

# THE COUNSELING NEEDS AND STRENGTHS OF HMONG AMERICAN STUDENTS IN THE SOUTHEAST

by

MICHAEL JAY MANALO

(Under the Direction of Jolie Daigle)

## ABSTRACT

Hmong Americans, a group of people with historical roots in Southeast Asia, represent a growing population in the southeastern United States. Hmong students and their families face several challenges including a changing socioeconomic status, a high prevalence of mental disorders, and linguistic barriers. This qualitative study examined school employees' and Hmong students' perceptions of their counseling needs in a southeastern metropolitan area. The purpose of this investigation was to understand the counseling needs and resilient strategies of Hmong students living in the southeast across elementary, middle and high school levels as perceived by both school employees and Hmong students.

In order to answer these questions, the researcher used qualitative research methodology in the data collection and analysis. The study included in-depth interviews with 10 school employees employed in a rural school district in the southeastern United States as well as interviews with 7 students who were currently or formerly enrolled in K – 12 institutions in the southeast.

The researcher utilized a grounded theory approach to examining the interview data in order to create base-level codes, axial codes, and themes. Codes and themes were collected and

organized using the ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software package. Utilizing these themes, the researcher developed a model to describe the resilient characteristics and counseling needs of the Hmong students and their community as well as strategies that counselors can use in working with this population. Strengths from the data included individual, family, and school-related strengths as well as problem solving strategies. Areas of need as derived from the data included school based challenges, mental health related challenges, cultural challenges, and environmental challenges. Possible strategies to working with the Hmong students as derived from the data included partnering with community organizations, developing trust and cultural understanding, communication with parents, and other specific strategies. This study also presents several implications for both current practice as well as future research as raised by both the participants and the researcher.

INDEX WORDS: Hmong, Asian American psychology, Counseling psychology, School counseling, Students, Qualitative research, Qualitative data analysis software, ATLAS.ti, Grounded theory

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### **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this study to the school employees and students who participated in my research. Without you this work would not have been possible, and in return I hope that this study will bring to light both the challenges and strengths of your experiences.

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This study represents to me not only a summative document of my research on Hmong students but also marks in many ways a major milestone towards my goal of becoming a doctoral level psychologist. As I would suspect is the case for many, my career path has varied and has included answering phones at my father's office, monitoring a computer lab, teaching kayaking, serving as an environmental education instructor, and flying around the country as a consultant. But a common theme for me has been a desire to help people and experience a connection and relationship with others beyond what I have been able to do in my other careers. I recognize that while much of this journey was largely I personal one for me, I would not have been able to stand where I am today (let alone complete this research) without the support of many whom I wish to name here. The names I list here are only a few of the countless numbers of individuals who in some large or small way have ushered me along my journey, so I also want to express thanks to the unnamed individuals near and far who have supported me in some way.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter provides an introduction to my research on the counseling needs and strengths of Hmong Americans living in the southeastern United States. In this chapter, I will provide a background of problem and of the Hmong living in the Southeast, a description of the problem I investigated, an overview of the purpose of my research, the questions which guided my investigation, and a series of definitions I used in my research.

#### **Background of the Problem**

The Hmong are a culture of people primarily from the mountainous country of Laos in Southeast Asia. After serving in the Vietnam War as allies to the United States, the end of the war in 1975 resulted in approximately 60,000 Hmong fleeing to surrounding regions such as Thailand and eventually the United States as refugees to avoid political persecution (Poole, 2004; Takaki, 1989). The majority of Hmong, upon entering the United States, settled in areas including California, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan. However, a growing number of Hmong people have also settled in the southeastern United States in areas including North Carolina and Georgia (Poe, 2002). One reason for this movement into the southeast has included the closure of a refugee camp in Thailand which displaced nearly 70 persons to Georgia as well as the availability of farmland and agriculture in the southeast (Kurylo, 1992; Poe, 2002; Poole, 2004). The federal government, through the Office of Refugee Resettlement, also offered financial incentives for Hmong families to move to areas of the southeast and partnered with

community agencies to provide assistance with language training and employment (Duchon, 1997). Data from the 2000 Census indicates that the Atlanta area had a Hmong population of 1,097 (Poole, 2002).

Hmong Americans represent a significant portion of minority student population in certain school districts. In one of Atlanta's suburban school districts, Hmong students represent not only the majority of Asian American students in the district but also the second largest group of the language minority population in the county after Hispanics (Barrow County Schools, 2007b). This district has been reported to be the site of the greatest Asian American growth in the Atlanta area (Reid, 2001). The presence of Hmong students and families in the district is also significant enough that student forms are provided on the school board website in Hmong in addition to English and Spanish (Barrow County Schools, 2007a).

Despite their increasing numbers, in many ways Hmong students are not well understood and are considered to have many disadvantages as compared to other families of Asian American immigrants. Their families, many of whom historically came to the United States as refugees from Southeast Asia, often live at lower socioeconomic status (SES) levels as compared to the general population. A 2004 Census report described the Hmong as having the highest individual poverty rate among Asian groups at 37.8%, as compared to 12.6% for Asians in the United States as a whole and 12.4% for the general population (Reeves & Bennett, 2004). Research literature has extensively documented the inverse relationship between SES and mental illness, namely that lower income populations tend to exhibit a higher rate of mental illness (Hudson, 2005). In addition to socioeconomic factors, Asian American students in schools face racial barriers such as race-related bullying and harassment as discussed by researchers such as Tseng, Chao, Padmawidjaja, Leong, Inman, Ebreo, and Fu (2007). While much attention has been



given to the academic performance of students, less research has been conducted on racial relationships between Asian American students, their peers, and school staff. Some researchers have identified the need to fill the gap in the understanding of the relationships between Asian Americans in schools and others as “critically important” (p. 114).

Other literature has presented a mixed picture of the status of Hmong American students. In her ethnographic study of Hmong American high school students in a Wisconsin school, Lee (2001b) writes that much current research and media attention to Hmong students tends to place these students into either high achieving “model minority” categories or into a lower achieving, delinquent student category. Her study also showed several issues relevant to Hmong students including intergenerational conflicts between students and their parents and mistrust of school officials. With particular regard to counselors, one student whom Lee recommended to speak with her counselors and teachers about her family problems refused to do so because of her mistrust of the officials and what she perceived as a lack of respect for her problems by school employees.

In terms of language education in schools, many Hmong refugees struggle. Takaki notes that 70% of the Hmong refugees are not literate in their own language, a language that until 1953 had no formal written existence until a written system for the Hmong language was developed by American and French missionaries (1989). Even for Hmong students who may have been born in the United States, Duchon (1997) writes that Hmong is spoken almost exclusively in the home, resulting in a disadvantage when entering the English speaking school system in kindergarten. Duchon reported that the average number of years of schooling among the Hmong male heads of household in a sample of Hmongs living in the Atlanta area was 7 years; for female heads of household the average number of years of schooling was 4.35 (1997). An

English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) report in one southeastern school district classified 27% (500 students) of the language minority students as speakers of other Asian languages, including Hmong (Barrow County Schools, 2007b). This number is the second largest group of language minority students in the county after Hispanics, who were identified as 60% of the language minority student population (1096 students).

Hmong refugees have also been noted to have relatively high rates of psychiatric disorders. Westermeyer (1988), who conducted a study of Hmong refugees 6 to 8 years after their arrival in the United States, found a *DSM-III* Axis-I disorder diagnosis in 43% of the individuals in the refugee group studied. The *DSM-III* disorders included Adjustment Disorder, Depression, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, and Paranoia. Westermeyer speculated that as many of the disorders began upon leaving Laos, the stress of refugee flight and acculturation may have placed a role in the onset of these disorders.

Hmong Americans have been reported to experience depression and flashbacks to images of fighting and war. Takaki writes that “many Hmong in Wisconsin sit by their window, feeling lonely and sobbing uncontrollably” (1989, p. 466). Problems associated with mental health have been suspected by some to relate to physical symptoms and even death as well. One unusual health problem that has appeared to affect the Hmong community has been called the “Hmong sudden-death syndrome”. This syndrome describes a phenomenon when apparently healthy Hmong men die unexpectedly for no apparent reason, even according to medical examiners. As of 1998, it was reported that over 100 men had died from such causes (Takaki, 1989). Although these problems are reported in Hmong adults, an examination of descriptions from many *DSM-IV-TR* (2000) disorders indicates that there are familial patterns in mental illness and that certain

disorders may have components that are inheritable. Mental health issues may then pose problems not only for Hmong adults but for their children in the school systems as well.

Counseling psychologists are particularly well positioned to develop an understanding of the difficulties and counseling needs of Hmong students in the southeast based on several areas of competence that are core to the profession. Romano & Kachgal (2004) advocate for a partnership between counseling psychologists and school counselors based on a shared history and common value of supporting multiculturalism. For example, both the American Counseling Association (Arredondo, 1996) and the American Psychological Association (2002) have both released guidelines supporting diverse multicultural perspectives in counseling and research. A past APA Division 17 (Society of Counseling Psychology) president, Leona Tyler, has been schools and by school counselors (Romano & Kachgal, 2004). Additionally, Romano & Kachgal state that counseling psychologists can bring several areas of expertise to schools including a strong foundation in research (particularly qualitative research) as is demonstrated in graduate coursework for programs in both school counseling and counseling psychology.

With regard to qualitative research in particular, the authors note, “Qualitative research methodology, increasingly used in counseling psychology research, may be more attractive than quantitative methods to school counselors” (p. 201) and may help inform reflective practice and school policy reform. Such a research partnership between school counselors and counseling psychologists, they suggest, may be mutually beneficial, particularly in light of an increased need for schools to demonstrate accountability and effectiveness but with more and more limited resources available to schools to devote to collecting data and conducting research. Gysbers (2004) describes the potential for counseling psychologists to collaborate with school counselors in measuring the impact of guidance programs in schools through methods such as action

research. Gysbers also proposed a partnership between the research committees of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) and APA Division 17. Others, such as Forrest (2004) advocate for a strong interdisciplinary approach between counseling psychologists and school counselors to dealing with complex problems in school systems. Such an approach would address barriers to collaboration between the disciplines such as poor communication and grant funding sources that do not consider the full spectrum of allied mental health resources to include practitioners such as school counselors. Forrest suggests that there should be increased communication at an organizational level between entities such as APA Division 17, ASCA, and the Association of Counselor Educators and Supervisors (ACES).

All in all, researchers and practitioners are calling for increased collaboration between counseling psychologists and school counselors in addressing the needs of students and families. With respect to my own training as a master's student in a school counseling program, as a holder of an educator certificate in school counseling, and as a counseling psychology doctoral candidate and future psychologist, I feel the need for this collaboration both personally and professionally. Keeping this in mind, this study represented for me an exploration of the Hmong student experience but also an interdisciplinary work combining the strengths of the various aspects of my professional identity.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The Hmong have settled in portions of the United States (including the southeast) as refugees, bringing with them the stresses of the flight from their homeland and learning to acculturate to a new environment. In the United States, they are faced with the challenges of low levels of income, mental health issues, and challenges of learning a new language (Reeves & Bennett, 2004; Takaki, 1989; Westermeyer, 1988). It is reasonable to believe, then, that such

challenges would affect not only the lives of the first generation of Hmong immigrants to the United States but also their children who are enrolled in the school system. As stated earlier, familial patterns to mental health issues exist and can be passed down to subsequent generations (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). While certain school systems are learning to adjust to the rising numbers of Hmong students in their districts (Barrow County Schools, 2007a), researchers such as Lee (2001b) report that Hmong American students continue to face problems in schools.

