

Caught Between Cultures: Hmong Parents in America's Sibling Society

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Abstract

Based on a qualitative study of the Hmong Community in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, this paper addresses the conflict between the traditionally hierarchical and patriarchal Hmong culture and those aspects of American culture that elevate freedom and equality over, not only patriarchy, but over hierarchy in general. Although this conflict has forced the Hmong community to change in some positive ways, it also creates great challenges for parents and their children. Distorted values of "freedom" and "equality," promoted by much of American culture, compromise the ability of many Hmong to be effective parents. A comparison of traditional Hmong parenting with what author Robert Bly calls America's "sibling society" demonstrates that both Hmong and mainstream families and society are hurt by a general rejection of authority and would greatly benefit from recognizing the value of hierarchy based on experience, genuine accomplishment and wisdom .

Introduction

According to community estimates, the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota, are home to some 65,000 Hmong people, one of the largest Hmong communities in the United States (Hmong National Development and Hmong Cultural and Resource Center, 2004). The federal government has now agreed to accept some 14,000 additional Hmong refugees, current residents of Wat Thamkrabok, a large Hmong refugee community in Thailand. By early 2005, approximately 5000 members of this group are expected to arrive in the Twin Cities.

I had the opportunity to visit Wat Thamkabrok in Thailand in January 2002. Residents lived in a cramped, unnatural environment, unable to engage in traditional Hmong farming and, because of restrictions imposed upon them as non-citizens of Thailand, also often unable to gain substantial employment outside the camp. Life in Wat Thamkabrok, however, much more closely resembles that of a traditional Hmong village than it does the life the refugees will

experience as city dwellers in the United States. Like those who came before them, they will have to leave a small, pre-industrial, closely-knit tribal community, in which they share deeply understood and agreed upon traditions and values and adjust to 21st century American urban culture (Meridith, Abbott and Cramer, 1986; Chan, 1994; Jacobs, 1996; Fadiman, 1997, Faderman, 1998).

This paper, based on a qualitative ethnographic study of the Twin Cities Hmong community, is about Hmong parents and children caught in a conflict between the traditionally patriarchal and in some ways, hierarchical, Hmong culture and those aspects of American culture that elevate freedom and equality over, not only patriarchy, but over hierarchy in general. Although this clash affects relationships both between men and women and between parents and children in the Hmong community, the issues are very different. In this paper, I will focus on how, in America, distorted values of “freedom” and “equality” compromise the ability of many Hmong to be effective parents.

The Study

The primary research question guiding this study was “How do relationships in the Hmong community work?” More specifically, “What are overt and covert rules of interaction and how is conflict managed?” The nature of the research question called for a qualitative approach by which I could capture the experiences and perceptions of members of the Hmong community. In addition to in-depth, open-ended interviews with approximately 35 members of the community, I used methods of ethnographic study (Spradley, 1979), such as participant observation (Patton and Westby, 1992), and document analysis (Van Maanen, 1982), in order to deepen my understanding of Hmong culture. I attended a number of community events, (e.g. weddings, funerals, Hmong New Years celebrations and ceremonies), and examined *The Hmong Times*, the community newspaper; the *Paj Ntaub Voice*, a literary journal for Hmong authors; and the *Hnub Tshiab Newsletter*, published by the Hmong Women's Action Team, a group of young feminist activists. In order to gain a sense of what traditional Hmong life looked like before the

people experienced the enormous impact of moving to the US, I also spent three weeks in Thailand, visiting several Hmong communities in that area, including Wat Thamkabrok. Three Hmong women were hired as interpreters/cultural brokers to assist at community events and in face to face interviews, when the interviewee did not speak English. One of the interpreters did most of the work in the US, with a second acting as back up. The third interpreter went to Thailand with me. During the study, I sought consultation from two professional social workers, a Hmong man and a Caucasian woman who had worked in the Hmong community for many years.

In response to questions about relationships, most of the participants spoke about those between men and women. They spoke about those relationships in the context of the larger culture (e.g. the importance of community, clan and family, the process of resolving conflicts, values, etc). A discussion of the major findings of the study as well as more details about the methodology can be found in Kaiser (2003). However, the parent/child theme emerged as well. Although a minor aspect of the study's results, this theme deserves attention. It is important to recognize that the discussion that follows shines the light on a particular tension and, as such, does not take into consideration many other complex aspects of both American and Hmong societies.

