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Race, Ethnicity, and the Incorporation Experiences of Hmong American Young Adults: Insights From a Mixed-Method, Longitudinal Study

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Abstract

Through the lens of racialized incorporation, this paper draws upon three decades of surveys and interviews to analyze the initial experiences of young adult Hmong migrants in the United States. The first part describes the aspirations and understandings of these young adults as adolescents (circa 1989–1994). Early in resettlement, they, like their parents, stressed education and mobility; however, in contrast to traditional assimilation theory and model minority stereotypes, their aspirations were oriented toward family, traditions, and ethnic identification. The second section (2002–2007) documents how they came to embrace a distinctive bicultural identity during the transition to adulthood even as they became increasingly aware of its tenuousness, the constraints of racism, and their own complicated place in American racial hierarchies. Focused on ethnic identity and the complexity of racialization, the Hmong case provides the foundation for theorizing varied patterns of incorporation and the value of multi-method, life-course approaches.

Keywords

racialized incorporation; immigration; race/racism; Hmong Americans; Asian Americans; refugee resettlement

In the 21st century, as generations of migrants have matured and the movement of diverse peoples all over the world continues, scholars and policy makers have taken a renewed interest in the processes, conditions, and experiences of immigrant incorporation (Marrow 2020; Ali and Hartmann 2015). In this context, researchers have been particularly interested in migrant groups of diverse origins (Waldinger 2015) and in varied contexts of reception (Golash-Boza and Valdez 2018; Crul, Schneider, and Lelie 2012). Such research has focused especially on communities of lower socio-economic status (Alba and Foner 2015), religious and cultural outsiders (Bulmer and Solomos 2018), and those who don't fit traditional racial binaries such as Latinx Americans (Telles and Sue 2019; Flores-Gonzalez 2017).

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One result of this burgeoning body of work has been the emergence of new, more nuanced conceptualizations of migration, incorporation, and multiculturalism. Combining the insights of established, if often contested frameworks of neo-assimilationism (Alba and Nee 2003; Joppke and Morawska 2003) and racialization (Bonilla Silva 2004; Roth 2012), emerging theories of racialized incorporation (Hartmann, Baiocchi, and Swartz 2018) and racialized assimilation (Lee and Kye 2016; Chaudhary 2015) have emphasized the uneven, incomplete integration of diverse, non-European migrants.

Yet much work on race, culture, context, and incorporation remains to be done, particularly with respect to unpacking what is meant by "race" and racialization, attending to subjective dimensions of incorporation, and specifying the unique combinations of identity, agency, and structure that appear in different racialized contexts.

One group that has been particularly interesting and understudied, at least in the United States, involves migrants of Asian origins. Asian Americans are a growing and heterogenous group, marked by differences of nationality, language, socio-economic status, religious affiliation, racial designations, and legal status (Lee and Ramakrishnan 2021). Moreover, Asian American migrants and various Asian Americans groups exhibit remarkably complicated and uneven socio-economic statuses—successful in some contexts and on some measures, yet facing persistent challenges and inequities on others (Lee and Kye 2016; Lee and Zhou 2015). At the root of the racial specificities of the Asian American experience are stereotypes such as "model minority" or "perpetual foreigner," and the complicated position Asian Americans occupy in a traditionally dichotomous black/white American racial order (Tuan 1998; Kim 1999; Lee and Bean 2007; Lee 2015).

It is within the context of these questions about race, migrant incorporation, and the diversity of Asian America that we situate this mixed-method, longitudinal study of the early experiences of one group of Asian American immigrants: young adult Hmong refugees. Relatively understudied but not entirely unknown (Zhou et al 2018; Wong 2017; Tapp 2015; Vue 2012; Vang 2010; Hein 2006;), Hmong immigrants are uniquely positioned in the United States and within the American racial/ethnic order. On the one hand, Hmong Americans defy dominant cultural stereotypes and structural conditions about many Asian Americans and the standard ethnic enclave trajectory: a refugee group from a largely rural, traditionalist culture (Hamilton-Merritt 1993), Hmong refugees have been among the poorest, least educated of American migrants (Teranishi, Lok, and Nguyen 2013). In Minnesota Hmong migrants are positioned socially, culturally, and even geographically on the lower end of the social stratification hierarchy in population centers like the Twin Cities. At the same time, however, Hmong refugees have experienced success and mobility, especially in locales which afford access to state, non-governmental, and co-ethnic social supports and resources (Swartz, Lee, and Mortimer 2003; Vang 2010).

