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Pa Der Vang
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Pa Der Vang \textsuperscript{a} & Pa Her \textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a} School of Social Work, St. Catherine University, St. Paul, Minnesota, USA
\textsuperscript{b} Department of Social Science, New York City College of Technology, Brooklyn, New York, USA

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Teenage Marriage among Hmong American Women

Pa Der Vang  
School of Social Work, St. Catherine University,  
St. Paul, Minnesota, USA

Pa Her  
Department of Social Science, New York City College of Technology,  
Brooklyn, New York, USA

As Hmong transition to life in America, efforts are made by Hmong to maintain traditional cultural practices. This article explores the traditional practice of early marriage among Hmong women and their responses to this practice. As Hmong women acculturate to American ways, women may question the role of traditional practices in their identity and everyday lives. This study examines the family socialization and individual processes associated with teenage marriage among Hmong American women. Interviews with 12 Hmong American women who were married in their teens describe their experiences.

Keywords: Hmong American women, teenage marriage, Hmong adolescents, culture, family (social work)

INTRODUCTION

Studies show that a significant number of Hmong American girls continue to enter into teenage marriages despite the negative consequences of early marriage on socioeconomic and mental health outcomes (Lee, Xiong, & Yuen, 2006; Vang & Bogenschutz, 2011a, 2011b). Women who marry in their teens, regardless of race, are more likely to report lower educational attainment, lower income, and increased mental health symptoms later in life (Burden & Klerman, 1984; Teti & Lamb, 1989; Moore et al., 1993; Upchurch, 1993; Astone & Upchurch, 1994; Sharlin, 1998; Vang & Bogenschutz, 2011a, 2011b). Among scholars, there is increased focus on the factors that underlie teenage marriages (Dahl, 2010). Because many Hmong women in the United States still tend to marry in their teens (Bays, 1994; Dunnigan, Onley, McNall, & Spring, 1996; Vang & Bogenschutz, 2011a, 2011b), there is a critical need to understand the processes that contribute to Hmong American women’s entry into teenage marriage.

This study contributes to the literature by examining family socialization and individual processes related to teenage marriage among Hmong American women. Using narratives collected through semi-structured interviews, we examine family socialization experiences as well as familial values and beliefs that are transmitted from generation-to-generation to gain greater understanding of Hmong American women’s insights and perspectives pertaining to teenage marriage.

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Address correspondence to Pa Der Vang, School of Social Work, St. Catherine University, 2004 Randolph Avenue,  
Fontbonne Hall 204B, St. Paul, MN 55105, USA. E-mail: pdvang@stkate.edu
HMONG AMERICANS

Although there are debates as to where Hmong originated, research generally confirms that Hmong can be traced back as far as 2679 BC in China (Koltyk, 1998). The Hmong lived in the mountain areas in South China (Hamilton-Merritt, 1993). Their eventual displacement from China took place amid war and competition over economic resources in the 1800s. During this time of war and economic upheaval, a sizeable number of Hmong migrated to Southeast Asia while some stayed behind. The Hmong in Southeast Asia made their homes in countries such as Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, Burma, and Cambodia, and significant numbers continue to reside in these countries.

The Hmong in the United States are primarily from Laos, with small numbers from other countries as a result of secondary migration. The Hmong in Laos were recruited by U.S. CIA officials as soldiers in the Secret War, an effort to stop arms transport within Laos during the Vietnam War. Because of their role in the Secret War, the Hmong in Laos were forced to flee their villages in fear of persecution and retaliation from communist regimes in Laos. The Hmong sought shelter in Thai refugee camps until they were later resettled to various countries such as Australia, Germany, France, Canada, and the United States (Center for Cross-Cultural Health, 2000). Since 1975, the Hmong population in the United States has quadrupled, making it one of the fastest-growing Southeast Asian ethnic groups. Currently, nearly 227,000 Hmong live in the United States, with the largest populations in California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin (American Community Survey [ACS], 2009).

Hmong have historically been identified as highland dwellers who preferred an agrarian lifestyle; planting their own food and raising livestock for a living. This agrarian lifestyle led to the formation and necessity of large families; more children meant more help on the farm. The developmental period of adolescence that is present in the United States and other industrialized countries did not exist for Hmong in Laos. Hmong children were typically given adult responsibilities as they moved from childhood to adolescence. This developmental period of adolescence for the Hmong is changing in the United States as a result of acculturation to an American lifestyle where adolescence is considered a pivotal stage in human development (Larson, Wilson, & Rickman, 2009).

Hmong Beliefs and Customs on Marriage

Teenage marriage has been an accepted practice among the Hmong for centuries (Downing, 1984; Hutchison & McNall, 1994; Lee, 1997; McNall, Dunnigan, & Mortimer, 1994; Ngo, 2002; Swartz, Lee, & Mortimer, 2003; Lee et al., 2006). For Hmong, marriage is a defining practice that forms social bonds and interdependence between two clans. Because the Hmong place high value on the virtuousness of a bride, a younger bride was often preferred for there was a higher likelihood that she would be a virgin. Having a virtuous reputation also increased the likelihood that daughters would marry into a family with a good reputation, thus bonding her family of origin to a clan with a good reputation (a good reputation is one that denotes good genetic markers, wealth, or cleanliness and industriousness).

Hence, daughters were socialized early on for the next phase of life to be a wife and a daughter-in-law (Pho & Mulvey, 2003). Women who were not married by their late teens were considered “old maids” or unworthy of marriage (Thao, 1986; Donnelly, 1994; Symonds, 2004). Since the union of two clans reinforces an important virtue of interconnectedness and collectivism within Hmong society, teenage marriage remains intact in the United States despite the hindering consequences of this practice on the lives of Hmong American women (Lee et al., 2006; Vang & Bogenschutz, 2011a, 2011b).