Given the significant numbers of Hmong students living in the southeast coupled with the socioeconomic challenges faced by the Hmong as well as the mental health challenges present in the community, the counseling needs of Hmong students in the southeast is an area worthy of investigation by counseling psychologists. Definitions of counseling psychology (American Psychological Association & Lichtenberg, 1999) inform us that counseling psychologists attend to educational and well-being concerns as well as issues of emotional and mental health. Therefore, it is appropriate that counseling psychologists may explore Hmong students' needs from a counseling perspective.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this investigation was to understand the counseling needs and resilient strategies of Hmong students living in the southeast across elementary, middle and high school levels as perceived by school employees and Hmong students. To help achieve this purpose, I conducted a qualitative investigation in which I interviewed both K – 12 school employees as well as Hmong students in a metropolitan area in the southeastern United States over a period of approximately two years (2008 – 2010). Through the interviews, I asked participants about their experiences with Hmong students (or in the case of the Hmong participants, about their own

lived experiences). I also asked them to describe areas of need as well as strengths within the Hmong community as well as ways that they believed counselors could be of help. I analyzed the data using a grounded theory approach (which will be described in further detail in a subsequent chapter. Through the analysis and by various means of reviewing the data for trustworthiness, I developed a theory of the counseling needs and strengths of Hmong students in the southeast. It is my hope that by understanding these needs and strengths that school systems serving Hmong students in the southeast can have increased knowledge of how to better serve this unique population.

### **Research Questions**

The following broad questions guided my research. I addressed these broad questions during the course of my interviews by creating semi-structured interview protocols which are described in further detail in a subsequent chapter and in the Appendix.

- What are the academic and social strengths of the community of Hmong students in the southeast?
- What are the counseling needs for Hmong students in the southeast?
- How do Hmong students address the challenges and needs that they have?
- How can a better understanding of Hmong students help school counselors be more effective in working with the unique challenges faced by Hmong students?

### **Definitions and Operational Terms**

**Hmong.** This is a term used for an ethnic group with historical ties to the country of Laos in Southeast Asia (Takaki, 1989). However, Hmong continue to live in other countries in Asia including Vietnam, Thailand, Burma, and China where they are sometimes referred to as the Miao. Many historians believe the Hmong originally lived in Southern China before

immigrating to other parts of Asia in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. From a linguistic standpoint, the Hmong can also be identified by the two dialects spoken by the community: White Hmong and Green (or Blue) Hmong (T. P. Lee & Pfeifer, 2009).

**Hmong American.** In my research, I utilize the term Hmong American to refer a person of Hmong descent living in the United States. Typically these individuals are first generation refugees from Laos (Takaki, 1989), second generation children born in the United States of Hmong descent, or the “1.5” generation (S. J. Lee, 2001b) of individuals who were born in Laos and moved to the United States at a young age.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter provided an initial understanding of what I hope I have accomplished in my research on Hmong Americans. I discussed the significance of the research not only to the academic community but to the community itself which I studied. Multicultural guidelines (American Psychological Association, 2002) state that research should provide benefit not only to the academy but also to the communities and participants from which we gain insight. In this way, I hope that my research will be able to improve the schools and students who will give me access to information about their lives and experiences. In the next chapter, I will situate my research within the context of the greater body of literature on Hmong Americans and other relevant topics.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Review of Related Research**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I will present a review of the literature related to my research on the counseling needs and resilient strategies of Hmong American students in the southeastern United States. I begin by giving background and historical information regarding the Hmong in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War and their movement as refugees into the United States and portions of the southeastern United States in particular. I then describe the literature related to the Hmong American experience in schools in the United States. Finally, to draw in the more psychological aspects of this study, I present literature related to Hmong Americans and mental health.

#### **History of Hmong Americans in Georgia and Beyond**

Scholars frequently point to the relationship between the Hmong and the United States as having started during the Vietnam War as well as what is referred to as the “Secret War” organized by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The Hmong, primarily from the mountainous country of Laos in Southeast Asia, were allies of the United States against the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese. In 1961, Colonel Bill Lair of the (CIA) met with Hmong military leader Vang Pao, initiating a partnership between the U.S. and the Hmong in Laos (T. P. Lee & Pfeifer, 2009). Capitalizing on the fact that a portion of the Ho Chi Minh Trail (a major supply line for the North Vietnamese) ran through Laos, the Hmong were secretly employed by the United States to help stop the movement of supplies and troops along the trail.



It was not until the 1980's that the full impact of the Hmong collaboration with the United States was officially recognized by the CIA when the organization stated that the Hmong had helped to save the lives of thousands of U.S. soldiers in the Vietnam War as a result of the efforts of Hmong soldiers to control the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Estimates of the number of Hmong lives lost in the Vietnam War range from 30,000 – 40,000 (T. P. Lee & Pfeifer, 2009).

After U.S. troops withdrew from Southeast Asia at the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, the Pathet Lao took control of Laos. Scholars have described that after this point the Hmong were subject to a “campaign of bloody repression,” resulting in approximately 60,000 Hmong fleeing to surrounding regions such as Thailand and eventually the United States as refugees (Poole, 2004b; Takaki, 1989, p. 461). Many of the Hmong chose to flee to Thailand by crossing the Mekong River which borders Laos and Thailand. Particularly gut-wrenching stories have been told of this exodus which killed many of the refugees, including tales of Hmong parents who in desperation to avoid the attention of Pathet Lao soldiers gave their babies opium to quiet them. Many of the babies were inadvertently killed in the process (T. P. Lee & Pfeifer, 2009).

One particularly large wave of Hmong immigrants to the United States occurred in 2003 when the State Department approved resettlement applications for 15,000 Hmong refugees from Thailand as a result of lobbying from Hmong American interest groups (T. P. Lee & Pfeifer, 2009). The majority of Hmong, upon entering the United States, settled in areas including California, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan (Poe, 2002). In the southeast, Census 2000 data indicated approximately 4,200 Hmong Americans to be living in North Carolina in the Morganton area, the largest concentration of Hmong immigrants in the southeast (T. P. Lee & Pfeifer, 2009). Other parts of the Southeastern United States received Hmong refugees during secondary resettlement efforts. For example, the state of Georgia was not initially a site where

many Hmong refugees settled upon fleeing to America, although it is believed that the first group of Hmong people arrived in Georgia in approximately 1976 (Poole, 2004a). However, a second wave of movement of Hmong into Georgia has resulted for various reasons, including the closing of the camp at the Wat Tham Karbok refugee camp in Thailand which displaced nearly 70 persons to Georgia. Refugees have been assisted by organizations in the metro Atlanta area including the Hmong Culture Organization and Hmong New Hope Alliance Church, both of which are based in the city of Winder in Barrow County, Georgia (Poole, 2004b). The resulting movement of Hmong to the Atlanta area has resulted in a population of 1,097 according to 2000 Census data (Poole, 2002).

Additionally, some of the increase of Hmong in Georgia is associated with the movement of Hmong from other states into Georgia (Poole, 2004b). Some of this movement appears to be related to the promise of farmland and agriculture in the state. The Hmong in Laos are described as having a largely agrarian culture with major practices including farming, growing rice, hunting, and fishing (Takaki, 1989). Indeed, it is farming, agriculture, and the similarity of climate in the Southern United States to Southeast Asia that by some accounts appears to have attracted many Hmong to relocate to the metropolitan Atlanta area and Barrow County in particular (Kurylo, 1992; Poe, 2002). Some Hmong have also viewed Georgia as having better employment and financial opportunities. One Hmong man in Auburn noted that “We have a better chance in Georgia. I plan to have a better job, a good house, and a brand-new car” (Reid, 2001).

Census 2000 data (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000) appears to show a picture of Hmong Americans in Barrow County that differs in some ways from Hmong Americans elsewhere. The report shows a population of 447 people of Hmong descent living in the county with a total

population of 46,144. The median age for the population was 17 years old, compared to the county's median age of 33. Additionally, the median household income Hmongs in the county for the year 1999 was \$75,898, higher than the county's median income of \$45,019 and also higher than the national median income for Hmong households at \$32,384 (Reeves & Bennett, 2004). The number of individuals of Hmong descent living below poverty level in the county was reported to be 44. Interestingly then, it appears that Hmongs in Barrow County are relatively young and of higher income than Hmongs elsewhere in the United States. These statistics of Hmongs in Barrow County are in sharp contrast to those mentioned in the introduction that paint a picture of Hmongs having a relatively high poverty rate and lower median income than other groups.

However, there are individuals such as Lee and Pfeifer (2009) who believe that census data does not fully describe the true state of Hmong Americans. For example, Lee and Pfeifer offer that linguistic challenges may have prevented many Hmong from completing the census forms. Additionally, they state that individuals were only counted as Hmong if they filled in "Hmong" in the ethnicity section of the census forms. Lee and Pfeifer also suspect that many Hmong, given their history of persecution and mistreatment by government entities in Southeast Asia, may be mistrustful of government initiated programs such as the census and would thus be less likely to complete the forms. The possible inaccuracies of census data, the heterogeneity of the Hmong population, and the amount of research that has taken place with Hmongs in the Midwest such as Wisconsin (S. J. Lee, 2001; Secrist, 2006) but not in southern communities leaves room for research to be conducted within other states such as Georgia which, at least in Barrow County, seem to bear some significant differences to Hmongs in other portions of the United States.

## **Hmong Americans in Schools**

Lee (1997, 2001a, 2001b, 2006; 2007) has published extensively about the experiences of Hmong American students. An article (1997) on Hmong American girls and their pursuit of higher education, Lee cites that many researchers and scholars of the Hmong have presented a one-sided portrayal of the Hmong's difficulties in the United States as having arisen from vast differences between traditional Hmong culture (viewed as primitive, rural, illiterate and backwards) and U.S. culture (viewed as modern, urban, and well-educated). However, Lee argues that these portrayals often ignore "economic, racial, and other structural barriers" (p. 2) which may better explain the difficulties that Hmong face in the United States apart from cultural differences that short-sightedly place the emphasis on the Hmong as the culture that needs to adapt and modernize in order to survive.

Further, Lee argues, this predominant view is based on the faulty assumption that Hmong culture is static and inflexible as opposed to fluid and flexible. These structural barriers were apparent to the Hmong students which she studied in relation to their pursuit of higher education. For example, Lee writes that Hmong teenage marriage is perceived by some to be a common cultural practice which typically results in negative impacts to Hmong girls pursuing higher education. However, others believe that early marriage may be a reaction against assimilation to U.S. culture, particularly from Hmong parents who may be fearful of losing cultural values to the dominant culture. Additionally, she writes that an emphasis on the educational success of Hmong children and the pursuit of higher education opportunities for the women in her study may come from the need to seek economic and financial security in the new country. However, Lee stated that her participants often struggled with having to choose between early marriage and continuing their education and that many times this pressure came from their families (1997). A

significant thread for her participants, then, was that choosing to pursue higher educational opportunities meant redefining traditional Hmong gender norms for females, who were generally expected to marry and stay at home rather than continuing their education. At the same time, however, many of the women in the study had parents who actually encouraged them to pursue higher education as a means of towards economic independence (1997).