Data and Methods

This paper is based upon rich, mostly unexplored data on the experience of Hmong refugees in Saint Paul, Minnesota collected through the longitudinal Youth Development Study. The "YDS" is an ongoing longitudinal study of adolescent (and young adult) development and

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life experience focused primarily on the domains of education, work, family, and mental health. The initial YDS sample was drawn randomly from a list of ninth grade students attending St. Paul public schools. 1138 students and their parents, including 128 purposely subsampled Hmong families, consented to participate. The first data collection occurred in spring 1988 with 1105 students, 105 of whom were Hmong (9 percent, the same as the public school population at the time), completing surveys during their first year of high school. (Of the non-Hmong respondents, 74 percent were White, 10 percent were African American, 5 percent Latino/Latina and 11 percent from other ethnic backgrounds.) This student panel was surveyed in the schools each year from 9th through 12th grades. Parents completed surveys in the first and fourth years; because of language barriers, face-to-face surveys, supplemented with some open-ended interviewing, were administered to Hmong parents. Follow-up surveys of students were conducted near-annually after high school graduation until 2011, with one final survey in 2019. Select sub-samples (usually around a dozen per period) were also periodically interviewed, including focus groups and/or in-depth interviews with various Hmong respondents conducted in 1995, 1997, 2002–2004, and 2007. Hmong interviewees were, with only two exceptions, of the 1.5 generation (Rumbaut 2004)—that is, they were born abroad and arrived in the United States before age 12. They were also slightly more educated than the original student sample, though there was a balance between those who pursued college and those who did not.

Given our interests in migration and incorporation, this study is focused on how this 1.5 generation of Hmong migrants understood and experienced attainment and mobility, acculturation, ethnic identity formation, cultural preservation, and racism, boundaries, and discrimination in their adolescence and young adulthood. Using established methods of qualitative thematic coding and interpretive analysis (Charmaz 2006, Pugh 2013), the analysis unfolds as follows. We begin with a brief description of the refugee experience that has been a key “context of reception” (Golash-Boza and Valdez 2018) for all Hmong immigrants. Then, in the first full section, we present an overview of the experiences of Hmong migrants as adolescents. Based upon the YDS surveys, contemporaneous interviews, and subsequent self-reflections, we pay particular attention to the subjective attitudes, understandings, and expectations of these young people vis-à-vis education, Americanization, cultural preservation, and mobility during their adolescent / high school years. Drawing from surveys and focus groups conducted after graduation (circa 2002–2007), the second half of the paper then traces understandings of achievement, incorporation, and acculturation during their transition to adulthood. This section captures evolving dynamics of incorporation and mobility, as well as the complexity of ethnic identification and Asian American stereotypes; also in this period, awareness and understanding of race and racism became far more explicit, structuring, and nuanced as did the desire for a distinctive, bi-cultural pathway.

Overall, our goals are twofold. First and most basic, we present a critical, theoretically-informed description of the Hmong incorporation experience, one that captures the evolving structural and racial contexts of reception as well as the emphasis Hmong respondents place on ethnic identity and racialized experiences. Second, we use this case study to contribute to emerging frameworks of racialized incorporation and suggest the value of historically-situated, mixed-method life course approaches for doing so. Key contributions

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on the theory front include unpacking the structuring significance of racial stereotypes and hierarchies as well as re-establishing the importance of ethnic identity and agency in forging distinctive immigration pathways.

Nested Context: The Formative Significance of Hmong Refugee Status

Beginning in 1976, the United States began accepting Hmong refugees who had assisted U.S. military operations in Laos. Large numbers of these refugees settled in the Twin Cities of Minnesota through primary and secondary chain migration. By the early 2000s, St. Paul had become home to the largest urban Hmong population in the United States. As of 2010, the estimated 29,662 Hmong living in St. Paul, made up about 10% of the total population of that city (U.S. Census Bureau 2012); the 2010 census found 66,181 Hmong living in the state taken as a whole.

In their generative segmented assimilation theory, Portes and Zhou (2003) specified “government policy” as a key structural variable shaping the incorporation experience of migrants to the United States. They further suggested that a receptive or favorable policy was one that allowed “legal entry with resettlement assistance” (see also: Bloemraad 2006; Ong 2003.) A Hmong enclave took shape in the unlikely context of Minnesota precisely because of the state’s relatively progressive welfare state policies as well as refugee resettlement programs of social service agencies, the development of Mutual Assistance Associations, and growing Hmong co-ethnic networks (Vang 2010). But while Portes and Zhou posited refugee status as an externally imposed condition, the Hmong experience also suggests a somewhat more complicated cultural reality. No matter what their age, time in America, or own personal experience, refugee status is (and remains) a distinctive aspect of Hmong American identity and incorporation.

For parents who fought in wars and experienced hostility directly, refugee memories and experiences were foremost. But they also profoundly impacted the next generation who are the focus of this study. With 61% of the Hmong respondents having moved to Minnesota after 1980—primarily from refugee camps in Thailand, all spent some portion of their childhood in Southeast Asia. Even if they could not actually recall memories of Laos or Thailand, stories of flight, encampment, and migration remained very much at the forefront of their understandings of their family stories, who they were, and how they were supposed to live. The Hmong refugee experience was culturally mobilized and shaped by community members themselves contributing to social solidarity and collective identification. Refugee status, in other words, not only constituted the material conditions of Hmong incorporation, it was a key component of the symbolic repertoire (Cornell and Hartmann 2007, pp. 236–243) by which Hmong identity, culture, and community was (re-)constructed in the American context.