In their countries of origin, marriage is a springboard into adulthood that occurred early in an agrarian society since the demand for labor left little time for adolescence (Symonds, 2004). Children in agrarian societies assumed early adult roles in order to contribute to the survival of the family. For daughters, this meant marriage soon after menses (Symonds, 2004). Brides
contributed domestic labor to their husband’s families while at the same time, as wives, women began bearing children soon after marriage, adding to the pool of labor supply available to her new family (Symonds, 2004). For parents of the bride, benefits came from marrying their daughter off early. Parents received a bride price paid by the groom’s family as compensation for the labor that would be lost to the family if she were to marry. The bride price also symbolized respect for the parents’ rearing of the daughter, her youth, and her virtuous status. In addition, teenage marriages were encouraged in order to prevent premarital pregnancies among teens: a time when the risk for premarital sex is typically high.

Scholars have argued in the United States that these traditional reasons for teenage marriage (i.e., marrying early to avoid spinsterhood and to maintain a virtuous reputation) are somewhat antiquated (Moua, 2003). However, most agree that teenage marriage in the United States continues among the Hmong, and the practice is carried out in much the same way as centuries before because it is ingrained in Hmong society. Though less is known about the precursors or causes that promote teenage marriage, we argue there may be different incentives or motivators that encourage teenage marriage in the United States. For example, the traditional practice of having the young couple reside with the husband’s family may have reinforced the value of maintaining a strong family unit; however, when teenage couples are provided food and shelter by family, teenagers do not face the fear that they must somehow fend for themselves in a labor-based wage-dependent economy. Having no housing costs may in effect neutralize the economic responsibilities of marriage because the couple can live together free of any housing costs to them. Additionally, when the couple gives birth to their first child; parent, grandparents and siblings all living within the same household may be available to help raise the child, thus freeing up the young couple’s time. The young couple also avoids any child care costs in this type of living situation. Last, since most Hmong families arrive in the United States with little to no education, the bride price may act as a financial incentive for parents who could gain upwards of $5,000 per daughter. The paucity of research in this area suggests it is important to investigate other potential reasons that may account for teenage marriage in the United States.

Prevalence

Compared to non-Hmong groups in the United States, Hmong American women tend to marry between 11 years and 23 years of age (Bays, 1994; Dunnigan et al., 1996). However, the actual rate of teenage marriage among Hmong Americans is unclear due to the lack of studies in this area. Among the small study samples with Hmong American girls and women, reports of disparate teenage marriage rates ranged from 30% to 80% (Downing, 1984; Meschke, 2003; Swartz et al., 2003). For instance, McNall and colleagues (1994) found that almost 50% of Hmong high school students in a Midwestern state were married. Ten years later, the rate of teenage marriage remained unchanged; in a 2003 report distributed by the Lao Family of Minnesota, a non-profit organization serving Hmong, found that 50% of the 187 Hmong high school girls in their study were married (Meschke, 2003). Similarly, Swartz and colleagues (2003) found that 70% of students were married as teens in their study of educational achievement among Hmong girls. More recently, Vang and Bogenschutz (2011a, 2011b), using a sample size of 186 Hmong women over the age of 18, reported that 31.7% of the women in their study were married at age 17 or younger. These studies suggest that Hmong teenage marriages continue in the United States, and more research needs to be conducted to understand this phenomenon.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Our conceptual framework that may help explain Hmong American women’s paths into teenage
marriage stems from social learning theories (Bandura, 1977; Mischel, 1973; Sears, 1975) and examines the role of culture that is transmitted through the family. Culture of origin is an influential factor that shapes one’s values and beliefs. Perhaps the most direct way to learn about cultural values and practices is through family socialization processes (Cole & Tan, 2007), as marriage is a part of early human socialization. Theories of social learning emphasize the importance of observing and modeling the behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others. That is, from a social learning perspective, marriage during the teenage years and raising children in multigenerational households is normative in some communities because they have observed other models (e.g., parents, sisters, cousins, close friends) engage in teenage marriages and witnessed the consequences thereof. The consequences of teenage marriage such as early pregnancy, dropping out of high school, and seeking social welfare benefits became normative as they witness several models follow this sequence. Another line of argument similar among other ethnic minorities is that with little encouragement or few role models to identify with, Hmong women may feel that education and labor force opportunities are out of reach (Stevens-Simon & Lowy, 1995) and, therefore, choose to adopt roles that are more readily accessible such as early marriage within a traditional cultural context.

Other potential factors may contribute toward teenage marriage include not only culture and unique familial experiences but also one’s individual insights and perspectives (i.e., reasoning or motivation). However, these individual processes are influenced by messages received from within the family system. How one understands their experiences reflects the teachings or socialization from within the family system, including the extended family. Therefore, we examine the messages learned from within the family and extended family as it relates to Hmong women’s own insights and perspectives.

We acknowledge that the entire environment includes not only the microsystem, but also mezzo- and macro-environmental factors. However, we focus on microsystem experiences of the family as the family experiences have one of the most direct influences on children’s outcomes. We do, however, discuss how these micro-level experiences may interact with the individual’s experiences with the mezzo- and macro-systems and the participants’ perceptions of these experiences. Hmong girls who choose teenage marriage face many barriers to success in their American context (Lee et al., 2006; Vang & Bogenschutz, 2011a), an experience that is foreign to their mothers or grandmothers who lived a mono-cultural existence until their entry into the United States. In their home countries, Hmong women who married young face the same issues as Hmong teenage brides in the United States. Therefore, the experiences of Hmong girls who marry early in the United States, although normed within their own familial setting, are out of the norm when compared to social norms set by mainstream mezzo- and macro-systems. Focusing on the interaction between micro- and macro-systems, the goal of the present study was to examine socialization processes, including direct observations, family normalization, and verbal socialization of teenage marriage as it relates to Hmong women’s insights and perspectives.