To further underscore the tensions that Lee describes that Hmong students face between choosing between traditional cultural norms and non-traditional cultural values such as pursuing higher education, researchers Su, Lee, and Vang (2005) studied the relationship between intergenerational family conflict and coping strategies among a sample of Hmong American college students. The study examined parent-child conflicts such as parental and child expectations of saving face versus bringing shame to the family and how these conflicts were related to various means of coping with these conflicts for the students involved. In their discussion, the authors stated that social support appeared to be a means by which the Hmong students would deal with intergenerational conflicts. In addition, a problem solving mode of thinking was usually seen as a way of mitigating conflicts (as would be advocated by many counselors), the authors surmised that for the Hmong students this problem solving mode of thinking may actually serve to exacerbate intergenerational family conflict because to Hmong students these conflicts were seen to be out of range of their control. The authors believed that it would be better to support Hmong students by encouraging social support rather than taking a direct problem solving approach.

In addition to college students, Lee (2001b) further discussed Hmong American high school students. One teacher characterized the Hmong students as belonging to two distinct groups: those who were in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes and those who were

more “Americanized” and had adapted to mainstream American culture. The children’s parents also characterized their Hmong American children as belonging either to a group of “good kids” or “bad kids,” where the good kids would perform well academically and retain traditional Hmong cultural values of helping out at home and attending to the family while the bad kids would be disobedient and rejecting of traditional Hmong cultural values. Lee described that many of the parents feared losing their children to the ways of the dominant culture. At the same time, many of the good kids struggled with balancing their school responsibilities with family responsibilities, such as missing school in order to drive parents to appointments or coming home after a full day at school to cook for, feed, and care for younger siblings.

One of the first uses of the term “model minority” to describe the relative success of Asian Americans as compared to other ethnic minority groups appeared in a *Newsweek* article by Kasindorf, Chin, Weathers, Foltz, Shapiro, and Junkin (1982). Lee writes that the idea of Asian Americans as a model minority population described by Kasindorf et al. may be particularly harmful in insidious ways to Hmong American students. One of Lee’s participants, a bilingual resource specialist, stated that because many Hmong American students are quiet and non-disruptive in class, teachers assume them to be working hard and achieving well when in fact they may be struggling to keep up with class material. Several of the students Lee spoke with skipped class out of difficulty with the material as well as to avoid embarrassment and as a means of dealing with the intergenerational conflicts that they faced at home.

At the other end of the spectrum, however, Lee also described Hmong American students who were quite the opposite of model minorities, but rather were seen as being truants and gang members. Many of the Hmong parents whom she spoke with decried particular ways of dressing, such as wearing baggy clothing, as being indicative of their son or daughter being

involved in gang activity. The children, however, viewed this assumption of their membership in gangs as yet another instance of intergenerational conflict.

Many Hmong who came to the United States were subject to racist remarks and actions when they attended schools. Takaki recounted the experiences of one Hmong man who at age 13 was spat on by White students in his school (1989, p. 463). One of Lee's (1997) participants described an incident as a teenager on her way home from school where she was harassed by an elderly white woman who degradingly referred to the Hmong women as being on welfare and existing only to have children at stay at home, ending her taunt by asking, "Why don't they – don't they just move back to their country?" (p. 14). Lee goes further to state that this racism was internalized by one of her participants to such a degree that she feared to speak or participate in their college classes, feeling "I'm inferior, I don't know as much" (p. 15) as her non-Asian classmates.

While racism may exist for Hmong Americans in the school, Lee writes that few formal educational efforts to combat these inequities exist. For example, her participants described never having learned much about the history of the Hmong in the Vietnam War while in school. As such, some Hmong youth such as organizers of the Hmong Youth Conference have made efforts to address this lack of knowledge by bringing in Hmong elders and former members of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to their conferences to educate the youth of their shared history and its significance to the experiences of their families.

With regard to other aspects of the educational experience, particularly language education, many Hmong refugees struggle. As stated earlier, 70% of the Hmong refugees are not literate in their own language, a language that until 1953 had no formal written existence until a written system for the Hmong language was developed by American and French missionaries

(Takaki, 1989). According to a Hmong folktale, the Hmong language existed in written form in a special book which was destroyed after being eaten by cows and rats. Missionaries, after working with the Hmong, produced the Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA), which uses Roman letters to record the language and is now considered to be the most accepted means of documenting the Hmong language (Fadiman, 1997). In order to educate Hmong refugees to become literate in English, one method that has been used has been to teach the students to read and write in Hmong, and then use the same letters to read and write in English (Takaki, 1989). At the same time, however, researchers such as Lee (2001b) have reported that Hmong American students have felt that their ESL classes are a safe haven for them to explore the dominant culture without fear of being made fun of. The classes have encouraged them to draw upon their unique cultural backgrounds while at the same time learning a new culture of experiences. These linguistic aspects of Hmong American education can present particular challenges for researchers. Goodkind (2006) writes that the challenges of language to the research process were “one of the most salient project challenges” (p. 90) during her work with the Refugee Well-Being Project. She described that while the project utilized co-facilitators who were fluent in Hmong to provide translation services, many of the participants in the study expressed some frustration about not being able to communicate with each other effectively at times. While Goodkind wrote that the language barriers decreased and relationships grew stronger as the Hmong participants learned more English and as the university participants learned more Hmong, there was nevertheless frustration associated with the “participants’ inability to fully express themselves” (p. 90).

Particular to school systems in the southeast, Hmong represent a significant portion of the linguistic minority student population. A 2007 report generated by the county’s English to



Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) office (Barrow County Schools) classified 27% (500 students) of the language minority students as speakers of other Asian languages, including Hmong. This number is the second largest group of language minority students in the county after Hispanics, who were identified as 60% of the language minority student population (1096 students).

School accountability data, while it does not provide specifically the number of Hmong students in Barrow County, does provide statistics related to the overall Asian population of students in the county. The 2006 – 2007 School Report Card for the Barrow County public school system (Governor's Office of Student Achievement, The State of Georgia, 2007) describes Asians as comprising 6% of the overall enrollment of 11,191 students (or approximately 670 students). Placing this number (670) of Asian students in combination with the previously mentioned report on language minority students in Barrow County (500 Hmong speaking students) seems to indicate that a significant portion of the Asian students in Barrow County are of Hmong descent.

### **Hmong Americans and Mental Health**

Hmong refugees have been noted to have relatively high rates of psychiatric disorders. Westermeyer (1988), who conducted a study of Hmong refugees 6 to 8 years after their arrival in the United States, found a *DSM-III* Axis-I disorder diagnosis in 43% of the individuals in the refugee group studied. The *DSM-III* disorders noted included Adjustment Disorder, Depression, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, and Paranoia. Westermeyer speculated that as many of the disorders began upon leaving Laos, the stress of refugee flight and acculturation may have placed a role in the onset of these disorders.

Hmong Americans have been reported to experience depression and flashbacks to images of fighting and war. Takaki writes that “many Hmong in Wisconsin sit by their window, feeling lonely and sobbing uncontrollably” (p. 466). He also notes that while few Hmong counselors existed that telling their stories to an interested scholar has seemed to help some Hmong to feel better about their experience. Takaki goes further to provide an example of a Hmong song that demonstrates the loneliness of their experience.

Oh heaven, we Hmong did not want to flee from our country to a new country

So far that we can no longer see our land

We hear the birds singing, they fly in the sky

They make us feel so lonely

The sun is shining brightly

Are you as lonely as I am, or not?

I still have relatives back in my native country

I miss them more than most people can miss anyone.

My life in this country is sunny; it makes me feel like asking,

“Should I continue to live or is it better to die?”

I have no parents or relatives, only myself alone

Do you know how lonely I am? (Takaki, 1989, p. 466)

Problems associated with mental health have been suspected by some to relate to physical symptoms and even death as well. As stated earlier, one unusual health problem that has appeared to affect the Hmong community has been called the “Hmong sudden-death syndrome”. This syndrome describes a phenomenon when apparently healthy Hmong men die unexpectedly

for no apparent reason, even according to medical examiners. As of 1998, it was reported that over 100 men had died from such causes (Takaki, 1989).

Psychosocial and family stresses have also been present in the Hmong American community. Some of these stresses have resulted from families being separated after fleeing to the United States. Poole writes an account of one family which was separated for 28 years before being reunited in America (2005). One of the sons, interviewed for the newspaper article, noted the stress this separation from his parents caused him, stating that “I was in a lot of stress about them. I left them for 20 – 25 years. I never had a mom and dad.”

The practice of traditional healing and mental health in the Hmong culture has frequently been attributed to a shaman or *txiv neeb* (Fadiman, 1997; T. P. Lee & Pfeifer, 2005; Secrist, 2006). The shaman is sought out to cure illnesses, which may occur from natural causes, spirits, or curses. In traditional beliefs, mental illness (such as depression) may be caused by the loss of the soul due to various reasons including fear, a sudden fright, being captured by an evil spirit, or from an unhappy soul. In Fadiman’s book (1997) written about a Hmong girl with epilepsy, her family attributes her illness to the loss of her soul after her older sister slammed the front door of their apartment, thus frightening the soul out of her body. In order to cure illness, the shaman may perform various rituals including herbal medicine, spiritual healing and chanting, and body manipulation (Fadiman, 1997; Secrist, 2006). Body manipulation may involve the use of “cupping” techniques where a vacuum is created on the surface of the skin to draw out evil spirits. Such techniques may leave a visible mark on the body where the cupping was applied (Secrist, 2006).

Other research on the Hmong by Goodkind (2005, 2006) explores psychological interventions with the Hmong in a community based setting. In her study, Goodkind paired

Hmong refugees living in public housing communities in a Midwestern city with undergraduates from Michigan State University in an advocacy project called the Refugee Well-Being Project (RWBP). The project had several purposes, including promoting cross-cultural sharing of experiences between the undergraduates and Hmong participants as well as helping the Hmong with specific skills such as learning English, completing employment applications, and studying for the U.S. citizenship exam. Goodkind used both a qualitative and mixed-methods approach to evaluate the effectiveness of the program in terms of the well-being of the Hmong participants and the strength of the relationships formed between the undergraduates and the Hmong. Her findings suggested that “a genuine process of mutual learning occurred” (p. 88) between the two sets of participants. Furthermore, Goodkind explained her choice of incorporating a large qualitative component to the research by writing that she wanted to “ensure that refugees had the opportunity to speak in their own words, because often others speak for them” (p. 82). Goodkind wrote that the effect of the intervention was beneficial in many ways to the Hmong participants. She stated that her team documented that the Hmong participants saw improvements in their command of the English language, their knowledge of concepts for the U.S. citizenship exam, their ability to identify resources in the community, and their degree of quality of life. Additionally, Goodkind describes that the intervention had a positive effect on the college students who partnered with the Hmong participants in that the students learned much about Hmong culture.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this review of literature was to provide some context for the Hmong American population that I studied. Understanding contextual factors is important for researchers such as myself, for as Denzin and Lincoln (2008) state, “research is an interactive

process shaped by his or her own personal history, biography, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity, and by those of the people in the setting” (p. 8). By presenting some of the historical background, school experiences, and mental health implications of working with Hmong Americans, I have given the reader some of this context that has shaped the experiences of my participants. But as Denzin and Lincoln state, my own background and context is an important part of the research process as well. In the next chapter I will describe my research methodology as well as my own subjectivities as it pertains to the study.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

#### **Introduction**

Having presented the reader in the previous chapter with some of the relevant literature on Hmong Americans in psychology and other related disciplines, I provide this chapter as a means of describing my methodology and overall research design. I will discuss my qualitative research design, a description of the participants I involved in my research, an overview of my data collection and analysis strategy, my understanding of the idea of trustworthiness in qualitative research, some limitations of the research, and a self-reflective statement of my own biases and assumptions in the investigation.