This history of refugee relocation also impacted the material conditions of their families during their childhoods in the United States. In large part because of casualties of war and post-war conditions, a large number of the Hmong youth (53%) in our study come from households without their biological father. Prior to migration most of the parents of the Hmong youth in this study were shifting subsistence farmers in the rural areas of Laos with

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fathers averaging two years of schools and mothers none. As a result, Hmong migrants came to the Twin Cities area with knowledge and skills that were not easily transferable to the labor market in metropolitan Minnesota. Consequently, only 28% of the Hmong fathers and only 14% of Hmong mothers worked outside the home while their children were in high school (compared to 91% of non-Hmong YDS respondents' fathers and 79% of non-Hmong mothers who were employed). Those that were employed primarily worked in low-paying, service and manufacturing jobs. Sixty-two percent of Hmong families in the YDS had incomes under $10,000 (1988) when the youth were high school freshmen, and 87% of these Hmong families lived in poverty according to the federal poverty guidelines.

In terms of objective conditions, then, the refugee status of Hmong migrants was associated with a favorable policy environment and strong co-ethnic community that helped balance and offset other disadvantages. In addition, refugee status was also a cultural touchstone, a formative aspect of collective identification and social solidarity in the context of migration, resettlement, adaptation, and incorporation.

Initial Experiences, Aspirations, and Attainment (1989–1994)

Despite the structural challenges they faced, our Hmong subjects had tremendous hopes and expectations for life in the United States. Like most young American adolescents, Hmong youth had ambitions for good jobs, upward mobility, and high status in American society. Key to their visions for achieving future success were their beliefs in American schools and in education generally. As high school students, their attitudes about schooling and educational aspirations were high, indeed essentially indistinguishable from those of their non-Hmong counterparts. Like other YDS respondents and common in immigrant communities, Hmong youth saw education as very important and hoped that they would be able to go to college with plans to attain four-year bachelor's degree if not higher (Swartz, Lee, and Mortimer 2003).

These views were fairly widespread in the Hmong community, and reinforced within peer networks. For example, when asked to reflect on what aspect of high school was especially influential in achieving success, one respondent stated: "I had (Hmong) friends who were academically oriented, and of course if you are in that crowd, you will aspire to be like others…Because I wanted to do well, because of my social group, I took college prep classes." Across all periods of interviewing, those who were successful in school cited their friends as encouraging their school achievement and serving as an important social support network who motivated and understood each other.

These high educational aspirations were reinforced by their refugee parents. Hmong parents believed that they themselves had very little chance of upward mobility due to linguistic, cultural, and educational barriers. However, like many American immigrants before them, they had a great deal of faith in the opportunities their children would encounter in the United States, and viewed education as the path out of poverty and into what they considered to be "good jobs." Some Hmong parents hoped their children would move into high status and financially rewarding professions like medicine or law. Others wanted their children to secure non-manual, higher status "office jobs" in business and government. Parents viewed

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education as the route to a more financially secure life than the one they had. "I just want her to have a good education so that she can work where she can support her family and she won't have to struggle with a lot of different jobs like me." Another couple recalled these hopes for their children: "We told them to go to school so that their lives were not like ours—so they would have a house and a good job so that their lives weren't as impoverished as ours."

Hmong parents actually had higher educational aspirations for their children in high school than non-Hmong parents. In fact, the Hmong youth who went to college retrospectively attributed their academic attainment to parental support and/or pressure, which they viewed as characteristic of Hmong parents. As one young man put it: "My mom [was] always saying, 'Son, you have to go off to college…and learn as much as you can.' And in a way I did not have a choice. They always keep pushing you and…they always question you, 'Hey, how come you didn't bring any homework today?' They always ask you questions. And they would push you and push you… And I think that's why I had the success that I did in high school."

Expectations to apply their efforts in school seem to have affected their study habits. YDS surveys during their high school senior year indicated that Hmong respondents spent more time on homework than non-Hmong peers, studying an average of 21 hours per week (as compared with an average of 8 hours per week reported by their non-Hmong classmates). These high aspirations and efforts paid off, at least in terms of educational attainment. Self-reported grade point averages (our best measure) for Hmong respondents in high school were higher than non-Hmong respondents, 3.05 high school GPA reported by Hmong youth, significantly higher than the 2.77 average reported by other YDS high school seniors from this socio-economically diverse urban sample. Hmong students had a lower high school drop-out rate than others, with only 5% of Hmong students in the sample dropping out by their senior year, compared with 9% of non-Hmong students. This was even despite high rates of marriage (70%) and childbearing (approximately 50%) among Hmong girls in the sample during high school. During the year after high school, Hmong respondents enrolled in college at higher rates than non-Hmong (71% versus 61%), with no significant differences in the types of college (e.g. community college, 4-year University) between Hmong and non-Hmong (Swartz et al. 2003). By age 38, Hmong respondents' educational attainment (some college on average), annual income ($75,000), and employment status (87%) were comparable to the main YDS sample.