METHODS

This study was approved by the IRB of California State University-San Bernardino. Because of the paucity of research in this area, the present study served as an exploratory pilot study to inform future intervention and/or research studies. These in-depth qualitative narratives with 12 Hmong American women who were married under the age of 18 may enhance our understanding of the kinds of changes in family practices that would be particularly maladaptive or adaptive within a specific cultural context. The 12 participants were recruited through several means. First, a recruitment notice was posted on a Hmong women’s online forum used by many members of the Hmong community. Due to increased access to technology, many Hmong communicate via
the Internet. Via this online forum, participants were recruited through word of mouth by other participants that resulted in snowball sampling. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews. The researcher met each woman in her home. Each interview lasted anywhere between 1.5 hours and 2 hours.

The research questions for this study encourage participants to discuss ways in which they were socialized by family and peers as well as their individual insights and perspectives related to their early marriages. Using an interview guide, the research asked participants questions about their beliefs and values regarding marriage learned in childhood, the family and peer values they were exposed to about womanhood, the circumstances surrounding the participants’ marriage, their family and community response to their early marriage, and their own insights pertaining to their marital situation. All interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Interviews were coded according to major themes that surfaced from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The 12 participants varied between ages 22 and 39. Five of the women were born in either Laos or Thailand, while seven were born in the United States. Participants were married between the ages of 14 and 17. Participants resided in various states representative of Hmong communities in the United States, including six from Minnesota, three from California, and one from Wisconsin, one from North Carolina, and one from Georgia. The areas with the highest population of Hmong are the Twin Cities metro of Minnesota, Central Valley areas of California, and the Fox Valley areas of Wisconsin.

The two broad themes reflecting social learning theories were found in the data: (1) family socialization processes and (2) individual insight and perspectives. Each theme is further delineated by more specific themes and will be discussed in further detail (Table 1). The themes are intended to highlight the manner in which Hmong American women are socialized toward teenage marriage through family socialization processes and their own individual insights and perspectives for engaging in teenage marriage. These themes inform practitioners of the experiences of Hmong American women when engaging teenage marriage and are intended to provide a foundation for discussing marriage with Hmong girls and women.

The first theme—family socialization processes—refers to the subtle messages within families that shape the norms and values surrounding overt and covert behaviors of each family member. These messages become internalized. Many individuals live out these messages in everyday life unquestioningly. However, some individuals possess the self-awareness and insight to ques-

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tion the norms and values passed down by family. The second theme—individual insights and perspectives—refers to the uniqueness of each individual and her ability to be critical of her own situations. Individual insights make it possible for individuals to analyze messages learned from their family and challenge the norms and values that may not fit with their own individual perspectives.

FAMILY SOCIALIZATION PROCESSES

The women interviewed described several factors contributing to their decision to marry as teenagers. In common with all participants were explicit and implicit messages from their families and extended relatives and peers normalizing teenage marriage. All messages about teenage marriage endorsed the plausibility of teenage marriage for young daughters, thus socializing Hmong daughters to accept teenage marriage as a viable option in their own lives. These messages were categorized under “family socialization processes” and included both implicit and explicit messages. These socialization processes were carried out through three primary processes: (1) direct observation of teenage marriages involving their own family members (these being implicit messages), (2) a family discourse that normalized teenage marriage (explicit messages), and (3) verbal socialization toward teenage marriage (explicit messages) such as explicit messages from parents and relatives regarding certain behaviors that would make a daughter more appealing for marriage. Each subtheme is discussed separately in the following section.

Direct Observation of Teenage Marriage Involving Family Members

Nine participants (75%) stated that in their early childhood and early adolescence, they attended the marriage ceremonies of their older female cousins or sisters who were in their middle- to late-adolescent ages at the time. Observing their sister or a close other adolescent participate in teenage marriage made the practice seem acceptable or normal for most of the participants.

I don’t remember anyone ever saying anything about my cousin’s young age. It was just not an issue. It was normal to everyone and to me at the time . . .

When I was younger most of my cousins got married early. I just thought that’s what girls were supposed to do when you reach that age since everyone else was doing it.

I remember one time one of my cousins got married to a girl from another town. The girl was just a little older than me. . . . When they got married, I don’t remember anyone ever saying anything about her age but she was just a teenager too. I guess it was just so normal that no one ever thought it was different.

The participants’ observation of family members’ marriages is reflected in these two statements. Their narratives reflect their perception, at the time, that marriage in adolescence seemed normal; almost a rite of passage for girls this age. Here, there are no explicit messages about teenage marriage, but their observation and participation in the ceremony in the ceremony suggest that their immediate environment supports the practice. These statements also suggest a lack of perceived negative consequences or lack of inhibition toward teenage marriage and the notion that teenage marriage is acceptable. In addition, the participants rely on their observations of others’ lived experiences to guide their decision. At the same time, the narratives indicate that participants felt that it was their duty to become married at a particular age. As conformity to peers peaks during early adolescence (Eccles, 1999), this type of observational learning from family members may significantly impact one’s decision to marry during her teenage years based on social acceptance rather than deliberate decision.
Family Culture Normalizing Teenage Marriage

A majority of the women (75%) interviewed identified messages conveyed to them by their immediate and extended family about teenage marriage as a common and accepted occurrence, a daughter’s role in the family and community, and the notion that marriage during adolescence is a normal and encouraged rite of passage for teens. The acceptability of teenage marriage was conveyed verbally through family stories and in the everyday language used by the family. The reality of teenage marriage was a part of the family discourse and cultural norm, thus exposing participants to the notion of marriage at an early age. The statements made by the participants reflected aspects of family life that normalized teenage marriage. These include:

Throughout my childhood, I remember my mom, aunts, and grandmother sitting around talking about my female cousins who were married. Sometimes my aunts would also talk about their daughters-in-law. I never really thought about it, but now that we’re talking about it, even at my young age, I was aware that these girls were still teenagers.