#### **Design**

This study used qualitative research methodology to both collect and analyze data on the perceptions of Hmong students' counseling needs by school employees and students in a school district in the southeast. Creswell (2007) defines qualitative research in the following way:

Qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is inductive and establishes patterns or themes. The final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, and a

complex description and interpretation of the problem, and it extends the literature or signals a call for action. (p. 37)

This study involved the collection of data through semi-structured interviews with school employees and Hmong students about their experiences as well as their understandings of what the counseling needs and strengths are of the Hmong community in the school system.

DeMarrais & Lapan (2004) described a range of roles that both the researcher and participant can play as a continuum between a more distant relationship between the two and a very close relationship between the researcher and participant. They also noted that “the more the participants are encouraged to be a partner in the research process, the more intense their relationship is likely to become” (p. 65). As will be described subsequently, I conducted research in a school community in which I was already heavily involved as part of my pre-doctoral master’s level graduate training.

The importance of this researcher-participant relationship is also particularly highlighted in the context of multicultural research. Multicultural guidelines in psychology, such as those published by the American Psychological Association (2002), call for a close relationship between the researcher and participant such that participants may benefit directly from the outcomes of the research. In Guideline # 4 (“Culturally sensitive psychological researchers are encouraged to recognize the importance of conducting culture-centered and ethical psychological research among persons from ethnic, linguistic, and racial minority backgrounds.”), the involvement of community leaders and cultural brokers in research design is encouraged. The research study included participants who are leaders in the school district as well as members of the Hmong community who are professionally involved with the school system.

Qualitative research has been utilized to study problems in counseling psychology as well as to explore questions related to Hmong American and other Asian American populations. Other authors such as Suzuki et al. (2005) provide examples of specific methods of qualitative research design used in counseling psychology such as ethnography. Lee has conducted several qualitative studies (1997, 2001a, 2001b) of Hmong adolescent students in which she conducted ethnographic research and participant interviews. Sandage et al. (2003) described that further research on Hmong populations should include both a quantitative and a qualitative approach. Fassinger (2005) noted the appropriateness of qualitative approaches by counseling psychologists, stating that “qualitative inquiry parallels clinical reasoning because of the inductive nature of many qualitative approaches to assimilating knowledge” (p. 165).

When it comes to conducting research related to these areas of need in counseling psychology, researchers have begun to rely increasingly upon not only quantitative methodologies but also qualitative methodologies as well. Fassinger (2005), for example, writes that while she still utilizes quantitative methods in her research in counseling psychology, frequently the populations or research questions she has considered have demanded alternative forms of data collection and analysis such as qualitative approaches. She writes that such qualitative approaches can be situated not only in post-positivist frameworks but also in poststructural/critical frameworks that can be used to address “populations (diverse women), issues (challenges to career development based on marginalization and oppression), and goals (a socially just world) that are of interest to me personally and professionally” (p. 157). As such, she describes the appropriateness of qualitative approaches for marginalized populations, and as described in the introduction to this section, Hmong Americans appear to fit into this category of less understood and marginalized persons living in the United States.



Additionally, the American Psychological Association's (2002) multicultural guidelines stress the importance of understanding both quantitative and qualitative methodologies in researcher minority populations and that emphasizing strictly quantitative methodologies may be a barrier to conducting multicultural research. APA's Council of National Psychological Associations for the Advancement of Ethnic Minority Interests (2000) calls for special attention to research on Asian American communities due to the fast growth of the population in the United States as well as the paucity of research on Asian Americans, particularly non-Chinese and Japanese cultures. Qualitative methodologies, then, can serve as an important means for helping to increase our knowledge in psychology of marginalized populations such as the Hmong.

In terms of a theoretical framework for this research, I chose to operate from a constructivist theoretical perspective (Crotty, 2003). I believe that I need not look any further than my experiences in providing counseling and psychotherapy in my master's and doctoral level training to understand how meaning is co-constructed between myself and others, whether they be my counseling clients or my research participants. In therapy, my clients' understanding of the world does not come from a unique, singular reality, but rather from their experience and perceptions, and feelings associated with an event or activity. For example, when I provided school counseling services in a middle school setting, I quickly came to understand that when it came to handling a conflict between two students, there was always more than one side to the story. When I used expressive arts techniques with younger clients, it never ceased to amaze me that a simple board game like Chutes and Ladders® could be played so many different ways and have so many different rules depending upon which child was playing with the game. In

counseling, I have found it less important to rely upon ferreting out the “truth” from my clients; rather, I have found it more important to attend to their perceptions and experiences.

Similarly, in the study I did not seek a singular truth but rather to understand the subjective experiences of my participants. In my research on working with Hmong students, my desire was to come to an interpretive understanding of the experiences of school employees and Hmong students. This meaning making came not only from the actions of my participants but was also co-constructed from my own actions and ways of being as I interacted with my participants. For example, in my pilot study one of my participants expressed to me that as an Asian American researcher, I would probably have better success in entering the Hmong community than she would have as a White teacher. Despite having a shared “pan-ethnic” Asian identity with my Hmong participants, I still feel myself to be very much an outsider to the Hmong community because as a Filipino American I do not share that specific ethnic identity with my participants. However, the teacher’s comments remind me that my interactions with my participants as well as my identity could very well have affected the meaning that is constructed in my research. A constructivist perspective in research reminds me of the importance of my participants’ subjective understandings combined with my own understandings of the world in constructing meaning.

In order to actualize this constructivist framework, I relied upon a grounded theory methodology and analytical methods. Corbin and Strauss (1990) describe grounded theory as a theory that guides data interpretation based on certain theoretical and philosophical assumptions with roots in sociological and philosophical perspectives including pragmatism and symbolic interactionism. In pragmatism, they describe, there is the idea that phenomenon observed as researchers are not static but are always changing. As such, a theory incorporates change and

constant comparisons into its very core. Secondly, in symbolic interactionism and pragmatism, Corbin and Strauss write that actors are neither strictly deterministic nor nondeterministic, meaning that a researcher should study not only the existing conditions that produce action in participants but also how participants may adapt to changing conditions. With this philosophy in mind, the researcher generates a theory as to the social actions of the participants that is grounded in the participant data. As Charmaz (2006) writes, a theory that is grounded in the data comes not only from the perspectives of my research participants but also from my own interpretations as well. Additionally, researchers in counseling psychology such as Fassinger (2005) write that grounded theory's highly structured nature and ability to bridge multiple theoretical perspectives such as post-positivism and more qualitative perspectives make grounded theory well suited for novice researchers such as myself.

### **Sample Selection**

Participants for the study consisted of a combination of individuals who participated in my previously completed pilot study as well as additional new participants, namely a group of Hmong students themselves. My initial pilot study, completed in July 2009, was a qualitative study of southeastern school employees' perceptions of the counseling needs and strengths of Hmong students in their community. In this previous study, I recruited as participants a sample of school employees ( $N = 10$ ) from a school district in the southeastern United States.

Participants were recruited using a snowballing technique in which initial participants recommended subsequent participants for me to interview. Other participants were individuals with whom I became acquainted from the school system during my masters-level training in school counseling. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who represented a variety of roles within the school system as well as to select employees who had experience in working

with Hmong students. The sample included: three teachers, two school social workers, two school counselors, one graduation coach (a person employed at a school site to assist with increasing graduation rates), one district level employee working in the area of curriculum and instructional support, and one assistant principal. The group consisted of three men and seven women with a mean age of 37.40 ( $SD = 9.69$ ). The racial and ethnic makeup of the group included seven White participants, one Black participant, and two Hmong participants ( $N = 10$ ).

Retaining and reanalyzing the data from the initial pilot study was important particularly because the original participant group included two Hmong American school employees. After conducting the study and talking to other participants, I believe that these may be the only two Hmong American employees in the school district employed in a professional capacity. These individuals were important because they served as cultural brokers in my initial research.

Singh, McKay, and Singh (1999) define a cultural broker as an individual who has an understanding both of the dominant culture as well as a minority culture. This individual goes beyond simply providing translation services but serves to enhance cultural understanding between individuals of different cultures. Cultural brokers can also go beyond their role as research assistants to helping therapists and other healthcare workers in assisting individuals. Singh, McKay, and Singh cite an example from Fadiman (1997) in which a translator/cultural broker informs a social worker on effective and culturally sensitive communication with a pregnant Hmong patient.

Multicultural guidelines for research in psychology (Council of National Psychological Associations for the Advancement of Ethnic Minority Interests, 2000) also describe the use of cultural brokers and their importance to the research guidelines. CNPAAEMI's guideline # 5 – 5 states that “Research on Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders should include the participation of

appropriate Asian American/Pacific Islander investigators or collaborators in order to have points of view from cultural insiders.” As such national organizations have also given the directive of using cultural brokers in effective and multiculturally sensitive research with Asian Americans. As another specific example of cultural brokers used in studying Hmong participants, Goodkind (2005, 2006) describes how in her Refugee Well-Being Project she utilized two Hmong co-facilitators to assist her. These co-facilitators assisted with the recruitment of Hmong participants, spreading word about the project through the Hmong community, translating communication between the university and Hmong participant groups, and providing input on the coding and analysis of the qualitative data. Although (as described in a previous section) the use of Hmong co-facilitators did not completely eliminate any barriers to communication between the Hmong-speaking and non-Hmong-speaking participants, Goodkind described their services to the project as “excellent” (p. 90). As such, keeping the data from these cultural brokers in my initial data set and incorporating their responses for further analysis was important in my study.

While keeping my original data set, I also collected new data to augment my initial data source by including Hmong American student participants in the study. Lee (2001b) states, the experiences of Hmong American students are often overlooked because they may not always be the most comfortable in sharing their feelings and ideas in the classroom. As such, I believe that it is important to include their voices in the study. A more detailed description of all of my participants appears in the next chapter (Findings), but a brief description of my participants follows. I recruited  $N = 7$  student participants for this next phase of my study in order to balance out the perspectives provided by the 10 adults in the pilot study. In keeping with research conducted by other Hmong researchers such as Lee (1997, 2001a, 2001b), I focused my efforts

primarily on older adolescents (middle and high school students) as they may have had more developmental experiences and may be better able to explain the complex concepts of counseling needs and resilient strategies than younger students. My student participants were a mix of male and female genders (2 male students and 5 female students) as Lee and others have indicated the importance of gender roles in Hmong American society.

