietnam (Xiong 2000). After the war, the Americans left Vietnam and left a large population of Hmong to fend for themselves. Many sought refuge in Thailand and countless numbers of them drowned in the Mekong River when crossing to Thailand from Laos. In the 1990s, the Thai government closed the United Nations’ camps that housed many Hmong refugees. With nowhere else to go, roughly 15,000 Hmong moved to Wat Tham Krabok, a Buddhist monastery in Thailand (Allen 2004). In 2003, the U.S. State Department reported that the United States was going to open its gates to the Hmong refugees living in Wat Tham Krabok. By mid-2005, around 13,000 new Hmong refugees came to the United States and were faced with the process of acculturation (Gerdner et al. 2006).

The purpose of this research is to understand how Hmong elders who are 55 years or older cope with acculturation stress on a daily basis. The literature of acculturation stress among Hmong elders is sparse, and there is no research on coping strategies for acculturation stress in this population. It is important to know what methods Hmong elders used to cope with stress.
and how effective these strategies have been because the Office of Refugee Resettlement has recognized the Hmong as one of the immigrant groups having the most difficult time adjusting to American culture (Gerdner et al. 2006). Tatman (2004) reported a 43% rate of mental health diagnoses in Hmong people; a rate that is about twice as high as the general population and likely explained by their wartime experiences and acculturation strain due to immigration to the U.S.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Researchers have been studying stress and coping styles for more than 50 years (Krohne 2002). As reported by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), Lazarus and Cohen defined three types of stress. The first type is a major life-changing event that involves many people such as war, relocation, and natural disasters. The second type is also a life-changing event, but is one that involves only a few people such as divorce or the death of a loved one. The last type is daily problems such as an argument or dealing with an irritating co-worker. For the present research, acculturation stress falls into the third type of stress because everyday problems, such as loneliness and frustration, can be part of acculturating into another culture. It is important to note, however, that everyday acculturation stress may also be combined with or influenced by the first and second types of stress because many Hmong elders living in the United States experienced the Vietnam War and, with that, the death of at least one family member.

**The Hmong and Acculturation Stress**

The Hmong are a group of Southeast Asians who have repeatedly shown their resistance to acculturation; consequently, one of the greatest stressors for Hmong elders is acculturation stress (Tatman 2004). Their history of resistance to acculturation was shown in China, Laos, Thailand, and now here in the United States where they still struggle to keep their cultural beliefs and religious practices (Xiong 2000). According to William and Berry (1991), acculturation includes the changes of finances, technology, politics, identity, and behavior. These changes contribute to physical, psychological, and biological stress (Gillette 2006). “Physical stressors” include the unfamiliarity of habitation, location, and the climate conditions, while “psychological stressors” include loneliness, home sickness, and being a social outcast. Biologically, the body’s vulnerability to foreign disease and new food could result in illness and even death (Xiong 2000). These examples demonstrate that acculturation stress may have dangerous consequences and, therefore, should be minimized as much as possible.
In 1977, during the arrival of the first group of Hmong refugees to the United States, a high number of males died unexpectedly at night, which has come to be known as the Sudden Unexpected Nocturnal Death Syndrome (SUNDS) (Xiong 2000). In the early 1980s, SUNDS peaked at a startling ratio of 92 deaths per 100,000 Hmong. Although no clear medical explanation for the phenomenon has been found, Adler (1995) has hypothesized that “abnormal electrical impulses in the heart” caused the deaths.

Adler also said that mental stress concerning traditional practice is prevalent in Hmong people who experienced this phenomenon. Due to the cultural differences, the Hmong were stressed at not being able to perform their religious rituals in America (Adler 1995). For example, slaughtering and sacrificing animals at home is not widely accepted in the United States, making the ritual more difficult to practice openly. Adler also reported that, although nightmare assaults or sleep paralysis are common in Laos, they did not result in death. Thus, SUNDS may be correlated with the acculturation stress in America.

Some scholars suggest that SUNDS has affected mostly men because of the role changes due to the acculturating process (Tatman 2004; Xiong 2000). In Laos, Hmong men are respected and are the main providers for the family. Elderly men were expected to give advice and resolve disagreements because they were highly respected due to their age (Xiong 2000). Conversely, in the United States, Hmong women’s expertise in embroidery and cleaning are better paid compared to men’s skills of hunting and farming (Tatman 2004). Among younger Hmong men, their physical strength may compensate for some of their other unrecognized skills, but the older Hmong men lose respect from their children and grandchildren as a result of their lessened role. Sometimes the elders are disrespected and are not consulted by their children when making important decisions because of the elders’ lack of education (Yee 1997). Although the elderly women have the same experiences, their roles of cooking, cleaning and childcare are still essential, and so they are less distressed (Xiong 2000).