My brother got married when I was younger. They lived with us for about three years... My sister-in-law was just about 16 or so I think and she went to high school. My brother used to drive us all to school.

The statements above demonstrate how Hmong families across generations engage in open discussions about their daughters and/or granddaughters who married as teenagers. When children hear and participate in these discussions, they start to internalize that notion that teenage marriage is acceptable. In this sense, the cultural norms of the family are expressed through verbal storytelling. These stories transmit cultural beliefs and values to children who may be more eager to mimic adult ways. The women do not question the “normalcy” of teenage marriage in their own upbringing. Their experiences with teenage marriage within their immediate families and extended family system may support a developing belief that teenage marriage is a life-event that could actually occur during their own teenage years.

At other times, marriage appears to be the only alternative in cases of unplanned pregnancies for a teen-aged Hmong woman. Traditionally, Hmong families would not allow teenager daughters to become a single parent due to the shame and loss of face associated with this practice. In addition, termination of the pregnancy is rarely discussed because it was not an option available in an agrarian society. However, single teen mothers and abortions are becoming more common as the Hmong acculturate to Western society. Traditionally, marriage is especially likely if the father is also Hmong as Hmong families tend to hold the father of the child responsible by forcing marriage (Fontes, 2005). Marriage in this way saves the family’s reputation and resolves the shame associated with having an unmarried pregnant daughter. The benefits of saving the family’s and her own reputation in this collectivistic society may trump the needs and individual wishes of their daughter. Thus, in cases of teenage marriage due to unplanned pregnancy, observers of this practice learn that marriage is the more socially acceptable option because it serves to protect the family’s reputation:

One of my cousins got pregnant when she was in high school and she was forced to marry. She was 16... I don’t think there was another choice for her... um... at least I don’t remember because what I remember is that she got pregnant and she had to get married.

Finally, all participants (N = 12) reported that their own mothers were married as teenagers. Family stories that include notions of teenage marriage serve as a mechanism to normalize the idea of teenage marriage within the family culture. For example, one interviewee stated,

Well, I just remember my mom telling us stories of how she got married to my dad. She was really young too. Back then they didn’t know their birthdays but she said she was still just a young girl.
Here we see family stories that contribute to the formation of culture as they imagine and reproduce ethnic identity through their mother’s own stories as a young bride (Langellier, 2002). Because parents, especially mothers with their daughters, serve as important role models for learning appropriate behavior, the stories that mothers choose to discuss with their daughters may be one way teenage Hmong American women become socialized into teenage marriages.

**Verbal Socialization of Girls toward Teenage Marriage**

Coupled with indirect forms of socialization, direct socialization of marriage through cultural messages of what it means to be a “good wife” and “nyab” (*daughter in law, pronounced “nya”*) from primary agents of socialization (i.e., parents, and close relatives) plays an important role in shaping the values and beliefs of marriage. Participants reported that their parents and relatives would consistently convey messages that a Hmong girl must learn how to be a good wife or face spinsterhood. These cultural messages of what it means to be a “good wife” reinforces the patriarchal organization of the Hmong family system:

> When I was younger, I remember my parents always telling me that I had to learn how to be a good wife and they used to say things like “if you don’t get married when you’re still young, no one will want to marry you when you’re old.”

> I learned how to cook at a very young age, I think I was in fifth grade when I cooked my very first meal for the family. I remember how happy my dad was that I was able to do this. My parents would say things to me about how to be a good nyab. They would say things like, “If you burn the rice they won’t like you.”

> One time I was throwing a fit and my dad said, “You’re going to be a nyab and you’re acting like that? No one is going to want you to be their nyab. They’ll probably send you back to us.”

Messages that place emphasis on learning domestication skills such as cooking and marrying at an early age are reflected in these statements. Particularly, the statement by one Hmong woman’s parents “no one will want to marry you when you’re old” suggests that one should marry early or face a life of spinsterhood. The “natural” unfolding of Hmong maturity is to be married with children, and this encouragement may subsequently lead to earlier Hmong marriages and pressures for childbirth before they reach their eighteenth birthday (Lo, 2002). Here, learning domestication skills is conveyed as adding value to your role as a daughter, wife, and mother, in turn; these skills will gain you social approval from others, especially your family, and your future in-laws.

Extrinsic rewards such as gaining approval or praises or avoiding “being sent back” to her family may motivate girls to engage and stay in teenage marriage. The message suggests that she may bring shame to her family and the clan because she did not act accordingly. It is not just encouragement or passing down these cultural messages but also parents’ reinforcement of these “good” wife behaviors: “I remember how happy my dad was that I was able to do this ... cook.” Rather than simply passing down cultural message of what is “good” or “bad,” here the parents also give positive praise for acting accordingly. Because this praise and advice stem from parents or important others, young girls may likely begin to seek ways to continue to earn this praise and social approval. Together, these multiple socialization experiences provide them with an awareness of socially ascribed roles.