A fundamental question that also guided my sample selection strategy was to know when I had accumulated sufficient information and interviewed enough participants that I could stop collecting data. Grounded theory researchers including Charmaz (2006) refer to this phenomenon as theoretical saturation. She defines theoretical saturation as the point in time where “gathering fresh data no longer sparks new theoretical insights, nor reveals new properties of your core theoretical categories” (p. 113). Because I did not know in advance how many participants I would need to interview in order to achieve theoretical saturation, I originally aimed for 8 adult school employee participants and an approximately equal number of student participants for a total goal of 16 participants across the entire study, a sample which is similar in size to those used in other qualitative research on Hmong Americans (Goodkind, 2006; S. J. Lee, 1997). I found that I reached theoretical saturation with my adult participants after 8 interviews but I chose to include data from 2 additional interviews for additional validation. Similarly, I found that I reached theoretical saturation from student data after 7 student interviews for a total of 17 interviews across the entire study, which was similar to my original overall goal in terms of number of participants.

I recruited the student participants from the same community in the southeast where I conducted my original pilot study. While I obtained appropriate permission from the school district for speaking with these students, I focused primarily on recruiting these students from

existing Hmong community organizations such as church youth groups. Other researchers studying Asian Americans have demonstrated the effectiveness of conducting research through existing community cultural organizations. In their book chapter on research with Asian Americans, Chun, Morera, Andal, Skewes, Leong, Inman, Ebreo, Yang, Kinoshita, and Fu (2007) described the helpful process of “identifying key civic leaders who could help legitimize their research project in the community” (p. 49). One of the researchers in the project met with these community leaders in order to communicate with them about their concerns regarding the research. The authors also comment that because there may be multiple groups or organizations within a community and that these organizations may be in competition for resources, ethnographic and field work methods can help create a “mapping” (p. 49) of the relationships between these organizations so as to better inform any possible collaborations between the researcher and the organizations. Goodkind (2005, 2006) also describes her Hmong Refugee Well-Being project as a community-based psychological endeavor that utilized community organizational resources. Goodkind held a series of “Learning Circles” meetings between the Hmong and university participants that took place in community centers within two public housing developments where many of the Hmong participants lived. Goodkind stated that the advantages of using these local community centers included providing a space that was convenient for the Hmong participants to get to as well as creating a familiar, safe environment.

In particular to the community in which my pilot study was based, there are two Hmong Christian churches in the county. During my pilot study, I met with the pastor of one of the Hmong churches in the county as well as the youth minister and other members of the parish. These individuals were receptive to my research and I continued to rely upon them as a resource throughout the rest of my investigation. Participants in my pilot study indicated to me that such

collaboration with the church would be a more effective way of accessing participants than recruiting students directly from schools and that such school-church partnerships had been helpful to school counselors before in terms of conducting outreach to Hmong families.

### **Data Collection**

In my pilot study, I conducted individual interviews with each participant, ranging from 35 minutes to 90 minutes in length. I conducted similar interviews with the student participants in the study. The interviews took place in a manner similar to Kvale's (2007, p. 19) "traveler" metaphor, in which the interviewer "walks along with" the participant and encourages the participant to share their lived experience. Although as the interviewer I asked questions based on a pre-constructed, semi-structured interview protocol, I also felt free to walk with the participant and ask questions relevant to the research but not necessarily on the protocol. I used the interview questions that appear in Appendix A with my adult participants in my pilot study. The questions followed a sequence recommended by Dilley (2000), in which shorter, more close-ended questions are followed progressively by more open-ended questions, ending with the researcher's broad research questions towards the end of the interview in order to set the interviewee at ease initially during the interview process. The questions included asking about the participant's role in the school system, their interactions with Hmong students, and their perceptions of how Hmong students viewed counseling in the school setting. I also asked a similar, yet modified set of questions of my student participants (Appendix B). The questions included asking the student about his or her experiences with challenges at school and at home, their perceptions of school counselors, and what they would like others to learn about their culture.



After obtaining informed consent from participants and their parents, I digitally recorded the interviews using an Olympus WS-100 voice recorder. I then transferred the audio files to a computer and played them back for transcription using NCH Software Express Scribe dictation software (NCH Software, 2009).

### **Data Analysis**

As Corbin and Strauss (1990) describe, data collection and analysis are two processes that are closely intertwined. The process of analyzing the raw transcript data will involve reading through and developing codes for the data. As described in Creswell (2007) and Charmaz (2006), I divided the data into initial codes (open coding) and then grouped these segments into broader themes (axial coding). Initial segments and themes were developed through what Creswell refers to as a “data analysis spiral” in which the researcher passes over or re-reads the data several times in order to develop higher and higher levels of interpretation and organization.

I also recognize what Corbin & Strauss (1990) refer to as a “constant comparisons” (p. 9) in the data analysis process in which I compared existing data and developing theories from previous interviews to incoming data from subsequent interviews as I continued to interview participants. Comparing the developing themes to new data helped to confirm or challenge my initial findings. Charmaz (2006) goes further to describe that the constant comparative method occurs at various levels and stages within the research process. She writes that comparisons can occur within data from a single interview, between data from two interviews, or across data from multiple interviews. Ideas that the researcher develops, even if not initially and directly supported by a participant’s responses, should be noted and compared to subsequent data as they are analyzed. Fassinger (2005) adds that such analytic approaches in which theory is derived

from participants' lived experiences represent a strong integration of theory and practice as evidenced by the scientist-practitioner model of counseling psychology. In addition to coding, the constant comparative process in grounded theory also involves the use of memo writing (Charmaz, 2006; Fassinger, 2005). Analytic memo writing includes the reflections of the researcher's own musings about the data and the themes that are developed by the researcher.

These authors describe several strengths of the constant comparative process, including that any themes or eventual theories derived by the researcher are well-tested through continual comparison and contrasting efforts. The authors also add that by taking a grounded theory approach to the constant comparative process that categories or theories that develop are well grounded and supported by the data itself and are less subject to the bias of the researcher. However, Fassinger (2005) reports several challenges for using a constant comparative approach, particularly with regard to grounded theory. She stated that while the use of such an approach is very thorough as a means of data analysis, the method can also be very time consuming and intensive. Additionally, she reported that in her own experience with submitting grounded theory articles for review in various journals, reviewers have criticized the methodology for alternately being not rigorous enough for more quantitatively based reviewers but also too post-positivist in nature for reviewers who have a more postmodern qualitative bend.

In order to systematically organize my codes and memos, I used the software package ATLAS.ti (ATLAS.ti GmbH, 2010) as part of the data analysis. The software is a qualitative data analysis package which allows the user to create a database of codes and memos from transcript data and to create various reports summarizing the user created codes. As I read through a transcript, the software allowed me to mark sections of the text with open codes related to general themes from the initial reading. The software continued to accumulate and track a list

of codes as more sections of the transcript were marked. Subsequent passages in the transcript were coded by comparing and referencing the existing code list against subsequent codes that I considered generating, so that in some cases codes were reused from the existing list while in other cases I generated new codes. ATLAS.ti's memo writing feature allowed me to also record short analytic memos about thoughts and conjectures I had about the data as I conducted my interviews and my analysis. Finally, using the software I was able to generate a list of all the codes and organize them using a graphical user interface into a hierarchical diagram using the axial coding process of connecting lower level codes to properties to higher level categories which reflected the broader themes from my data. A mapping of these codes is presented in the next chapter in the discussion of the grounded theory model I developed of the resilient strengths, counseling needs, and counseling strategies for working with Hmong students in the southeast.

The use of computer software by researchers for the purposes of data management and analysis of qualitative data has drawn both praise and concern from qualitative researchers. Creswell (2007) notes the increasing importance of technology in qualitative research, noting that "with extensive use of computers in qualitative research, more attention will likely be given to how qualitative data are organized and stored... with extremely large databases being used by some qualitative researchers, this aspect assumes major importance" (p. 142). Charmaz (2006), however, cites other researchers who have concerns that the use of computer programs in qualitative research may result in "short-changing the analytic process, generating superficial analyses, and forcing qualitative research into a single method" (p. 179). In my own use of qualitative data analysis software in this study, I found that while the software provided a convenient means of organizing a large amount of data, it by no means performed the analysis

for me. As Creswell writes, “The process used for qualitative data analysis is the same for hand coding or using a computer: The inquirer identifies a text segment or image segment, assigns a code label, and then searches through the database for all text segments that have the same code label. In this process the researcher, not the computer program, does the coding and categorizing.” Indeed, one of my professors who first introduced me to qualitative research software also noted that even with her experience in using the software, she will also cut and paste quotes from paper transcripts in conducting her analyses. With this in mind, I viewed my use of computer software in analyzing my data as a modification of but not a replacement for the more tried-and-true methods that my research mentors have utilized in conducting analyses using non-computerized methods.

### **Trustworthiness**

Qualitative research concerns itself with the idea of trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) as a parallel to the quantitative concept of validity. Trustworthiness in qualitative research has a similar meaning to its quantitative analogue in that trustworthiness relates to the credibility and the believability of the researcher’s assertions and interpretations of the data. Cho and Trent (2006) state that “in seeking trustworthiness, researchers attend to research credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability” (p. 322). Anfara et al. (2002, p. 30) provide a cross walk of various quantitative concepts of validity with their qualitative equivalents. In particular, authors such as Flick (2007) suggest that specific concepts dealing with validity and trustworthiness in qualitative research such as triangulation can be thought of not so much as a means for achieving validity but as a complete alternative to the idea of validity in qualitative research. Flick states that instead of searching for a single “truth,” it may be better consider the possibility of multiple perspectives and quotes Köckeis-Stangl’s metaphor of a “kaleidoscopic”

(p. 179) picture of research rather than a uniform picture. In considering this alternative view to trustworthiness and validity, I believe Flick's conceptualization appears to be much more complex than Anfara et al.'s parallelization of qualitative and quantitative concepts of validity. However, the basic tenets of trustworthiness in qualitative research relates to looking at the data from multiple perspectives in order to help improve the credibility of the researcher's findings.

In terms of the research, one method I incorporated to increase the trustworthiness of my findings was to incorporate member checking (Anfara, et al., 2002) in my study. Cho and Trent (2006, p. 322) cite Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 314) as asserting that member checking is "the most crucial technique for establishing credibility." In the process of member checking, I submitted short summaries of my findings back to my participants in order to initiate a dialogue between my participants and myself. Through this dialogue, my participants helped to confirm and shape my findings and increase the credibility of my work.