Traditional Hmong Childrearing Meets Mainstream America

Participants in the study, particularly those who hold more traditional values, reported that many Hmong parents in the United States are dismayed by their children's inappropriate behavior. They believe that American notions of freedom and egalitarianism influence children in very destructive ways. For example, the leader of an influential group that handles disputes among members of the community insisted that freedom of speech is a significant threat to the Hmong culture. He believes that when an individual can say what he or she wants to anyone else in the community appropriate boundaries of interaction between those with differing status break down. The result of such "freedom" and "egalitarianism," said many traditional Hmong who participated in this study, is that children do not obey their parents and are dangerously "out of

control.” For some parents, this may simply mean that a child is going out with friends. For others it includes such behaviors as joining gangs, using drugs, or (for girls) becoming sexually active and bringing shame upon themselves and their families.

A community leader who is a program director in a family service agency developed by the Hmong community told me that a major problem for Hmong families in the United States is that their children's behavior is being influenced by too many ethnic groups. This is in contrast to the traditional Hmong village, which was both isolated and homogeneous. Several parents in the study supported this view, explaining that in America it is necessary to keep their children very close to home in order to protect them from bad influences that will lead to a bad reputation in the community. One mother even reported insisting that her own children always bring their friends to her house, where she can monitor their activities closely. A related problem is that because parents and children in traditional Hmong villages spent the whole day together and were protected from outside cultural influences, they shared the same world and worldview. Children learned how to behave simply by experiencing and observing others. Parents did not directly tell their children what to expect. In the words of one father, “When I was young, I learned from my father side-to-side. In the United States, children learn face-to-face.” Given the overload of negative messages from peers and popular culture in America, Hmong children need, but often do not receive, very firm and explicitly stated guidelines from their parents.

In traditional Hmong culture, children who are “out of control” would be properly subject to shaming and corporal punishment (Timm, 1994). Many parents are very critical of and sometimes physically abusive to their children. The more their children act in ways that are “out of control,” the more desperate and therefore punitive many parents become. Children exposed to American notions of enhancing self-esteem, of “being one's own person” and of cultivating independent thought and action often experience their parents as uncaring, over-controlling, and even cruel.

A major complaint reported by many Hmong parents is that schools, human service workers, and police do not help them. A Hmong male human service worker, whose clientele is Hmong adults, expressed this view when he observed that "the law" (a term that for him included various systems, such as human services, schools and the police) does not punish children enough. For example, rather than locking up a child who is out of control, the child usually goes free and faces few consequences. This, he believes, reflects a general lack of caring in American society. His view is very understandable, given his experience in Laos, where the entire social structure supported adherence to the norms of the community. Men and elders had significantly more status and power than either women or children. Children had no option but to obey their elders. If a child were being punished for misbehaving, no one in the community would challenge the parent's right, indeed obligation, to do so. In school, it was the teacher's job to control the child. Many Hmong raised in Laos were physically punished or publicly shamed in school for not properly preparing their lessons. None of the several participants of the study who told me such stories expressed regret or bitterness. Instead, they said they learned never to put themselves in such a position again. They often made a point of becoming excellent students in order to prevent future punishment. Never would parents challenge a teacher's right to punish their child.

The leader of the community group mentioned above stated that physical abuse of children never happens in the Hmong community in the United States. Several other participants in the study (primarily younger women and men whose experiences and values are less traditional) disagreed, maintaining that corporal punishment severe enough to be considered physical abuse does occur and that the community elders deny this reality. They maintain that the denial arises from two motives. First, many consider it a source of great shame to both the family and the entire community if an agency such as Child Protection becomes involved in a family's affairs. Second, because physical punishment is motivated by care and concern for the child, it is not considered abusive. The group leader stated that "In Laos, we would show them the rod and spank them out of love, but we don't do that here because the law won't let us." Here, he

reported, children get bruises by bumping into something and then lie about it at school, accusing their parents of abuse. He echoed the view of other participants in the study who believe that children take advantage of the leniency of the "law" in the United States. When they are upset with their parents, they tell the teacher their parents are abusing them. Neither teachers nor Child Protection workers ask the parents what is happening. Instead they simply label the parents as bad and take the children.

Like this man, many parents assume, incorrectly, that, rather than offer any support to the family, Child Protection will take their children if they discipline them at all. Of course, many teachers and human services professionals do indeed recommend a much more lenient style of parenting than that of traditional Hmong parents. And certainly the goal of Child Protection is to ensure the physical safety of children. If a child has bruises as a result of being hit, the line between discipline and abuse has been crossed.

The Sibling Society - Mainstream America

Prior to the latter part of the 20th century, family life in the United States was unabashedly patriarchal and hierarchical. The father had primary authority in the family and was supported by tradition, religion and the law. Like the Hmong in Laos, children were generally respectful to authority. Schools emphasized discipline, morals and memorization, rather than encouraging students' individuality and freedom of expression (Bly, 1996).