**INDIVIDUAL INSIGHT AND PERSPECTIVE**

According to theoretical approaches, parents’ beliefs and goals guide parents’ socialization behaviors and, ultimately, contribute to their children’s outcomes (Dix, 1991). Over time, repeated
exposure to parents’ socialization strategies is likely to influence children’s own values and belief system. We discuss two broad individual cognitive processes reflected in the insights and perspectives shared by the participants: (1) internalization of cultural practice, including high acceptance (16.6%; n = 2) and low acceptance (75%; n = 9) and (2) escape-avoidance, including affirmation and disappointment (8.3%; n = 1).

Internalization of Cultural Practice

Internalization refers to the process of acceptance of a set of norms established by people or groups that are influential to the individual (Greenberg & Cheselka, 1995). Through direct observations of teenage marriage, the person first becomes aware of the set of values and norms. Awareness is followed by an understanding of the set of values or norms. This awareness may be a result of the socialization processes described earlier. As experiences accumulate and family members reinforce teenage marriage, the person moves toward adoption of these cultural values. Thus, the final stage is acceptance of the values or norms into one’s own viewpoint. Individuals are not fully aware of the process of internalization.

All participants reported some level of internalization of teenage marriage as a concept within their own worldviews, meaning the manner in which they viewed the world included the concept of teenage marriage as a reality. The women in the study seemed to be aware of their internalization of teenage marriage on differing levels, and most were able to reflect on the impact of teenage marriage on their life. However, participants varied in their level of acceptance of teenage marriage. Some individuals exhibited high acceptance (16.6%; n = 2) while others reported low acceptance (75%; n = 9) of the practice of teenage marriage.

Individuals with high acceptance (16.6%; n = 2) of teenage marriage tended to speak of teenage marriage as an ordinary fact of life. These individuals reported satisfaction in their marriage, and a sense of pride about fulfilling the societal expectations of a Hmong woman. In fact, as a researcher, it felt intrusive at times to be asking questions about teenage marriage of women who had low insight about their internalization. For women who had accepted teenage marriage as a normal facet of their culture, teenage marriage appeared to be a way of life, reporting contentment and satisfaction with having been married as a teen. Acceptance was demonstrated by the absence of objection to having marriage as a teenager. Instead, participants spoke about their experiences using matter-of-fact language. It was not this researcher’s position to question the participants’ perceptions of their life situations since that is judgmental and leading.

A majority of participants (75%; n = 9) appeared to be unclear about their feelings about teenage marriage. Their interviews reflected a sense of ambivalence as well as low acceptance of teenage marriage. These individuals appeared to face an internal struggle regarding their participation and own feelings about teenage marriage as a practice. In addition, these participants reported a sense of loss in regard to the loss of their teenage years in lieu of early adulthood and the loss of personal choice in decisions about their life path and marriage. There appeared a sense of powerlessness in the stories shared by these women.

Well I think marrying as a teenager really took away a lot. I mean I didn’t get the chance to know myself, develop an identity, and now that my kids are grown, I’m getting that chance I think, but it’s not the same. That’s what marrying early does, girls don’t get a chance to be a young adult because you start having kids and all the other responsibilities. . . .

If I could do things differently, I don’t think I would have married so young. I don’t want my girls to make the same mistake. I want them to experience life while they are young before they get married.

The above emphasizes the importance of adolescence as a time for teenagers to develop a sense of identity that will serve as a basis for their adult lives according to Western worldview (Erikson,
In the United States, teenagers who adopt adult roles prematurely and assume adult responsibilities before identity issues are resolved may, as adults, grieve their lost adolescence. Here, adopting the role of wife and mother “took away a lot,” where she does not feel that the loss can be replaced. As a result of this loss of identity, these women may display ambivalence towards their decision to marry.

Back then you didn’t know any better. You just thought since everyone else is getting married that you should get married. It’s kind of sad how girls get into that situation and then they realize later what they did. I feel like I never really got to learn about myself.

You know, you just marry because some man wants to marry you and you don’t realize what you’re doing until it’s too late. Life has been good but it could have been different.

As Hmong women contemplate the impact of these lost adolescent years, conflict in marriages may result, leading to higher rates of divorce among Hmong teenage brides (Vang & Bogenschutz, 2013).

In these narratives, the concept of identity comes into play repeatedly, but decision-making abilities also matter. Shown here, a key point for engaging in teenage marriage is social approval because “some man wants to marry you” and “everyone else was getting married” are reasons for getting married in your teens. However, at this time, adolescents have lower abstract reasoning abilities to think about the future, and this lack of reasoning may lead them to choose more immediately rewarding decisions than those that require time and education (Baron & Brown, 1991). Teens may also need more experimentation with different identities before committing to adult roles (Erickson, 1968) to develop a concrete sense of identity.

In addition, some women with low acceptance demonstrated a desire to make the best out of their situation with statements such as

Sometimes if you cause trouble⁴ you have to stick it out and take responsibility for what you’ve gotten yourself into.

Well, I guess you just take what life gives you and you do your best. Overall, I think it’s been good, but there are days when you wonder what if . . . .

One interpretation from above is that these women are resilient even when they express a desire for a different life situation and despite the acknowledgement of the possible losses (e.g., education, identity, experiences). Rather than focusing on their sense of loss, their narratives reflect an effort to change their perspectives of the situation by endorsing that they did what they could to improve their lives and continue to make the best of their marriages. They understood the situation in a positive meaning in light of the losses they reported. These statements suggest that strong ties to their culture of origin mitigated the effects of losses they experienced in adolescence. The rewards provided by the culture of origin for being a good wife and daughter compensated for the losses that might have been perceived as a Westernized adolescent. However, their statements also allude to another potential explanation we turn to next.