The majority of Hmong elders cannot perform tasks that require English literacy skills, which is a significant source of acculturation stress. Sixty-one percent of Hmong elders in the United States are illiterate, and literacy largely affects a person’s motivation and potential to acculturate. Many of the elders are unable to attain a job in the United States because they cannot read or write (Xiong 2000), causing them to become financially dependent on their children and on government programs such as Social Security income and welfare benefits. Elders depend on their better-educated children to read and translate information to them. The younger generation not only translates
government forms, but also important notices from energy companies and doctors’ offices (Xiong 2000). This literacy dependency not only creates stress for the elders, but it also limits their access to resources such as counseling and other programs that may help them cope with stress.

Coping Strategies
Although the percentage of mental health diagnoses in the Hmong community is high, most Hmong people are reluctant to seek professional help. Hmong elders would normally seek the help of their family and clan leaders before they seek help from mental health service providers (Cerhan 1990). Hmong elders prefer to seek help that is consistent with their cultural beliefs before surrendering to Western medicines or treatments, because these approaches to coping with stress, such as counseling, would seem bizarre and unnatural to the Hmong (Tatman 2004). Fang reported that 52% of Hmong elders still like to use herbal treatments and a spiritual healer such as shaman to call back their lost or wandering soul (Gensheimer 2006; Fang 1998; Gerdner et al. 2006).

There are theories of coping strategies that researchers have used to evaluate or analyze coping behaviors. Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) definition of “coping” is “constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person.” Some coping strategies that have been greatly studied are problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies (Schier 1986). A “problem-focused coping strategy” is used to eliminate the stressor, while an “emotion-focused strategy” is used to ease the feelings of sorrow that comes with the stressor. Problem-focused coping is found to be most effective in controllable situations, and emotion-focused coping is most effective when the situation cannot be controlled and one has to tolerate the problem (Schier 1986). Therefore, the effectiveness of these strategies depends on the situation.

Similar to the problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies is the “approach-avoidance coping strategy,” in which the person will actively find a solution or take action to solve the problem in order to reduce or eliminate stress, including the process of lessening the emotion that comes with the problem (Roth et al. 1986). The “avoidant coping strategy,” on the other hand, involves repressing any thoughts or feelings about the stressors (Roth et al. 1986), and giving little or no attention to the stressor.

Coping with acculturation stress, however, may take different strategies. According to Berry (1997), separation, marginalization, assimilation, and integration are some psychological strategies people may use to cope with the process of acculturation. “Separation” is when people choose to maintain
their own cultural values and do not try to acculturate into the customs of the host country. “Assimilation” is when people abandon their own cultural values and fully accept the customs of the host country. “Marginalization” is when people desert both their own cultural values and those of their host country; in contrast, “integration” is the strategy of upholding one’s own culture while learning the culture of the host country. Many scholars agreed that integration is the healthiest strategy to acculturate into a new culture because it is a balanced method (Gillette 2006). In this present study, the researcher explored the views of Hmong elders regarding their experiences of acculturation, their use of coping strategies, and the extent to which these strategies may fit into the four acculturation strategies. Based on what the existing literature reports, the researcher expected that Hmong elders’ coping strategies would fall into the separation category.

**METHODOLOGY**

The research question of how Hmong elders cope with acculturation stress was evaluated through an interview process. Human subjects were approved by California State University, Sacramento’s Department of Psychology Human Subjects Committee before the researcher proceeded with the interviews.

This qualitative research was conducted through individual interviews with the researcher. A qualitative method of interviewing was chosen for this research because of the lack of existing research on the topic of how Hmong elders cope with acculturation stress. Another reason an interview method was used is because most Hmong elders cannot read and write, making it difficult or impossible for them to take a written survey either in English or Hmong.