Some scholars might take these patterns of achievement as evidence of assimilation; however, a closer look reveals a somewhat more complicated story, one that helps us better appreciate the varied ways in which racialization, social context, and ethnic identification shape contemporary American incorporation. For starters, Hmong youth reported parental restrictions on peer socializing and afterschool activities as sources of family conflict that created feelings of social difference. These feelings were exacerbated in public and institutional settings. Hmong students described experiences in school that reinforced a sense of ethnic difference that sometimes hardened into boundaries of "otherness." One respondent, for example, was asked to "instruct" a more recently-arrived Hmong girl who had worn a nightgown to school about norms of American dress. This story was memorable

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to this respondent not only because it made her responsible for other co-ethnics, but also because it associated her with those whom were less acculturated than herself. Hmong youth reported being regularly called upon by teachers or school administrators to "represent" the Hmong community.

Other interviewees talked about English as a Second Language programs. Although the majority believed that "ESL" was helpful to them as students, some recalled being angry when they were placed in such classes even after they had gained proficiency in English. Many felt that these classes marked them as distinct from their classmates. "Mee" recalled her feelings as a child in ESL classes: "And the thing is that while growing up, I didn't think that I needed it…Fourth or fifth grade I tested out and I didn't have to go anymore. But it was just something that you felt, 'Okay. (Sighs). I'm going to this special class because like we're stupid, that's why they put us in this class.'" When she was older, Mee consciously decided not to put her son in ESL classes even though his first and home language was Hmong so that he would not have this same experience: "I want him to be normal like the rest of the kids. I don't want him to feel like, 'Oh there's something wrong with me.'"

Some viewed such experiences of being singled out as racial discrimination, and interviewees and focus groups regularly debated which St. Paul schools were most welcoming to Hmong students. Such discussions were not just based on whether other students accepted them as peers, but also on encounters with school administrators, teachers, and counselors. One high school student said that some high school teachers spoke "nicer" to the "American people" they teach than they did to "Asian people," reflecting a lack of concern for Hmong youth. Another woman told a retrospective story about not being admitted to a particular high school through open enrollment because a school counselor said the school already had "too many Asians." Both in high school and reflecting back, respondents perceived differential treatment from teachers, echoing this young woman: "Being a minority, a Hmong, you know, you have to be twice as good as somebody else to get the same kind of treatment." Even when they did not encounter overt prejudice or discrimination, Hmong youth saw obstacles to their success in school, saying they had to work harder than "American" kids—which they meant *white* youth—to be successful.

On the other hand, not all Hmong respondents mentioned racism of any significance in high school, and many credited individual teachers who had been particularly helpful to them and praised schools that facilitated their ambitions and achievements. For these youth, feelings of difference were not so much imposed from the outside as they were cultivated from within their own kin, clan, friendship, and family networks. This is a crucial point. Such feelings of distinctiveness were a central aspect of Hmong ethnic identity, community, and culture.

Viewing themselves as different resulted from social arrangements and cultural practices that clearly, and often intentionally, marked Hmong individuals and the Hmong community in general. Demographic data (as well as interviews) make it clear that Hmong adolescents in the early 1990s resided both physically and culturally in ethnic enclaves in the most traditional geographical sense (Vang 2010). They also lived in or near large, intergenerational households and reported that their peer circles were mostly Hmong.

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Throughout high school, moreover, Hmong youth retained vital and rich elements of Hmong culture and lifestyle including language, food, kinship patterns, clan rituals, cultural festivals and celebrations. One primary theme in interviews with parents was about the need to retain the distinctive Hmong culture they brought from Laos.

Both this externally imposed and culturally constituted sense of being different from other Americans contributed to the centrality of Hmong identity in moving through high school and their subjective understanding of being in America. Respondents saw themselves not as trying to shake off or transcend their ethnicity but as carving out their own distinctive niche and place within the American landscape. Unpacking the unique dimensions and context of this collective identification also helps specify the distinctive Hmong conception of and orientation to education as it related to their ongoing incorporation into American society.

The fact that educational attainment for Hmong youth was not primarily about assimilation or individual upward mobility was not necessarily because Hmong youth didn't aspire to that; they believed it important to establish their economic standing, and at least in the abstract, these young people expressed disappointment or frustrations at not being able to be like other, "regular" or "normal" (again: read "white") American kids in some ways. Rather, the old-fashioned assimilation-via-education we often associate with earlier generations of European immigrants simply wasn't seen as a realistic option for them.