That is, these young girls may have internalized feelings of inferiority due to their ascribed roles and “daughter, wife, mother, nyab” and may not learn to develop their active agency or their own independent voice (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). By speaking up, they are only “causing trouble” for themselves. It is the intersections of these various marginalized positions, along with their internalized inferiority, that have socialized them to be passive rather than seeking a change. These women may accept the messages and try to live up to the standards of the motherhood mandate and social scripts regarding collectivism and family honor passed on by the “knowledgeable.”
Escape-Avoidance

The last sub-theme within the theme individual insight and perspective was escape-avoidance. This type of individual coping strategy is characterized by the effort to escape from having to deal with a stressor like a negative home environment (Folkman, 1984). Three women shared that marrying in the teenage years was a way to escape or avoid their current home environment in search for a better one. These women described demanding and unhappy home environments in childhood that ultimately led to their decisions to marry in their teens. They discussed their home environments as those in which they were assigned multiple household responsibilities and where they were obligated to assume adult roles in the home. Household responsibilities included providing care for younger siblings, cleaning, and assuming sole responsibility for preparing meals for the family on a daily basis. Traditionally, Hmong families assign the duties of cooking and cleaning to the females in the home. Responsibilities for cooking rested heavily on mother and oldest daughter. Cooking responsibilities can be substantial as Hmong families typically have five to six children and grandparents living in one household.

It was a way out for me. My dad very abusive ... not only that, I had to come home from school every day and watch my nieces and nephews, cook, and my parents never let me do anything. I met my husband at school when I was thirteen and he would visit me at home for two years. He felt so bad for me when he was about to move away he asked me to marry him. I was only fifteen.

These substantial responsibilities in the home and parents’ strict control over their daughters’ whereabouts prevented daughters from socializing with peers and blocked their ability to participate in autonomy-seeking activities in adolescence. Autonomy-seeking behaviors include those such as taking a part-time job, extracurricular activities such as sports and arts, and volunteering among others that expose adolescents to a gradual entrance into adulthood in the United States. Marriage was seen as an entry into adulthood and freedom from strict control of parents.

Within the escape-avoidance theme, participants’ expectation for finding a better situation through marriage were either affirmed or they were disappointed, and they found themselves in situations that were either worse or no better than life with their own parents. Participants whose desire to escape was affirmed reported a newfound sense of independence soon after the marriage. These participants reported marrying into families who were supportive and where strong emotional bonds were forged with the husband’s siblings and other daughters-in-law who also resided in the house. These women reported having positive relationships with their spouses. In addition, these women reported fulfilled autonomy and independence in the form of moving out of the in-laws’ home with their spouses early on and feeling successful in accomplishing milestones in their lives with their spouses including having children, completing their educational goals, and eventually becoming a home owner.

I got along with my sister-in-laws. And his mom was pretty nice to me. He took me to school every day and they didn’t have a problem that I had to study at night because my sister-in-law was in school too. I don’t think it was a big deal for me.

We only lived with them for two years and we were able to move out on our own. Umm, and ... we got an apartment when he got a full time job. His parents never had a problem with it, I don’t think. They treated me like a daughter and they kept to themselves most of the time.

Women who reported disappointment in fulfilling their hopes of escaping the negative environments within their families of origin reported marrying into families who were equally as verbally and emotionally abusive as their own families (no physical abuse by the in-laws was reported). These women found themselves having to assume similar parentified responsibilities, if not more,
as they had when living with their birth parents. In traditional Hmong families, daughters-in-law are assigned substantial domestic duties upon marrying. These include cooking, cleaning, caring for younger children in the home, caring for aged in-laws, and bearing several children of their own. In addition, these women reported unsupportive or unsatisfying relationships with their spouses. The husbands of these women often endorsed cultural views and beliefs that supported the subordination of women.

At first I had to do a lot. I watched my husband’s younger brothers and sisters. I did a lot of things like, um, come home from school and cook dinner for everyone. It wasn’t easy. I didn’t have a lot of time for homework.

We got pregnant right away. Back then I didn’t know any better. I didn’t think about those kinds of things. You just get pregnant and do what they ask you to do . . . um . . . I just took over doing things like a lot of daughters-in-laws do, you know, do all the cooking and cleaning and basically, they just got a new helping hand you know.

He was not very supportive. He always sided with his mom whenever we had an argument. It was hard . . . he is very typical in that he wanted me to be the submissive wife and I couldn’t do that because I was in school and I was very involved in things at school.

Unfortunately, for these women, their hope of finding new independence with their spouse was met with disappointment as they found themselves shouldering even heavier familial duties as a daughter-in-law. With little to no support, these women reported disappointment and ambivalence in their decision to marry early as teens.

**IMPLICATIONS OF STUDY**

The narratives from these qualitative interviews highlight beliefs and socialization phenomena pertaining to the practice of teenage marriage. Contrary to how daughters in mainstream American society are socialized toward marriage in adulthood, many Hmong American daughters are socialized in their immediate family to marry in their teens. Socialization practices leading to the internalization of beliefs surrounding traditional marriage practices among Hmong American women serve as major contributing factors for the high rates of teenage marriage in the Hmong community within the United States. Specifically, our study shows that family socialization strategies can reinforce cultural and family values about teenage marriage, thereby influencing their daughters’ perceptions endorsing teenage marriage and an internalized belief that normalizes the practice of teenage marriage. There appeared to be a variety of reasons for teenage marriage, including more traditional and individual motivators.