The interviews were semi-structured to allow the researcher to ask standard and follow-up questions and to probe more into unclear or broad answers. The researcher designed and prepared seven interview questions about acculturation and how participants cope with acculturation stress. The researcher chose open-ended questions because they were intended to allow the participants to share stories of themselves in a way that captured the participants’ stress and their way of managing that stress. The interview started with broad questions to build rapport and comfort with the participants and to give the participants the space to tell their stories. Standard interview questions were then asked, followed by specific follow-up questions that pertained to the research question. The next seven questions were demographic questions about age, education, and religion. Each interview took approximately thirty to forty-five minutes to conduct.
Participants
The researcher conducted outreach and recruitment of participants with the support of the Hmong Women’s Heritage Association in Sacramento, California. The participants were Hmong elders who are clients or had sought the help of the Hmong Women’s Heritage Association. Twelve elders signed up for the interview, but when the researcher called to confirm their participation, the researcher was able only obtained six confirmations. Six Hmong elders ages 60- to 71-years old were interviewed in the comfort of their homes. Four of the participants were females and two were males. The age criterion for an elder to participate was 55 years of age or older, because the Hmong community defines someone as an elder at a younger age than other groups.

Procedure
The researcher introduced herself as a student from California State University, Sacramento who was conducting the interview research as part of her participation in a school program. The reason for the introduction was to let the elders know that the researcher was not from any government agency that was investigating them. It was important to establish the researcher’s identity so that the participants could feel comfortable revealing sensitive answers about their stress. The option to decline to be part of the research was given to the participants. When the participant agreed to be part of the research, the researcher then set an appointment to meet with the participant. The interviews were conducted at the participants’ homes where they were most comfortable, and because they are not able to drive. There were no incentives given for their participation, which was done solely on a voluntary basis.

Before the interview, each participant received a consent form that was translated into Hmong. Many Hmong elders do not know how to read English or Hmong; therefore, the researcher read the consent form in Hmong and then asked the participants to sign the forms. During the interview process, which was also conducted in the Hmong language, the participants were audio recorded, but they were asked to not state their names or anyone else’s name to ensure anonymity. After the interview, each participant received a translated debriefing form, which the researcher also read to the participants in the Hmong language and answered any questions. During debriefing, the participants were advised that the Asian Pacific Community Counseling organization or Hmong Women’s Heritage Association would be available for counseling if the research caused any painful emotions or bad recollections that they might want to talk about.

Analysis
In order for the researcher to analyze and draw conclusions from the raw, transcribed data, the “analytic hierarchy approach” was used. This is the
process of grouping and categorizing transcribed interviews in order for the researcher to visualize what is going on (Spencer et al. 2003). Using this approach helped the present researcher identify, organize, synthesize, and then refine the thematic context present in the transcribed interviews with Hmong elders.

There were four *a priori* themes already laid out from the interview questions, to which additional emerging themes such as family violence were added. Specifically, the researcher categorized interview data that fit the four types of coping strategies: separation, marginalization, assimilation, and integration.

Furthermore, the researcher used the framework approach toward descriptive analysis. Using the framework approach helped the researcher to sort more specific elements within each theme (Spencer et al. 2003). After using the analytic hierarchy to organize the data into themes, the framework approach was used to summarize the themes for analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to examine how Hmong elders cope with acculturation stress. In order to find out how Hmong elders cope with acculturation stress, the researcher used an interview method. The interview questions were specifically designed to identify if the participants had any acculturation difficulty and stress. The researcher then followed up with a question on how the elders cope with the stress.

**Changes and Acculturation**

The interviews revealed that the elders can identify many changes in their cultural beliefs and traditions since their immigration to America. In the words of one participant:

> In this country, you have electricity, water in the house, and so if you want light, it’s there, if you want water, it’s there, and if you want to go to the bathroom, it’s in the house.

This participant was comparing the changes in his way of life in Laos to life in America. His way of life changed because, in the United States, everything is conveniently installed in the home, whereas in Laos things were more difficult because there was no running water, electricity, or indoor bathroom. Interviewees also described cultural differences in strictness to time. Specifically, they expressed their understanding that Americans work around the clock, while the Hmong people like a more flexible schedule to go and come as they please. These responses are examples of changes in culture and custom that the Hmong elders identified in the interviews.
After it was established that there were evident changes to the Hmong culture and customs, the researcher asked about specific accommodations that the participants have made to American culture. One common theme in the participants’ answers was that they felt that they have no control over what they want to change, and that they were forced to change because there was no other option. Participants gave at least two examples of this theme:

1. We have to change to be like them. It’s like driving; we have to know the rules to be able to drive. In America, we have to know their rules to live here.