A significant trend in American mainstream society in the last five decades is the challenge to its oppressive and often abusive patriarchal social structure. A positive manifestation of this is the creation of laws that give more power to victims of abuse, discrimination and oppression both in families and in the larger community. This philosophy is embedded in the social work code of ethics, which stands against any kind of maltreatment based on race, gender, age, religion or culture and which promotes the well being and safety of all individuals, particularly those who are oppressed. However, in addition to these positive effects, the leveling of traditional hierarchy in the United States has also created what Robert Bly (1996),

calls a "sibling society." We see a powerful manifestation of this aspect of our culture, above all, that comes into direct conflict with traditional Hmong culture. This aspect of contemporary society, I believe, deserves much of the criticism expressed by Hmong with traditional values.

The Media

In the past, children learned cultural and spiritual values the same way that those in traditional Hmong communities did: from parents, teachers, and religious and community leaders. In today's society, the most powerful cultural broker and the most influential teacher of values is popular culture, particularly as depicted through the media (Walsh, 2001). At this point the average American child spends his or her time each week in the following manner:

.5 hours interacting one on one with father

2.5 hours. interacting with mother

5 hours. doing homework

26 minutes reading outside school

25 hours watching TV

(Walsh, 2001, p.42)

This does not include the amount of time spent on video games, using the internet, going to movies and listening to music.

Unfortunately, in most cases, the goal of the media is not in fact to teach children how to become responsible members of society or even to provide information and entertainment. Rather, the goal is to "deliver eyeballs to advertisers." (Walsh, 2001, p.57). In short, this means that we have turned much of the teaching of our children over to corporations who view them solely as consumers valuable for their ability to increase corporate wealth of the corporation owners.

One reason for this shift is the lack of time today's parents have to spend with their children. Since the advent of the industrial revolution, parents and children have not spent their days together as did the Hmong raised in Laos or in traditional settings in Thailand or China.

Given an increasingly disparate distribution of wealth in America, many families require both father and mother to work long hours to make ends meet leaving adults unavailable to their children. Between 1935 and 1990 the amount of time a father had to spend with his family went from 35 hours per week to 17 (Bly, 1996). An increasing number of single parent families exacerbates this problem, as it is even more difficult for only one parent to provide children with the degree of emotional and physical caring needed for healthy growth. This relative absence of parents and the strong presence of media has led to a situation in which media heroes and the often destructive messages promoted by the media have much more influence on today's children than do their families (Taffel, 2001). This phenomenon exists in the American Hmong community as well where children, like their mainstream counterparts, are exposed to a wide variety of destructive media messages.

In addition, the distinction between community leaders and media heroes has been significantly blurred (Downie and Kaiser, 2002). In 2003, California elected Arnold Schwarzenegger, an actor with no prior political experience whose movies promote adolescent violence as the solution to all problems. A few years earlier, Minnesota elected Jesse Ventura, a professional wrestler and radio talk show host with minimal prior political experience. His appeal was "refreshing" irreverence and perceived authenticity, characterized by vulgar and provocative statements and behavior. In 2001, while still governor, he accepted a job as commentator for XFL Football, a television show that focused not on the athletic ability of the players, but on gratuitous violence between players and implied sexual behavior between players and cheerleaders. Consciously created to grab the attention of 12-25 year old males, XFL Football sought to exploit the most pubescent urges of this group, again with the ultimate goal of making money for the network and its advertisers.

Families and Schools

Since the 1950's we have seen an increasingly pervasive rejection of the values of postponement of pleasure, hard work, control of impulses, and authoritarian limit setting by

adults, particularly fathers. Bly (1996) notes that the work to dismantle an oppressive patriarchy was a positive thing. However, he maintains that there has been little recognition that the same larger forces that rejected the authority of the father are now rejecting the mother – and all authority - as well. At this point many parents feel deeply discounted and lack confidence in their right, in fact obligation, to be authority figures in their children's lives. More than any other time in the past, today's parents are inundated by parenting books and theories, all geared towards helping them alleviate the anxiety they bring to this role (Hurlbert, 2003). Rather than being willing to take an unpopular stand, many parents are more concerned with being loved by their children and with protecting their children's sense of self esteem and personal empowerment than with insisting on high standards of performance and behavior.