As a second means of addressing trustworthiness, I also used code maps such as those described by Anfara et al. (2002) as a means of documenting and displaying an audit trail of the codes I generated during the constant comparative data analysis process. The code map is a table that hierarchically displays how the low level, initial codes I generated relate to higher level axial codes and to my research questions as well. The code map served as a means of providing transparency into my analytic and interpretive process and allows the reader to trace back through successive iterations of the data analysis to see how I have analyzed and related the data. An example code map is as follows:

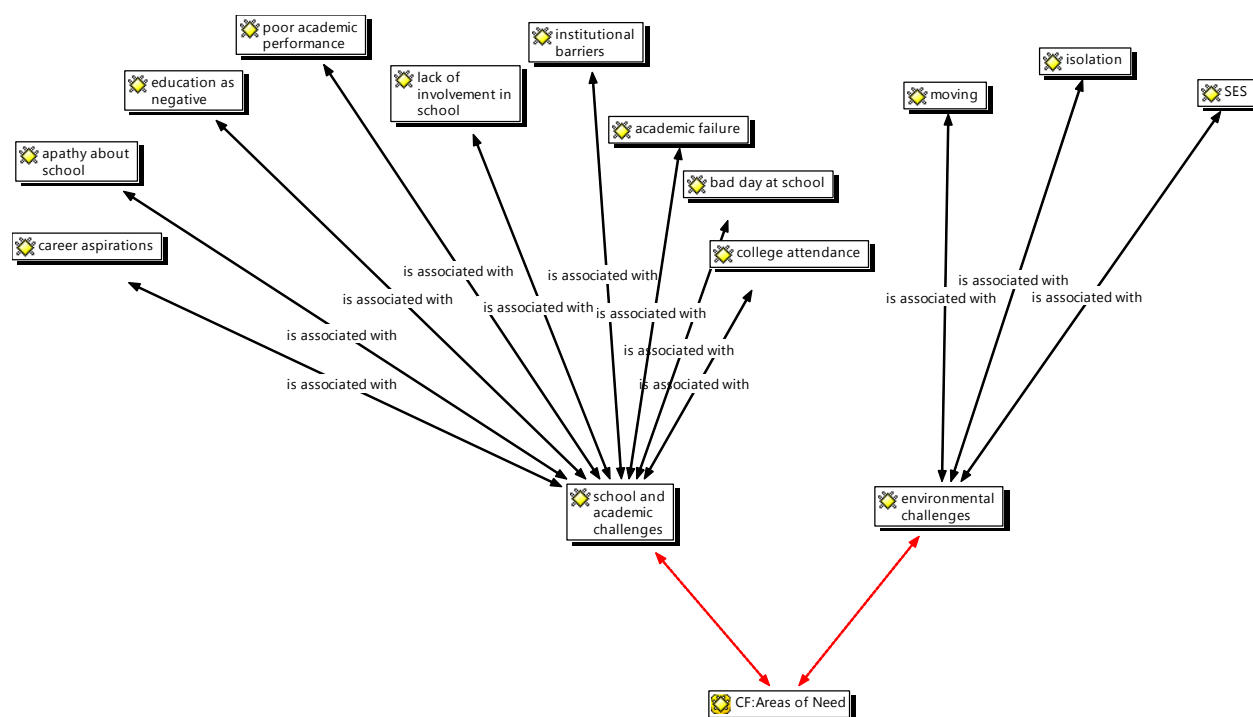


Figure 1. Sample Code Map

This code map shows an example of how I constructed one of my higher level categories (Areas of Need). I derived this category from the successive development of codes from lower level codes (appearing at the top of the diagram) to properties (in the middle of the diagram) to a higher level category (at the bottom of the diagram). For example, as I performed the basic line-by-line coding as I read through a transcript, I highlighted and marked sections of text with codes such as “poor academic performance” or “lack of involvement in school” to illustrate some basic themes I was seeing in an initial read through the text of the transcript. At a later time, I then looked at the lower level codes that I had come up with across various transcripts and started to group them together under a broader heading of properties (such as “school and academic challenges” or “environmental challenges”). Finally, as I continued to derive properties, I was able to group several of these properties together under a related category heading of “Areas of Need”. As such, I provide this example of a code map so as to give some insight into my

analytic process as I went from line-by-line coding of the raw transcript data to developing higher order themes and a general theory. I also hope that in providing this example of a code map I can provide the reader with an “audit-trail” so as to have some transparency into my analytic process and thereby increase the trustworthiness of my findings.

A third means of addressing trustworthiness that I utilized is reflexive journaling and the memoing process described by Charmaz (2006). Throughout the data analysis process I wrote memos of my initial thoughts, impressions, and experiences in the field as they related to my data analysis. The memos served as an additional source of data for me to rely upon in my analysis also highlighted any potential areas of researcher bias that I encountered in the process. An example of one of my memos is as follows, a memo I wrote when beginning my data collection through the Hmong Christian church:

I made it out to the church tonight. I got that same familiar feeling as soon as I pulled into the parking lot, that feeling of being similar yet different. It was a nervous feeling... Several of the men greeted me and shook my hand as they walked out of the sanctuary. I smiled and said hello, and several of them expressed surprise when I told them I was not Hmong. "You look like one of us!" one said. Eventually the pastor greeted me... I left feeling very welcomed and positive about the experience, even about the part I was most nervous about, getting parent permission.

In this preceding memo, I reflected upon the feelings I had of entering the church for the first time and the nervousness I felt in being an outsider to the Hmong culture as will be further discussed in a subsequent section of this chapter in my reflexivity statement. Such memos helped me be aware of my personal reactions as well as my perceptions of the reactions my

participants had to me, which further served the purpose of informing my analysis and helping me become aware of biases that I could hold as I developed my theory.

### **Limitations**

The study did have limitations, many of which can be addressed through further research. One limitation was that the majority of my Hmong student participants belong to a Hmong Christian church in the community that served as the base for my recruitment efforts. Outside of these church-going students, I had one Hmong student participant who identified with a non-Christian (shamanistic) faith background. Although I believe that my collaboration with community church officials was beneficial, I realize that in collaborating with this one particular community entity, I was not able to more fully incorporate the voices of non-churchgoing students in the system I studied. As a result, although my study gives an in-depth perspective of the experiences of some of the Hmong Christian students in the community as well as the experiences of one student of another faith background, the study does not fully reflect the diversity of spiritual beliefs of the entire Hmong community.

Additionally, while the particular district I studied does have a significant Hmong population in the southeast, it is not the largest or the only site of Hmong settlement in the southeast (T. P. Lee & Pfeifer, 2009). While I developed a wealth of information related to the experiences of school employees and Hmong students in one particular region of the southeast, based on my geographic and travel limitations, I was only able to focus on one metropolitan area. As census data and other reports have shown (Poe, 2002; Reeves & Bennett, 2004), Hmong students have settled in various parts of the southeastern United States including both Georgia and North Carolina. As such, future research could also include students and employees from



other school districts and organizations outside the church to broaden the understanding of Hmong students in other parts of the southeastern United States.

### **Reflexivity Statement and Assumptions**

The importance of the relationship between the researcher and the participant are present in various writings on research with Asian American populations. In particular, one's status as an "outsider" or a person in some ways removed from the community of study becomes a particular challenge to the researcher. Chun et al. (2007) presented the example of Operation Mango which studied the health service needs of Filipino Americans in the greater Chicago community. One of the researchers (Andal) described herself as an outsider to the community due to differences in age, gender, and other factors despite a shared Filipino American identity.

In another example of working with Hmong communities, Lee (2001b) in her study of Hmong high school students wrote that despite their shared "panethnic" Asian identity, her non-belonging to the Hmong culture as a Chinese American woman relegated her as an outsider to the community initially and was a gap she had to overcome through her research. She stated that her participants experienced a mistrust of her as a researcher that was similar to their mistrust of school officials. For example, participants would not disclose to Lee aspects of their personal lives such as their marital status.

In a third example of being an outsider, Koltyk (1993) conducted an ethnographic study of the Hmong and their use of home videos to document various aspects of their lives. However, Koltyk faced a challenge when it came time to view videos of activities that her participants considered more sensitive in nature. These videos included scenes of the Hmong killing a pig or chicken in a traditional ritual. These acts incited the disdain of their neighbors who regarded the rituals as cruelty to animals or paganistic. Koltyk wrote, "...some of my informants used their

remote controls to censor portions of these home-mode videos that they thought were unsuitable for outsiders' viewing. In my case, items were censored that the Hmong felt would offend me, as an American, or that I would judge as wrong" (p. 440). As such, Koltyk's status as an outsider prevented her from being privy to aspects of the Hmong participants' lives which others regarded as negative.

With these examples in mind, I also realize that in my research there are challenges in this aspect of my identity as an outsider to the Hmong community. Suzuki et al. (2005) wrote that "prior to engaging in the research process, the researcher must consider the potential impact of his or her personal and group history, gender, class/caste, race, skin color, social attitudes, biases, and so forth" (p. 209). Though I have a shared Asian racial identity with my participants and conducted my master's program clinical work in the school district I am currently studying, I am of Filipino descent and as such differ from my participants in regard to nationality and ethnicity. One of my participants in my pilot study, a White teacher, shared her thought with me towards the end of her interview that as an Asian American I would "definitely have more of an in than a Caucasian would" in terms of working with the Hmong community

While I suspect that her statement may be true to a certain extent, her comments make me recall a particular event I experienced in visiting a Hmong Christian church in the county I am studying. I entered the church and attended a prayer meeting which was conducted in Hmong. I was greeted in Hmong by several of the attendees when I entered the church, but after I disclosed that I did not speak Hmong, they kindly suggested that I could attend the youth group service down the hall way which was conducted in English. The experience highlighted for me not only my status as an outsider to the community, but also some of the ways in which I perceived the flexibility of a culture in providing spiritual services to their youth in English, a language which

many of the Hmong in other studies are only beginning to understand themselves. However, my hope was to develop and utilize the relationships with key community leaders and organizations (such as church leaders, school leaders, and elders in the community) so as to go from an outsider status to a closer relationship with his participants so that they would benefit from this and future research.

With regard to relationships, I was also mindful during this research of the role that power and privilege could play in my interactions with my participants and community liaisons. During my master's level field experiences in school counseling in the district where I conducted the research for this study, one of my first supervisors (an elementary school counselor) reminded me that as a graduate student, I was already coming in with a greater degree of formal education than most of the students or parents with whom I would interact. As such, she reminded me that some of the clients and parents I would serve could potentially find my higher level of education to be threatening or that I would be looking down upon them in some way. Similarly, in the present study, I had to be mindful that it was a common experience for many Hmong parents (including the ones with whom I would be asking for permission to interview their children) would not have achieved a significant amount of elementary school education (Duchon, 1997) let alone graduate school. As such, through the use of reflexive memo writing and self-reflection I was aware of the power differential I may have presented to my participants and their families in addition to the privilege that my education and background have afforded me.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have provided the reader with the methodological framework that I used for my research on Hmong Americans. As a student engaged in the interdisciplinary qualitative

research certificate program at The University of Georgia, the importance not only of actual methods but also of the theoretical underpinnings of these methods have been emphasized to me as a student researcher. I hope that I have provided an understanding not only of the more concrete steps I took in my research but also the more theoretical and philosophical stances that have guided my investigation. But on a deeper level, I have aspired in this chapter to also take a look at myself in relation to my research and to understand how various aspects of myself, my identity, and reflexivity played a role in the research that I undertook with a unique population of individuals living here in the southeastern United States.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Findings**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to understand the counseling needs and resilient strategies of Hmong students living in the southeast across elementary, middle, and high school levels as seen through the eyes of both school employees and Hmong students. The following research questions guided my study:

- What are the academic and social strengths of the community of Hmong students in the southeast?
- What are the counseling needs for Hmong students in the southeast?
- How do Hmong students address the challenges and needs that they have?
- How can a better understanding of Hmong students help school counselors be more effective in working with the unique challenges faced by Hmong students?