2. Whatever they let us do, and then we do.

These answers suggest an attitude of having been forced or given no choice. In the first quote, the participant compared her experience to driving. What she means is understandable because it is crucial that the driver knows the rules of driving, like what a red light means and what one should do at a stop sign. If a driver does not know these rules, then the driver will soon be stopped by the police or probably get into an accident. Similarly, living in the United States requires the elders to know and obey the country’s laws. The second quote shows that the participant answered this question in a way that communicates a lack of freedom. He feels that he can only do what he is allowed to do.

The elders’ beliefs that they have no power were also evident when asked what they do when things get hard or how they cope. The elders gave answers such as:

1. If it gets too difficult, then I cried. After a long cry then that’s it. What else can I do? I do not know what to do.

2. Even if I cannot change, I just live on as how I am living. There’s nothing I can do.

3. What is most difficult is that I cannot speak and write their language even when I tried to learn. And so that cannot be changed. I have to ask those who are knowledgeable and those who understand the language to help translate.

These elders seemed to believe that they cannot do anything to change their fate. They believe that they have no power because they are unable to speak and write English, so most of them ignore the problem or depend on the younger generation who are more educated and knowledgeable. When the researcher asked what they would do if they were required to read or write,
all the interviewed elders referred to their children or any educated Hmong person for help.

Another way to interpret the theme of forced assimilation is that the Hmong elders are trying to accept cultural changes that they feel they have no power over because they understand that they are the minority in the United States. The previously quoted responses show that the elders have an understanding that they have to learn and abide by the rules of this country in order for them to survive. Elders may be assimilating through their value of acceptance. They are accepting what they cannot change and are absorbing whatever they can of the American culture.

Coping Strategies

The researcher categorized the interview responses into themes of separation, assimilation, marginalization, or integration acculturation coping strategies as shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Separation</th>
<th>Assimilation</th>
<th>Integration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maintains own customs, does not accept customs of host country</td>
<td>Abandons own customs and fully accepts customs of host country</td>
<td>Maintains own customs and accepts customs of host country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I do not change</td>
<td>• Way of life changes</td>
<td>• Women become more equal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Uneducated people do not change</td>
<td>• Have to change to be like them</td>
<td>• Less rules and traditions to follow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Do not know how to change</td>
<td>• Do not make loud noises</td>
<td>• Shamans charge for services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Do not care</td>
<td>• Follow the children</td>
<td>• Men lower their power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Cannot change the food we eat</td>
<td>• Do only what they allow us to do</td>
<td>• Learn to accommodate each other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Those who cannot change commit suicide</td>
<td>• Change our beliefs</td>
<td>• Be patient and ignore each other’s faults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Hmong cannot be like them</td>
<td>• Change the way we talk</td>
<td>• Slowly change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Change our spirits and behaviors</td>
<td>• Asks neighbors to excuse our traditional ways</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Have to follow the clock/time</td>
<td>• Courtship has changed</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• They know best</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The Americans will take of it</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Go to church</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Cannot change the food we eat</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Acculturation coping strategies identified in interview responses

Based on this analysis, it appears that Hmong elders mostly use the strategy of assimilation to acculturate into the American culture. There was no indication of any elders using the marginalization strategy, which is the strategy of ignoring both cultures. The elders seemed to use assimilation a lot more in acculturating because, as stated before, they believe that they have no power to control what happens. However, this does not mean that Hmong elders abandoned their cultural beliefs and have fully taken on the American culture. Elders only assimilate when they believe that they are less knowledgeable, or when they have no control over it, such as with government laws. Many of the Hmong elders use the integration strategy.
more when it comes to more personal matters, such as family problems and their cultural beliefs. For example, one participant said:

_Eating habits have changed. Women used to eat last always, but now women have their own table and men have their own. They can eat at the same time. Men and women were also segregated, but now, they can go everywhere together._

Another participant expressed his dissatisfaction at a change that he did not like, “When you go ask for a shaman, he will charge you $40 to $50. In Laos, they never charge you for their services.”

These two quotes demonstrate that the Hmong are changing some of their customs to accommodate the American way of life. The first quote showed the changes of the Hmong elders acculturating into the United States’ perspective of equality, especially the equality of sexes. The Hmong were able to change this part of their culture because of the wealth they found in America. In America, the Hmong have become wealthier although they are only considered middle class. In this country, Hmong families are able to provide more food during parties, and so there is plenty of food for men and women to eat simultaneously. In Laos, because men were regarded in a higher status, they were invited to eat first for fear that there may not be enough food for all.