It is important to avoid judgment or negative labeling of family socialization practices pertaining to teenage marriage. In addition, questioning client’s acceptance of teenage marriage may create confusion for the client. Instead, practitioners must help Hmong American women gain insight into the role of teenage marriage as a cultural practice within their lives in the context of mainstream American society. Girls must develop an awareness of the influence of the culturally specific construction of teenage marriage on their own decision-making process. In addition, girls must develop an awareness of cultural differences pertaining to institutions of marriage.

**Practice Interventions**

Social workers who work with Hmong women and girls must seek education about traditional marriages practices within the Hmong community. Social workers must work with cultural consultants who can provide valuable information and act as liaisons with Hmong families. Social
workers must be considerate of the self-determination of Hmong girls while at the same time being respectful of cultural traditions of Hmong. The primary goal is to work toward the best interest of the client. It is the social worker’s responsibility to inform the young girl of the consequences of her decisions whether she chooses to marry early or not, while encouraging the girl to make the final decision. It is important that the social worker ensure that the girl has received the information she needs such as consequences of actions and alternative choices before she makes a decision; the decision must be one that is informed. Thus, it is important that social workers obtain education about traditional Hmong marriage in order to work effectively with Hmong girls faced with this decision. Social workers must suspend their judgment and opinion about teenage marriage and try not to influence the situation according to how they feel about teenage marriage. Finally, social workers must be able to talk about teenage marriage with Hmong girls without blame or shame of the young girls; in addition, the social worker must not use the intervention with the girl as a means to resolving his or her own countertransference surrounding teenage marriage. In this next section, we make a suggestion for direct practice intervention with Hmong girls.

Narrative therapy, developed by social workers Michael White and David Epston, allows individuals to examine social constructs that have shaped their lives by separating the person from these social and mental processes (White, 2004). The narrative approach does not negate or label the stories of Hmong American women; rather, the narrative approach explores the family and cultural stories that have shaped their identity. A narrative approach assumes that the provider first possess a complex understanding of teenage marriage within Hmong culture, that acknowledges and validates the lived experiences of their clients. The narrative approach also utilizes the strategy of externalization. In its original form, externalization approaches a “problem” existent in the client’s life such as alcoholism or depression and externalizes it by using language that removes the problem from the person’s identity. For example, rather than speaking of alcoholism as “your alcoholism,” the therapist would state “let’s talk about alcoholism.” An externalization technique is recommended that similarly separates the concept of teenage marriage from the identity of a Hmong woman will allow the client to examine the concept of teenage marriage objectively. This practice challenges Western therapists to be grounded and to challenge their own comfort level. Often times, Western therapists believe that to be culturally sensitive is to talk about culturally specific concepts using non-judgmental language; to act as if teenage marriage were a normal everyday part of life in order to sound non-judgmental. The researchers suggest that in order to use narrative therapy, the practitioner must name the issue head on. That is, the practitioner must be comfortable enough to discuss teenage marriage, including the pros and cons of teenage marriage in an objective manner. Thus, the therapist must be able to say to the client, “Let’s talk about teenage marriage” without feeling as though they are being disrespectful to their client.

The narrative approach encourages therapists to name the issue at hand, openly and directly. The first author’s own counseling experience with Hmong women who were faced with the decision to marry in their teens has used this approach by openly talking about the issue in a genuine, curious, and empathetic manner. The narratives shown in the current study suggest that these women may not be consciously aware about the cultural conflict of teenage marriage. Although several participants briefly noted that teenage marriage directly conflicted with the norms surrounding adolescence in American culture, none elaborated on it.

Narrative therapy techniques may encourage Hmong women to discuss teenage marriage because it removes the notion of teenage marriage and the problems assigned to it by Western culture from their identity, giving women the permission to discuss marriage without feeling as though they are overexposed to an outsider and possibly making their own personal identities vulnerable to judgment. It is recommended that the therapist identify contrasting and comparable aspects of both the host American culture and Hmong culture to reveal the plethora of life choices.
available to the client. Comparing and contrasting these two cultures should not be made in the tone that feels as though the therapist is trying to sway the client toward Western culture or somehow contrasting to see which decision is better. The point of talking about these two differing cultures is to help the client envision two possible life stories: a way to encourage her to craft a life story for herself. Social workers can also use the narrative approach to assist clients in co-constructing emergent life stories.

Focusing on the clients’ personal experiences and how these experiences have shaped the lives and thought patterns of the clients will assist the social worker in developing a thorough intervention plan that is inclusive of the client’s culture of origin. The co-construction of life stories must include not only the clients’ lived experiences within their own culture but within dominant culture as well; assisting clients in creating a new life story that combines the realities of both cultures. In addition, the social worker must take into account client self determination while at the same time providing guidance in sorting out the many facets of Hmong American women’s lived experiences in the United States, lives that embrace two cultures.