One reason goes back to the fulfillment of familial and collective obligations in an immigrant community. From their earliest days, Hmong youth stressed collective rather than individual reasons for academic achievement. As one woman put it, "I started to think about college… way back …when we were in the war and my dad said that he was going to bring us to America for school. I wanted to succeed in school not just for myself, but for my whole family, and for them because they never had a chance to go to school." Another shared a similar motivating memory: "I remember my father telling us when we were coming from Laos, 'I am taking you to America to go to school,' and I always keep that in mind. I think I knew all along that I would go to college, because I had that in the back of my mind… In a way I really wanted my parents to be proud of me because they never got the chance to go to school." As one parent explained when her child was a freshman: "We have to study hard to be educated to satisfy our people who died in Laos and while crossing the Mekong River. A debt is owed to those who died in Laos so that we could come here. The children must study hard to pay back our people."

Young people and parents alike described Hmong youth who were academically focused as "traditional" and on a "good path," while those who focused on peers or fun were seen as too individualistic, self-centered, or "Americanized." Ironically, in other words, even though most Hmong parents had little formal education heeding parental wishes to apply oneself in school was viewed as maintaining traditional family order, authority, and traditions.

Scholars have documented similar visions of education among other immigrant families and communities (Cf. Portes and Rumbaut 2006; Park 2004). Estrada's (2019) ethnography of Latinx street vendors in Los Angeles, for example, shows that families sought to advance youths' education to help both individual parents and the ethnic community in what she calls

a “collectivist immigrant bargain.”. Our young Hmong respondents felt a responsibility, as one young woman put it, “to go to school, get a good job, to support your family…and also being concerned for the community and help your relatives;” respondents who aspired to careers in health care, education, and social services did so self-consciously to serve their communities.

However, there were also distinctive dimensions of the Hmong case. For one, growing up in the midst of a large and dense urban ethnic enclave was clearly a unique, driving factor in reinforcing connections to Hmong culture and community. Second, typical stereotypes about Asian Americans being model minorities—think of Lee and Zhou’s (2015) “stereotype promise”—weren’t really relevant to Hmong migrants given their recent arrival as refugees and relative poverty. Situating Hmong adolescents comparatively helps to illuminate a broader ethno-racial context, and sets of relationships and boundaries, that Hmong migrants were only beginning to make sense of in high school.

One aspect of the racial order they encountered was their relationship with other Asian American groups and broader racial stereotypes just alluded to. Not only did conventional racial stereotypes not fit, the whole concept of a pan-ethnic label was brand-new to these refugees. Another involved their relationship to white Americans and whiteness more generally. In contrast to how Jiménez and Horowitz (2013) describe Asian Americans in California’s Silicon Valley as seeing themselves as superior by virtue of their academic performance, Hmong Americans did **not** think they were better than white Americans in schools, much less aspire to be on an equal level; rather, they saw education as their particular path to community preservation in an otherwise stratified and competitive society. When it came to race, in fact, Hmong Americans tended to focus on communities of color on the lower end of American racial hierarchies, Black Americans in particular. And the primary concern among Hmong Americans was what scholars have called “ideological blackening” (Ong 2003 p.86)—the process by which Southeast Asian American refugees find themselves associated with African Americans by virtue of their socio-economic status and spatial proximity resulting from residential segregation (see also: Vue, Schein, and Vang 2016; Portes and Zhou 1993). These deeply racialized conditions provoked some anti-Black sentiment as well as racially-coded fears about gangs, especially from Hmong parents who tended toward stereotypes they learned in refugee camps before coming to America. But they also generated creative, nuanced multicultural identities and cultural forms as revealed in ethnographic studies of the period, such as Vue’s (2012) research on race, assimilation, and hip hop in the Twin Cities.[1]

Incorporation in Early Adulthood (2002–2007)

As these children of Hmong refugees moved from high school and adolescence into young adulthood, they began to exhibit a distinctive bicultural pathway of incorporation (Baiocchi and Hartmann 2017). On the one hand, they leveraged their educational ambitions into relatively high rates of college attendance and educational attainment, moved into good jobs

[1]Vue’s work centers the gendered dimensions of the dynamics of racialized incorporation. We do not have the space to discuss it here—except to note the complicated status of women and girls in traditional Hmong culture, and the relative freedom afforded to Hmong boys in the adolescent years as a result.

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and careers, and established families of their own. On the other hand, most of these young adults continued to reside in St. Paul or nearby suburbs, married co-ethnics, and lived in intergenerational households or regularly helped parents with translation and negotiating American institutions (and their parents helped them with childcare, food preparation, and the like). Many still used the Hmong language and maintained cultural customs, especially those associated with kinship and clan membership. At the same time, Hmong young adults experienced new forms of discrimination leading them to refine their understandings of stereotypes and hierarchies in the context of a racialized and increasingly diverse Midwestern American city.