The second quote also showed the changes of the Hmong culture in America because of wealth. In the United States, money is the currency for services, but in Laos the Hmong do not use such currency, instead they exchange labor. In Laos, shamans do not ask for money because they knew that the family does not have any and that their labor will be repaid some other way. The second quote indicated that, in the United States, some shamans are integrating the American currency for their services because they know that their labor will not be repaid with labor.

An emergent theme brought up among the elders is the child discipline policy in America. It was brought up by three out of the six elders during either the questions about cultural changes here in America or during the questions about status/power change. It was a conflict because they do not know what to do. If the Americans do not let them discipline their children by hitting them, then the elders believe the children would not listen. When the children do not listen, then the Americans blame the parents for not teaching the children. Thus, the elders have significant concerns on how they can discipline their children if the idea of hitting conflicts with United States law.

Similarly, many participants talked about decreases in what might be termed “domestic violence.” Some of the elders brought this up when they talked about child discipline and some brought it up at other points in the interview.
They said that men could not beat or threaten their wives as much as they did when living in Laos because of the American laws. The women said that men are decreasing in their power and are becoming more lenient toward women. However, one man said that he feels that women in this country have more rights than men, because the police and government would always take the women’s side. Overall, both the men and women said that they are acculturating to American ways, and the men are limited in their power and status.

LIMITATIONS

One of the biggest limitations for this research was the accuracy of the translation of the written research materials. The interview questions, consent form, and debriefing form were translated from English to Hmong, to the best of the researcher’s ability, with the help of some peers and the Hmong Women’s Heritage Association staff. Although it is very important to have interview questions and other written study materials translated back from Hmong to English to verify the accuracy of the translation, this was not done for the present research. This was due to limited resources and time and may have affected the accuracy of the translated materials and, therefore, the analysis. In order to keep the analysis as accurate as possible, the researcher did not include information that was not relevant to the questions. There are only a few of these answers that were believed to be irrelevant and were, therefore, thrown out.

Another limitation of the present research was the number of interviewees and the insufficient representation of male participants. There were four female participants, but only two males. It is believed that Hmong men are more reserved and hesitant to participate in this kind of study than Hmong women. However, it is important to collect a variety of views from both men and women because, as discussed in previous studies (Xiong 2000; Tatman 2004), men and women have a different experience of acculturation and acculturation stress. In addition, the small sample size increases the likelihood that other prominent themes may be present in the population but were not discussed by the study participants. There was also not enough information to make a real solid analysis of how the Hmong elders cope with acculturation stress because of the limited number of participants.

FUTURE RESEARCH

For future research, back translation should be used for any translation to ensure the accuracy of the information. A larger sample size and more male participants should be recruited to provide more insights and information about Hmong elders’ experiences in acculturation.
Future research should consider conducting a quantitative study that examines how variables such as social events, Hmong radio, the elders’ ability to drive, and religion affect the elders’ stress level. This quantitative research will help answer the question of what factor help Hmong elders live successfully in the United States. In terms of more qualitative research, researchers should develop more specific questions that will be easier for elders to answer. In this research, some elders were confused by the broad questions and gave unclear answers.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to understand how Hmong elders cope with acculturation stress in the United States. It is important to explore Hmong elders’ coping mechanism for acculturation stress because, according to the Office of Refugee Resettlement, Hmong have been labeled as one of the most difficult groups to acculturate into the American culture. Research such as the current study will help professionals understand the perspective of Hmong elders and their way of coping so they can better serve the Hmong elders in dealing with their stress. The present researcher explored the Hmong elders’ experiences acculturating to American culture and customs through individual interviews. Through these interviews, Hmong elders were able to share some of their experiences about how they cope and feel about the changes within the Hmong community.

The researcher found that Hmong elders are assimilating and integrating into the American culture; however, they still struggle with power and control over their lives. The Hmong elders felt that education and knowledge constitute power, and because most Hmong elders are illiterate, they feel that they have very little power to control their lives. With this study, the researcher was able to understand that the Hmong elders’ way of coping with this lack of control is to let the problem go and detach themselves from the problem or stress.
REFERENCES