Policy Interventions

Hmong marriage takes place in a traditional cultural ceremony. The ceremony does not occur within legal sanction from any legal or court system in the United States; therefore, a Hmong girl can be married without legal systems’ being aware of the underage marriage. Hmong marriages are conducted by a mej koob (pronounced may-kong) who officiates the marriage and facilitates the negotiations between the two families. The mej koob is a member of the clan. The traditional marriage is considered an official marriage by members of the Hmong community although it has not been officiated by the American court. Once the couple turns 18, they may then decide to officiate their marriage in a court of law. Many times, couples never officiate their marriage, and they run into problems related to property rights when there is a divorce or death. Traditional marriage ceremonies not only exist in Hmong culture but are also a part of many other cultures. In the United States, European-style marriages have been institutionalized within our social and legal structure; however, our society has failed to legally recognize the traditional marriage practice of other cultures. By providing legal recognition to traditional Hmong marriages, our society may be able to prevent teenage marriages among the Hmong. By providing legal sanction to traditional marriage practices, the state can then provide legal sanctions around the legal age of marriage within traditional marriage practices. In the state of Minnesota, such as the Hmong Marriage Bill (HF 3674; SF 2403) was introduced in the Minnesota Legislature in 2006 to solemnize Hmong marriages. The bill would require the mej koob to file papers with the American court system to officiate the marriage. This bill would have expanded the law making it a form of neglect to allow minors to marry by requiring that the mej koob report underage marriage to Child Protection authorities (MN State Legislature, 2006). The Hmong marriage bill drew heated debate in the Hmong community. Some members of the community were wary of giving government control of traditional Hmong marriages, while some members of the community believed that legal recognition of traditional Hmong marriages would legitimize a very important traditional practice within Hmong culture. The bill was tabled for further study in 2006 with hopes that it would be revisited in 2007. However, the bill was not moved forward in 2007.

Because our legal systems have less awareness of traditional marriage among many underage Hmong girls, these situations rarely come to the attention of child protection systems. Although many child protection agencies have encountered underage marriage among Hmong girls, more proactive measures must be put in place to address the situation. Hmong girls who marry early are forced to grow up quickly. These girls do not have the opportunity to experience adolescent identity development, which may result in poor sense of self and poor mental health outcomes in the future (Vang & Bogenschutz, 2011). Many times, teenage girls are married to much older
men, which would warrant intervention by child protection in states where statutory rape laws are applicable.

**Research Interventions**

There are no large-scale studies on the prevalence of teenage marriage among the Hmong in the United States or worldwide. A study of this nature is necessary in order to give researchers and policy makers the information needed to plan interventions for women facing this situation. Current studies rely on small samples.

Further research is also needed to understand the impact of teenage marriage on multiple systems in the lives of these young Hmong women while also being considerate of the loss of traditional practices for Hmong. As the traditional practice of teenage marriage becomes increasingly challenged by American systems, the Hmong community must grapple with the loss of a century-old tradition. This concept of culture loss must be further explored for its impact on members of the Hmong community and Hmong girls. In regard to impacts on women’s lives, as Hmong women delay marriage in pursuit of education and employment, they will find it more difficult to find a mate within the Hmong community who will accept them. In the Hmong community, young women who are more likely to be subservient to their husband are considered more appealing for marriage than an older more educated Hmong woman. Young to middle adult women with educations and careers are viewed as threats to the patriarchy, who may emasculate their husbands and fail to obey traditions.

Finally, more research is needed to understand the interventions utilized by Child Protection Systems and public schools in response to teenage marriage among Hmong girls. Little information can be found regarding how public systems are responding to these situations and what decisions are being made surrounding the ethical dilemma systems must face as they grapple with how to intervene to the best interest of the young girl. This type of research would provide valuable educational materials for practicing social workers and agencies who work with Hmong women and girls.

**STRENGTHS, LIMITATIONS, AND CONCLUSION**

Our study makes several contributions to the literature. First, we provide new information on Hmong Americans, a rapidly growing and understudied group in the United States. Next, we explored the experiences and beliefs of an immigrant group facing cultural change as they transition to life in a host country. And third, we discuss cultural practices that may have held symbolic meaning in another place and time but are currently being challenged in a new society and the implications for social work.

We note three limitations to this study in particular. First, and perhaps most important, our small sample size suggests lack of generalizability. Within-group variation is essential to consider, especially one’s acculturation level as it may relate to different beliefs about marriage (Lee et al., 2009). The participants of this study were raised in families led by first-generation refugee parents. Thus, the family backgrounds of participants may be more consistent with traditional Hmong culture. It is also important to acknowledge that first-generation Hmong parents also vary in their beliefs about teenage marriage, views on childrearing, and their level of ascription to dominant individualistic views. Future work incorporating larger samples will be critical for understanding mechanisms underlying teenage marriage. Second, self-selection may influence the findings of this study; women who chose to participate are more willing to openly discuss their perspective on teenage marriage, thus excluding the viewpoints of women who may have had
completely different experiences. Future studies including diverse experiences will be important. Third, multiple pathways for teenage marriage manifested in participants in divergent ways, with some women indicating contentment or positive experiences whereas others experienced ambivalence or uncertainty about their decision to marry as a teenager. In the case of Hmong American women, living life within two cultures may contribute to conflicting experiences and views regarding teenage marriage. Overall, this study sheds light on the influence of culture and family on Hmong American women’s decisions to marry in their teens. Socializations experiences communicate family and cultural values and beliefs that influence the lives of clients. We have examined potential precursors and mechanisms that may be associated with teenage marriage, including family socialization and individual processes. Strategies from narrative therapy such as externalization may aid social workers in discussing this sensitive yet important topic with Hmong girls.

NOTES

1. The Hmong were recruited as soldiers in the “Secret War,” a U.S.-backed effort against communism in Laos.
2. Hmong families are members of 1 of only 18 clans and have one of the only 18 surnames (McInnis, Share all of the surnames 1991). All 18 clans are represented in the United States.
3. In Hmong marriage practices, the husband may send the new bride back to her parents’ home, signifying the initiation of a divorce resulting in loss of face for the young woman and her parents.
4. The participant used the phrase “cause trouble” to refer to the act of taking on adult responsibilities at such a young age.
5. This recommendation is consistent with the NASW Code of Ethics (2008) statement of responsibility to clients in the area cultural competency and social diversity. The NASW Code of Ethics (2008) suggests that social workers develop an understanding of the client’s culture and the function of culture in the client’s life and their interaction with society.

REFERENCES