With the new roles and responsibilities of young adulthood came new perspectives. As emerging young adults our Hmong respondents began to talk about a cultural change occurring for their communities and Hmong culture more generally. Far more than their parents, the younger generation believed that what it meant to be Hmong was undergoing a major shift from the culture carried to the U.S. from Laos by their parents. They began to realize that they and their generation would determine what it would mean to be "Hmong in America" and decide which elements of traditional Hmong and contemporary American culture they would incorporate or resist—e.g. individualism, gender relations, polygamy, ritual, authority, community obligation. Much as Kasinitz (2004) wrote about the new second generation at the time, Hmong young adults saw themselves and their culture as a "work in progress," accepting the fate of an inevitable hybrid culture and seeing themselves as cultural bridges, preserving the old and forging new culture in America for their children.

Our respondents were surprisingly comfortable with these developments, in some respects even upbeat. Among the key changes that occurred with the transition to adulthood was that much of the tension Hmong youth felt about feeling caught between cultures and generations in adolescence appeared to have dissipated. In contrast to a decade earlier, these children of Hmong refugees appeared fairly comfortable with who they were and their place in the world, accepting of and even embracing their hybrid, bi-cultural status. As one respondent put it: "I think I'm just, I'm really of both cultures and as much as I want to forget one sometimes when I am in one community, I can't."

Several factors help explain this general acceptance. First, Hmong young people had a better understanding of their parents than they did as adolescents, especially with regards to their parents' concerns about Americanization and excessive individualism. For example, although young adult parents could now afford day care, they often preferred to rely upon grandparents and relatives both to keep resources within the family and because they believed it to be "Hmong" to be interconnected with kin. Homeownership, intergenerational family life, and living in an ethnic enclave also played a part. One successful young adult explained how even though she could have moved out on her own, she instead bought a large house for the extended family to live in simply because it would have been "too selfish" to do otherwise. When another young woman was asked how long she expected her divorced brother-in-law and his children to live in her household with her husband, their children, and her husband's mother, she shrugged and said matter-of-factly "always, unless he gets remarried or something." Here, the co-ethnic context created unique conditions and support

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for ethnic identity development and preservation (and probably function much differently for Hmong and other migrants who move away from or are more isolated from ethnic enclaves).

As Hmong young adults became more established in socio-economic terms and more secure in their own hybrid, bicultural American identity, they expressed newfound concerns about losing traditional Hmong culture. These were less about them personally, than about the future of Hmong customs and community that would be available to their children. As Jer explained:

> When you are younger, you think, 'Oh, come on. We're in America. We're Americans…' But then as you start getting older, you're kind of like it's not, it's not about 'Hmong pride.' It's more about maintaining, it's your heritage. You want to be proud of what you have [and] where you came from and things like that. And you just want to maintain some of it. You want to remember some of it, instead of just, 'Oh, we have to go to a museum to see it.'

Food, clothes, rituals, stories—these were all things this woman said were essential to pass on to the next generation. As young adults, in fact, several Hmong respondents took on leadership roles in Hmong cultural and community organizations and kinship networks. When asked why she got involved, Mee explained:

> I think people are so busy surviving… that they aren't intentional about what their kids remember and keep. I don't want to wait until my kids are my age to teach them things… It needs to happen now. In Laos, Hmong was all around. But in the U.S. there are lots of different things competing for attention, so parents and grandparents really need to look at what it is we want kids to know and keep… without that, I think we will wake up and say 'How did we forget all this stuff?'

This potential loss of ethnic culture and identity is, of course, a familiar challenge confronting all immigrant groups; indeed, it is the essence of the "third generation" problem famously described by Hansen (1987 [1953]) in which the children of immigrants and the children of children of immigrants become nostalgic for traditional culture even as they themselves assimilate and lose touch. However, certain aspects of Hmong cultural preservation and biculturalism were quite distinct from some previous generations of American immigrants.

This generation felt particularly responsible because Hmong resettlement to the U.S. had largely ended and as a stateless people that depended on oral transmission of culture, they felt the lack of a homeland or a recorded history that future generations could turn to learn their culture heritage: "We don't have a country, a central place where we could still say 'Well all our people, all our roots, and our history and language and everything is still over here even though we lost [it] or assimilated over here'…It's just a matter of two or three…generations before we lost it all, no archives of our history …It's not like I can go to a Hmongland and say, 'at least I can still connect, even though I'm totally not Hmong anymore'…I still look Hmong, but everything about me is not, that's not going to happen unless we start to do something now."