In this qualitative study, I conducted semi-structured interviews with a total of 17 participants (10 school employees, 7 students). Our interviews averaged 60 minutes in length. My interviews with the adult participants took place between May 2008 and May 2009; a second phase of data collection involving youth participants took place between June 2010 and July 2010. Audio from the interviews was digitally recorded, transferred to computer, and then manually transcribed by myself. I then utilized a grounded theory approach to analyzing the raw interview transcripts, organizing the various codes utilizing the ATLAS.ti 6 qualitative research software.

I begin this chapter by presenting an overview of the various participants who were involved in my study. I refer to each of the participants using a pseudonym so as to protect the actual identity of the individuals involved in the study. After presenting an overview of the participants themselves, I provide the findings of the grounded theory analysis that I conducted. In presenting these findings, I discuss the various data categories and the overall theory I generated along with supporting examples of quotes from the interview data. I then end this chapter with an overall summary of the findings.

### **The Participants**

The participants in this study were 17 individuals who reside in the southeast. Ten of the participants were adult employees including teachers, administrators, counselors, and social workers in a rural school district in the southeast. I chose employees from this particular school district because it has a significant population of Hmong students; specifically, 27% of the language minority students in the district were believed to be of Hmong ancestry which translates to approximately 500 individuals according to a recent report by the school board. The school employee participants consisted of three males and seven females, ranging in age from 29 to 60 with a mean age of 37.4 years. Seven of the employees self-identified as White, two employees self-identified as Hmong, and one employee self-identified as Black. Three of the employees were teachers, one was an administrator, one a district-level coordinator, one was a graduation coach, two were school counselors, and two were school social workers. The grade levels served by the employees included elementary, middle, and high school.

The remaining 7 participants in the study were either current or former K – 12 students of various school districts in the southeast. At the suggestion of several of my adult participants as well as relevant research literature, I chose to use a Hmong community organization (a Hmong

Christian church) to help me with the recruitment of student participants. The church is located within the same county where I had interviewed the school employees. Because the church is one of the few in the metropolitan area dedicated to serving the Hmong community, members of the church reside in several counties beyond the county where the church is located. As such, the students whom I interviewed came not only from the same county as the school employees I interviewed but also from other surrounding counties. One of the students was currently enrolled in the same school district as the aforementioned employees, while five of the students were currently attending school in a neighboring school district. The seventh student was currently enrolled at a state university in the southeast and also attended high school in a school district within the same southeastern metropolitan area as the other students in the study. The students in the study consisted of 2 males and 5 females, ranging in age from 10 to 20 with a mean age of 15.1 years. All of the students interviewed self-identified as Hmong. The grade levels of the student participants ranged from fifth grade (elementary) through senior year of college. Six of the student participants self-identified as Christian and were interviewed at a Hmong Christian church located in the same county as the employees interviewed for this study, while the seventh student participant self-identified as practicing shamanism.

Tables 1 and 2 present a summary of the school employee and student participants' demographic information, listed in the order in which the participants were interviewed. Following this table, I present a short, narrative description of each of the participants.

Table 1.

*School Employee Participants' Demographic Information*

#	Name (Pseudonym)	Age	Gender	Race/ Ethnicity	Position	Level
1	Andrew	33	Male	White	Graduation Coach	High School
2	Loretta	31	Female	White	District Office Employee	Board Office
3	Nadine	45	Female	White	School Social Worker	Board Office
4	Bao	33	Female	Hmong	Teacher	High School
5	Mai	29	Female	Hmong	Teacher	Elementary School
6	Barbara	33	Female	White	Assistant Principal	Middle School
7	Brandon	33	Male	White	School Counselor	Middle School
8	Emma	32	Female	White	School Counselor	Middle School
9	Anna	45	Female	White	Teacher	Middle School
10	Nathan	60	Male	Black	School Social Worker	Board Office

Table 2.

*Hmong Student Participants' Demographic Information*

#	Name (Pseudonym)	Age	Gender	Race/ Ethnicity	Position	Level	Grade
11	Richard	16	Male	Hmong	Student	High School	11
12	Jane	15	Female	Hmong	Student	High School	10
13	George	17	Male	Hmong	Student	High School	12
14	Justine	16	Female	Hmong	Student	High School	11
15	Michelle	12	Female	Hmong	Student	Middle School	8
16	Cassie	10	Female	Hmong	Student	Elementary School	5
17	Yi	20	Female	Hmong	Student	Undergraduate	16



**Andrew.** Andrew is a 33-year-old self-identified White male who works as a high school graduation coach. At the time of the interview, Andrew was also working towards a Ph.D. in social studies education at a nearby state university. He holds an undergraduate degree in psychology and a master's degree in counseling psychology. He became interested in education through his former work as a counselor with a governor's school summer program for high school students and eventually got his teacher's certification for social studies education.

As a White male, he described having grown up in a primarily Black neighborhood and school district, which he believes has given him some sensitivity to understanding the needs of the ethnic minority students he currently serves as a graduation coach. Throughout our interview, Andrew described his passion for social justice and how he sees a great responsibility for schools to serve the needs of all children while also acknowledging several institutional barriers which make this difficult including lack of after-school transportation and the rigors of school scheduling. He stated that he sees his role as a graduation coach to "increase the graduation rate and decrease the dropout rate." With regard to the Hmong students with whom he works, Andrew estimated he has worked with approximately 50 Hmong students during his tenure as graduation coach. While he described their relatively high academic success rates and high graduation rates, he also described several challenges for Hmong students related to language barriers and lack of transportation limiting their involvement in after-school activities.

**Loretta.** Loretta is a 31-year-old self-identified White female who works in the school board office. She has particular experience and interests in working with English Language Learners (ELL students) and also helps provide support various teachers in the school district, including those who teach English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). Her undergraduate degree was in middle school science education as well as language arts. She stated that a

particularly significant experience she had during her education was participating in a study abroad experience in Mexico (the first time she had ever been out of the United States) in which she learned a great deal about worldviews besides her own.

When Loretta began teaching, she first worked as an ESOL teacher. Although she held a valid endorsement to teach ESOL classes, she stated that it was “very unplanned how I ended up in that position” and she initially felt somewhat unprepared to work with ELL students. However, in her first series of experiences as an ESOL teacher, she learned more about working with Hmong students, a population with whom she had no previous experience. Loretta spoke of the various differences between the English language and Hmong and how these differences often create challenges for Hmong American students who are learning English. Now, after several years in education and in working with non-native speakers of English, she stated with regard to her ESOL experience that “that’s all I’ve ever done in education and I love it. I love it.”

**Nadine.** Nadine is a 45-year-old self-identified White female. She has worked as a school social worker for the past 10 years. She described the challenges of having started as one of only two social workers for the entire district but expressed a sense of hopefulness in knowing that recently the school district had hired additional social workers to augment her team. Based on the way the school social workers divide their caseloads in the particular school district that she serves, Nadine works primarily with middle and high school students. At the time of the interview, she estimated that she potentially serves approximately 6000 students at the middle and high school level in the district, although with the addition of more social workers to the county, she expected her caseload to drop in number. She also estimated that of the students she serves that approximately 10 of the students she sees a year are Hmong American.

Nadine provided a unique perspective as compared to many of the employees interviewed for this study in that as a school social worker she has had the opportunity to visit many Hmong homes and meet with the families of Hmong American students. She describes the Hmong families with whom she has worked as “ambitious,” having “strong family values,” and that they “work well together as a family.” However, she also described several cultural challenges she faced in working with Hmong families, including one in particular where one of the daughters, a student in the school district, was experiencing some symptoms of psychosis including hearing voices. She described the particular challenges of working with this family, including balancing the desire to respect their cultural values of not wanting to seek Western doctors or clinicians while also maintaining the safety and care for the student.

**Bao.** Bao is a 33-year-old self-identified Hmong female. She currently works as a high school teacher. Bao’s unique contribution to the study was that she was able to provide the perspective of having been born in Laos and attending school in the same district where she now works as an employee. Although she currently has a teaching certificate she is also taking classes towards getting an additional ELL endorsement with the eventual plan to teach classes such as social studies in a “sheltered” setting for ELL students. She sees one advantage of these special classes as having a smaller student to teacher ratio, which she feels will allow her to spend more individualized time teaching subjects to students who may struggle with learning English.

Bao shared her perspectives not only in working with the Hmong students that she teaches but also her perspective of interacting with their parents. She cites her ability to speak Hmong as a distinct advantage in terms of her interactions with Hmong parents. In addition, she also shared the various cultural values with which she grew up as a Hmong American herself and

how she sees this come into play with the various Hmong American students that she currently has in her classroom. She also describes the changes that she has observed in her school district through the years, noting that when she was a student there were “maybe 5 or 6 Hmong students in the whole school. And now, there’s tons, so [it’s] definitely changed.”

**Mai.** Mai is a 29-year-old female, who like Bao, also self-identifies as Hmong and works as a teacher (albeit at an elementary school). She previous taught school in California and moved to the southeast approximately 3 years ago to be closer to her husband’s family. As an elementary school teacher, she teaches a variety of subjects and also has an ESOL certification. She stated that although she has been teaching in the southeast for the past 3 years, the time of the interview represented the first school year where she had Hmong students in her classroom.

Our interview was somewhat unusual in that it took place during a school carnival. Although we found what initially seemed to be a quiet location in the school to conduct the interview, our conversations were frequently interrupted by the overhead PA system announcing various events taking place during the carnival. Nevertheless, Mai maintained her composure during the interview and shared some of her unique experiences as a Hmong teacher now working with Hmong students herself. Mai also described some of the differences she noticed between having lived in California (where there is a much higher population of Hmong people) to living in the southeast. She stated that because of both generational differences and geographic differences that even in the celebration of traditional events such as the Hmong New Year “here is not as culture centered as it used to be... a lot of things have been edited out.”

**Barbara.** Barbara is a 33-year-old self-identified White female. She received her degree in education in the southern part of the state and taught for approximately 5 years prior to moving to her current school district. Upon moving to the district she continued to teach in a

middle school for the next 3 years, but approximately 8 months prior to the interview she had applied for and was accepted into a new role as an assistant principal at another middle school within the same district, all the while completing and earning a doctoral degree in education as well. She described the transition to her new job as a positive one and that she was constantly learning on the job as a new administrator. “It’s totally different from teaching,” she described, “so there’s a lot more student interaction, and it’s not always on the positive side., It’s more as a disciplinarian.” As we were conducting our interview, I gained a sense of how busy she was as she had several students waiting outside her office to see her. She described her responsibilities including handling disciplinary referrals, conducting curriculum reviews, working with the special education program, and other duties. “You name it, it just kind of falls under the assistant principal,” she stated.