A particularly noticeable characteristic of a sibling society is a belief that no one is superior to anyone else. This includes a rejection of ideas, beliefs, traditions and teachings offered by previous generations. Americans are increasingly ignorant of history, art, music, geography, literature, religious and philosophical ideals, and moral issues (Bly, 1996, Downie and Kaiser, 2002). As the idea that there is such a thing as superior art, music and literature is discounted, so are the standards for what is indeed considered superior (Bly, 1996).

The phenomenon of grade inflation is one obvious manifestation of the leveling of standards for performance (Rosovsky and Hartley, 2002). While grades have increased dramatically, both in high school and college, so has the need for remedial courses due to the large number of college students who graduate from high school unprepared (Levine, 1997). An attitude that contributes to this phenomenon is an assumption, held by many teachers, that all students can excel equally and that the most important factor in whether someone succeeds is their level of self esteem, rather than either their ability or commitment to discipline.

Accompanying this is a belief that any sort of rigor or criticism will be detrimental to self-esteem and, therefore, to the student's performance (Rosovsky and Hartley, 2002). In addition, teachers are frequently punished both by parents and school administrators for attempting to demand too

much, either with regard to schoolwork or to proper behavior. For example, research has indicated a positive correlation between high grades and high student evaluations of their teachers, which are now a major tool used by colleges and university to determine teaching effectiveness when making decisions related to salary, promotion and tenure (Wilson, 1998, Goldman, 1985).

As respect for elders diminishes, less and less real care is given to young people. In a public middle school in Minneapolis, a child who was running in the hallway responded to a teacher's attempt to stop him by saying "you can't stop me" and knocking her to the ground. The teacher's ankle was severely injured. The child was initially suspended for one day and, only after another teacher corroborated the first teacher's report, was the suspension raised to two days. In an interview for the Minneapolis Star and Tribune (Grow, 2004), the teacher discussed the increasing level of disrespect shown to teachers by administrators and by many students and parents. According to both this teacher and to the district director of student engagement, the reason for this particular light punishment was a recent mandate to reduce the large number of suspensions to encourage teachers to develop other forms of discipline. According to the administrator, teachers simply need to learn more about working with children who come to school with many needs and are not prepared to learn. Although this is a worthy and very important goal, the head of the Minneapolis teacher's union was quoted as stating that the district was taking this idea to an illogical extreme, forcing teachers to be far too lenient. In her opinion, the major reason teachers are leaving the field is poor student behavior and the lack of support they receive to deal with it effectively. The resulting chaos in many schools leads to a general lack of safety, not only for those children who are not experiencing firm limits, but for other students in the environment. Contrast this situation to the one described above, where traditional Hmong society would, without question, support the teacher's authority to discipline a child behaving in a much less offensive manner.

Bly (1996) observes a strong lack of a sense of appreciation not only among adolescents but among adults in the United States as well as a decreasing sense of the importance of responsibility, hard work or indebtedness to a god or to a higher power. We can see this phenomenon reflected in the pain of the Hmong elders whose children have no idea how to properly perform age-old spiritual rituals that acknowledge a profound debt to the spirit in all things, have no appreciation for or even knowledge of the ancestral stories and inherent values of the culture, and are rejecting millennia-old traditions and standards of moral behavior. Without this appreciation, Bly maintains that a child cannot become fully adult.

Conclusion

This discussion has important implications for those who work with Hmong youth and families. In order to help bridge the gap between parents and children, it is necessary to recognize and address the parents' real and appropriate concerns. It is not only ineffective, but potentially destructive, to expect Hmong families simply to assimilate. Mainstream American culture is eroding traditional Hmong values. Some of the changes are positive. For example, the Hmong Women's Action Team, a women's advocacy group, contends that sexism (an inherent devaluation of women) leads to violence. They are working to educate the community about the destructiveness of sexist beliefs as well as of customs, such as polygamy and early marriage that hurt both women and children. Some of the changes, however, are quite negative. Many Hmong children have been involved in criminal gangs and/or drug use. Replacing an ancient culture with certain shortcomings with American "trash" culture is not a good trade. Does America have something more substantial than a sibling society to offer them? Hierarchy is not, by definition, bad. It becomes destructive when status is based on attributes like gender, race or class, rather than on experience, genuine accomplishment and wisdom. In many ways, the Hmong recognize this. That is, although the culture is somewhat patriarchal, it is also the case that traditional Hmong society does not have a caste system, nor do the leaders inherit their power. Rather, they have to earn their status and authority .

Respect for the latter type of hierarchy is essential to the well being not only of Hmong families but of society as a whole. It includes acknowledgment that adults know more than children and are responsible for their care, that children have much of importance to learn from those who came before them, and that being adult requires responsibility for the care and preservation of the larger community and civilization.

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