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Relatedly, respondents frequently raised language-loss as a concern. Sometimes they discussed language for communication with elders, sometimes as useful for work, but most often related to identity. 'You are Hmong, so you should know your language' was a familiar refrain in our interviews. Tou explained why it was essential that his children be fluent in Hmong:

> You cannot remember your own language, you cannot remember your own culture. You're not white, you're not Hmong…You have to know your own language. You need to know a little bit about your own culture…You want to forget everything, you want to be like white people to follow their traditions but your skin color is not white.

Tou's was a fairly typical, traditional appeal to the importance of language acquisition for Hmong cultural preservation. These young adults did not want themselves or their kids to be seen as what they called "whitewashed" (Pyke and Dang 2003)—so assimilated as to be unable to identify with (or be identified with) or understand Hmong culture.

By situating this point in a larger racial context—the predominance of whites and whiteness in America—Tou was also suggesting that bilingualism wasn't only about preserving culture but about trying to secure a unique place, status, and identity for Hmong people in a racialized landscape where they were inevitably othered. This complicated, multifaceted discourse of ethnic culture and racial difference was typical of these Hmong young adults. Our respondents were familiar with being seen and treated differently because of their culture and skin color from their high school years. As then, not all of our respondents saw ethno-racial difference in young adulthood as constraining or discriminatory. When asked about race in young adulthood, for example, some interviewees attributed their post-secondary educational and job market achievements to college programs designed to serve underrepresented minorities, as well as faculty members who cared about diverse and disadvantaged students like themselves. However, while in college and then when entering the workforce, they also became more aware of the boundaries of race in American society and the ways in which they and others from their community were impacted by racism.

In their 20s, some respondents reported feelings of isolation and difference. While most continued to live in the Twin Cities with proximity to the enclave, those who had moved away from St. Paul noted standing out in white neighborhoods. As one said, "We didn't see any Asians at all, we went to the store and everyone kind of looked at you." Problematic encounters at work were commonly reported and understood in racial terms. Some of these anecdotes were about employers who, based upon stereotypes, asked them to help other new immigrants understand American culture and workplace norms, much as they had experienced in public high schools a decade before. Others talked about being complemented for the "good English," or forced to answer the question "where are you from?" by coworkers, clients, and customers. Still others described more overt forms of discrimination. For example, one young father told a story about an accident at work which gave him back pains, forcing him to stay in bed and call in sick. He was surprised and disturbed when the company sent two men to his house later that day. They entered his home on their own and frightened his children, all in an attempt to make sure he was actually in bed. Our respondent experienced this as a great violation and believed the company treated

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him this way because he was Hmong. He insisted this, "…never happened to white people. I talk to probably close to 100 white people everyday. I mention that and no, [it] never happened to them."

Such experiences opened the eyes of these young adults to the barriers of racism. This understanding of their own racial status and the complexities of race in America intensified as they became more involved with mainstream American institutions. "I felt like a second class citizen and now that I am an adult, it's hard for me to feel equal to the next guy because I am so used to being kept down."

E These experiences signaled for Hmong respondents the whiteness of the community and nation they were trying to fit into. "[When I think of America], I see white Americans," one interviewee told us. This respondent boldly stated that she could never be an American, even though she had recently become an American citizen and was a public school teacher. When asked why, she explained: "You think about all the hidden rules that you need to know to be an American. [And] your skin is not like theirs." As another put it, "No matter how much you try to be Americanized…people would never think you are American." Like other Americans of color, these respondents believed that they and their children were racially marked as "other" and would never be able to "blend" or "pass" as a generic American.

While ethnic stereotypes still held and some tensions with other racialized groups persisted, these experiences in young adulthood also helped cultivate new empathy and affinity for other people of color. "The minorities, we kind of understand each other… we have Black people at work, Mexican—because we don't have the same treatment like the white people do so we already know [how] each other feel." The more politically active respondents got involved with inter-racial organizations and activist groups largely because of their own experiences with racism and discrimination. Such experiences made Hmong young adults more aware of their racial categorization as Asian American and what this meant for their own identities. A young woman we called Maykolia summed up: "It is important for [our children] to know all this stuff because it is who they are, I mean that is part of who they are… even if I think 'I'm not Hmong' people will always look at me and go, 'Well you must be some kind of Asian woman,' and so they need to know who they are and they need to be grounded in culture and people and history."

While there is not space for a full discussion of emerging Hmong conceptions of Asian American pan-ethnicity, the takeaway is that the distinctive bicultural identity Hmong migrants were developing in the transition to adulthood was based in an understanding of the complexities of American race and racism—in particular, the dominance of whiteness and white Americans, on the one hand, and complicated relationships with other peoples of color, on the other, including the question of what it meant to be Asian American itself.

Conclusion

In recent years, much public and scholarly attention has focused on migrants and immigration. At the heart of discussion is the question of how newcomers of all backgrounds will adjust to their new lives in different contexts and diverse cultures. In view of such

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issues, we have presented a case study of the early incorporation experiences and cultural understandings of one relatively small, unique group of immigrants: Hmong refugees who came to metropolitan Minnesota as children with their parents from rural Southeast Asia in the 1980s.

We found that these refugee families came to the United States hopeful for education, opportunity, and mobility. They were also surprisingly successful at fitting into mainstream institutions of education and work. These patterns were consistent with basic processes and theories of traditional assimilation (Alba and Nee 2003). At the same time, numerous aspects of the Hmong experience did not accord with an assimilationist mode of incorporation. The Hmong young adults' desire and ability to maintain a distinctive ethnic identity and community, for example, would appear to challenge traditional assimilationist theories. Moreover, the barriers of racism and discrimination Hmong young adults found themselves and their aspirations coming up against is largely missing from traditional models, as are the complexities of American racial hierarchies and categories they had to navigate.

These findings have implications for social scientific research and theory in at least two areas. Perhaps most basic and theoretical is an emerging body of work on racialized pathways of social integration (Cf. Morrow 2020; Alarcon, Escala, and Odgers 2016; Ali and Hartmann 2015). These new approaches, extending from Portes and Zhou (1993), avoid the extremes of assimilationism and racialization by exploring the forces of both inclusion and exclusion—as well as agency and constraint, and ethnicity and race—at play in the incorporation experience. In dialogue with these theories, our analysis of the Hmong American case can help better conceptualize the immigrant incorporation experience as a set of distinctive, if often uneven and deeply racialized pathways for different migrant groups in varied social contexts—what might be thought of as "racialized incorporation" (Hartmann, Baiocchi, and Swartz 2018) or "racialized assimilation" (Lee and Kye 2016; Chaudhary 2015; see also: Golash-Boza 2006).

Of the key conceptual contributions that emerge from the Hmong refugee experience, perhaps most obvious is the centering of the different ways in which race, racism, and experiences with discrimination shape Hmong opportunities as well as their own sense of collective identity and culture. Over time, we see Hmong young adults not only have their lives structured by racial discrimination, but also develop increasingly sophisticated understandings of the complexity of American race relations and cultural categories—including Asian American categories and stereotypes—and how they can navigate or are constrained by these forces and the kinds of ethno-racial identities they can carve out in these contexts. Experiences with race and racism, in short, appear even more complicated and multifaceted than previous theories of assimilation have suggested.

The Hmong case also highlights the continuing importance of theorizing ethnic identity, solidarity, and agency as core to immigrant incorporation (Telles and Sue 2019). Sometimes overlooked by scholars focused on race and racism, culturally-specific dimensions of ethnic identification are themselves a key, determining component of the incorporation experience. Attending to the persistent power of ethnicity in the lives of migrants can refocus attention

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on the specificities and agency of diverse new immigrant communities, along the lines of Brown and Jones's (2015) "ethnoracialization" framework. Extending from this, the Asian American refugee case also calls attention to the need to better document and analyze the changing social, cultural, economic, and political conditions—the "nested contexts of reception" (Golash-Boza and Valdez 2018) within and against which all immigrants are "incorporated," including both the importance of co-ethnic communities as well as the complexities of situating within the pan-Asian category.

There is much research to do on racialized patterns of immigrant incorporation, particularly as migrants like our Hmong American young adults encounter new conditions and big barriers in the contemporary moment: more restrictive, even punitive policies for immigrants, refugees, and asylees (Massey and Sanchez 2010); the re-emergence and intensification of prejudice, bigotry, and xenophobia (Lee 2019); growing anti-Asian violence (Tessler, Choi, and Kao 2020); globalization, uneven development, and extreme social inequalities across the globe. These evolving contexts bring us to the second major contribution of this case study. It is methodological and involves the need for and value of historically-situated, life course perspectives in the study of racialized incorporation.

As they entered into young adulthood and had kids of their own, we saw our Hmong respondents develop new feelings of obligation and responsibility to maintain the Hmong culture in the United States, even while they wanted to integrate themselves into "mainstream" American culture and encountered the limitations of racial discrimination and prejudice. Listening to these shifting narratives of "growing up" Hmong in St. Paul as they finished schooling and entered the workforce, our second generation respondents began to more fully grasp the challenges that lay ahead of them and their community, especially in terms of the whiteness of mainstream American culture, the pernicious barriers of racism, and the complexities of American racial hierarchies and categories. How will these experiences and understandings shift in coming years? And how will they compare with those of other migrants in the US and elsewhere? This examination of the Hmong American experience across several decades reminds us that both racialized conditions and cultural understandings change over time, as well as of the powerful role that subjectivity and agency play in shaping the differential incorporation pathways of individuals and communities.

Immigrant incorporation is not static but dynamic; not one dimensional but multifaceted; not only externally determined but culturally navigated. And, perhaps most of all, immigrant incorporation is not linear, certain, or universal in a constantly changing and deeply racialized world. To understand these realities and complexities, we need to know how they are understood and experienced by migrants themselves.

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