She described that while she did not have much regular interaction with Hmong students in her school, her overall sense of them was positive. “I don’t think I’ve even seen one last year when I was here for discipline.” However, she stated that she was learning more about Hmong culture and that she had noticed that the Hmong students whom she had knowledge of tended to “fly under the radar,” meaning that although they had good behavior and good academic performance they would not necessarily report needing to see a counselor even if something was wrong.

**Brandon.** Brandon is a 33-year-old self-identified White male. At the time of the interview, he had been working at a middle school in the district for the past 4 years and had worked as a high school counselor for the 2 years prior to that. When describing his role as a school counselor, he stated that “in any given day it changes,” speaking of the variety of roles he plays. To give me a better idea of his responsibilities, he reviewed with me his schedule for the

past week, which included coordinating the peer mediation program, working on a suicide prevention protocol, speaking with parents, running a social skills group, working with bullying referrals, and even helping a child to get a pair of eyeglasses. He also reported that he enjoyed being able to help with the student athletic program which included him selling concessions and working the score board. “That’s always fun,” he explained. Brandon also informed me that he had recently passed the state exam for an educational leadership endorsement.

Brandon reported some relative success in his interactions with Hmong students as a counselor in that because he had started to get to know more of his students’ social circles in his school, he had also gotten more knowledge and context regarding various student groups including several Hmong students. “The more students I get to know, the more I can put everything together, which definitely makes it easier because they’re not looking at you going, ‘How do you not know this?’ I think they know you care because they know you’ve obviously listened enough to know what’s going on with them, and then they know that they don’t have to sit and explain every little detail to you.” However, he also noted some challenges in working with Hmong students and their families, explaining that although he had gotten to know some of the Hmong students better through the years, he also found that some of the Hmong students with whom he interacted tended to be more private. “They’re not as likely to share with you what’s going on.”

**Emma.** Emma is a 32-year-old self-identified White female who, like Brandon, also works as a middle school counselor, although at a different school in the district. She said at the time of the interview that this was her third year at her school. Emma reported that she had a former career working in retail management for several years and that this was her first position working as a school counselor after finishing her graduate program. “It’s something that I

always wanted to do,” she described. She said that where she used to live there was a requirement that one had to first work as a teacher prior to becoming a school counselor and that “I wanted to do school counseling, but I wasn’t interested in teaching.” She was glad, then, to find that when she moved from her prior home to the southeast that there was not a similar requirement for school counselors to have been teachers first.

With regard to her work with Hmong students, she described several case examples of Hmong students with whom she had done counseling work. One particularly poignant example was of a seventh grade girl. “She had issues with behavior in the classroom, had issues with defiance a lot with the teachers, but we’d built a great rapport and on special occasions she would write me a little note thanking me.” However, upon entering eighth grade, Emma said that the girl was reported to have been having some “breaks with reality” and additional issues of defiance in classroom. “It didn’t seem she like she could control it,” she described, and they feared that she could be a danger to herself or to other students. In working with the girl’s family, Emma chose to take a collaborative approach, visiting the home with the school social worker, a family and children’s services worker, and a representative from a Hmong Christian church. Eventually, the parents agreed to have the girl tested, and she ended up qualifying for special education services for an emotional-behavioral disorder (EBD). However, despite the success of the collaborative approach, Emma described that the case presented some cultural challenges. “The family would not take her to the doctors. The father had to explain to me there are things that they take care of. They may see that a person is sick but they don’t seek outside help for it. It’s a different culture. It’s the way they see things.”

**Anna.** Anna is a 45-year-old self-identified White school teacher specializing in teaching ESOL. She has taught at her current middle school for the past 4 years; prior to that she

worked as a teacher's assistant in special education at the same school for 5 years. She described her role as an ESOL teacher by saying that she teaches both collaborative classes with a general education teacher as well as specialized resourced classes for ESOL students. But in addition to her role as a teacher, she described herself as a supporter. "I think that a lot of my role here is to encourage the students, to be there for them, to offer them support, whatever they need, because they really need that and it makes a big difference in their lives."

In our interview, Anna shared her knowledge of several children with whom she had worked closely and how she learned more about them through her classes and also through attending community events such as the Hmong New Year celebration. She described having knowledge of them not only as her students in the middle school but also knowing of how they were doing in high school. She described the story of one Hmong student and her family who had moved to the county from a refugee camp in Thailand approximately 4 years ago. Anna gave the example of how the student struggled with aspects of American culture such as understanding the symbolism in C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia* book series in a language arts class. "She didn't know anything about our culture, about our religion, anything." Anna stated that the student is now in high school and is going to be having a baby soon and that Anna is now teaching some of her younger siblings and step-siblings. "They have some of the lowest [standardized test] scores in one area in the whole school... They've got some real severe issues. Honestly I'm not sure exactly what they are." Anna reported that in addition to her developing more relationships with Hmong students, one of her sons, who is also a student in the school, has also developed relationships with many of the Hmong students. "My son is very, very, very interested in the Hmong culture. He has a lot of Hmong friends and I'll ask him questions all the



time about different things... I think it's good for them to trust someone who's not Hmong... the Hmong kids are just all around him."

**Nathan.** Nathan is a self-identified Black male who works as a school social worker in his school district. He jokingly declined to give his exact age but told me that I could say that he was 60 years old. He works in the same school district as Nadine and described how the addition of more social workers to their district has been a welcome change as it has allowed them to further divide their workload amongst the various schools that they serve. He stated that with the new arrangement he was now able to focus on serving students who attend a subset of the elementary schools in the district as opposed to the much larger caseload he had before. Nathan said that he has worked as a school social worker in the district since 2000 and that prior to that he held various positions in administration including being a school counselor, an elementary school principal, and a middle school assistant principal. He estimated that he has spent a total of 25 years working in education. I asked him if it truly felt like he had worked in education for that length of time, to which he replied, "It doesn't really. And at other times, it's like, 'Yeah.'"

Nathan came to the interview prepared with several printouts of statistics related to Hmong students in the county. Nathan also spoke of his own direct work with various Hmong students and their families, noting that (similar to Nadine) the advantage of being able to visit Hmong families in their own homes was that "Being on their own turf they feel a little more confident and feel like they're not being threatened by the school officials or by this person." Nathan also said that his knowledge of working as a pastor in his own church community gave him some sensitivity to the social needs of diverse families such as the Hmong students with whom he works. "Being a pastor as well, I recognize and I know the need of fellowship."

**Richard and Jane.** Richard, a self-identified 16-year-old male, and Jane, a self-identified 15-year-old female, are brother and sister and represent the first two students that I interviewed for my study. I present them together in this chapter because I also interviewed them together when one of their parents presented them to me to work with at the Hmong Christian church where I conducted the majority of the student interviews. Richard and Jane both self-identify as Hmong. They are both enrolled in a high school in a district that neighbors the one where I interviewed the various school employees. At the time of the interview, they were in the middle of their summer vacation with Richard entering eleventh grade, and Jane entering tenth grade. They and their parents are both actively involved in the church, and they described to me the various church retreats and other events that they would be attending as a family over the summer.

Richard and Jane stated that both of their parents were born in Laos and that their family lived in Colorado for a period of time prior to moving to the southeast when they were in middle school. “It was a lot easier because we had our cousins there too,” Richard described in terms of being able to make friends in Colorado. However, upon moving to their school district in the southeast, Richard and Jane estimated that including each other there were only about five other Hmong students in their school. “It was hard too because you’re going to a new area and you don’t know much people at all except for cousins, so you have to get to learn and know more about those people,” Jane said about adjusting to their new surroundings in the southeast. Richard and Jane shared their impressions of interacting with other students in their new school district while also keeping in mind the difficulties that their own parents faced when they were growing up. “Their life generation was different from ours,” Jane shared. Richard went on to

say, “When I was growing up I had nice shoes already. In Laos, all my dad wore was sandals or just going barefoot. It’s like a totally different thing for him.”

**George.** George is a 17-year-old self-identified Hmong student who at the time of the interview was about to start his twelfth grade year at a high school in a neighboring school district. I also interviewed him at the Hmong Christian church where I conducted many of the student interviews. He stated that he was born in Fresno, California and that as a young child his family moved to the southeast. He shared with me that his parents were born in Thailand and Laos and that he has one brother and two younger sisters. He said that his mother has an associate’s degree and that while his father had started to take some college courses he eventually dropped out in order to work and support the family. He said that currently his parents both work in manufacturing.

George described himself as wanting to live a “Christian life” which he said meant that “I really don’t care so much for the money, or trying to go out and get a good career. I’m just interested in trying to go far enough to support myself and a family in the future.” He contrasted the differences between the Hmong people he saw living in California to his current experience of living in the southeast. “Here we all just go to school, but out of state like in California or from the north... they don’t really care too much about school...” He said that although in some ways he has noticed the relatively smaller number of Hmong people living in the southeast, he said that in his opinion this reduced the chances of Hmong people becoming “troublemakers.” “Our parents, they really don’t want us to be with too [many Hmong people] at school, because the more you have the more chances you have to go be a troublemaker... [In my county] we’re pretty much out there by ourselves so we can’t go cause trouble or stuff.”

**Justine.** Justine is a 16-year-old self-identified Hmong female. At the time of the interview at the Hmong Christian church, she was a rising eleventh grade student at a high school in a neighboring county. She said she was born in Northern California and that she and her family moved to her current district when she was in elementary school when she was approximately 8 years old. She stated that both of her parents were born in Laos and moved to the United States when they were young children. She described herself as being very active in her church and that she participates in church youth groups and Sunday school.

Justine estimated that there were approximately 15 to 20 other Hmong students in her high school, a quantity which she described as “not a lot.” She described the difficulty she sometimes has in explaining to teachers her ethnic heritage. “People don’t really understand where we’re from... A lot of teachers ask where I’m from. I’m Hmong and my parents are from Laos, but we’re not Laotian or anything. We’re from the mountains. I think more people from school are starting to understand where we’re from, so they kind of know.”

**Michelle.** Michelle is a 12-year-old, self-identified Hmong female student who at the time of the interview was entering her eighth grade year at a middle school in the same school district as the school employees I interviewed (which is also the same county where the Hmong Christian church is located where I conducted her interview). She said she was born in Sacramento, CA and that her family moved to the southeast when she was approximately 4 years old. Although she was not sure of where her parents were born, she guessed that her father was born “somewhere near Laos” and that her mother was born in California.

Michelle described that much of the “drama” at her middle school that she had noticed as a Hmong student related to racism. “Mostly the Blacks will make fun of the Asians, and then the Whites get involved as well,” she described, although she also pointed out that these incidents

only occurred “every few months or so.” “They’ll make fun because we have teeny eyes and we have an accent when we talk.” However, she stated that she found it helpful to go talk to the school counselor about these issues, particularly with one boy who had made fun of her for being Asian. “I think it helped me influence that boy that we’re not as different as them,” she explained of the intervention.

**Cassie.** Cassie is a 10-year-old self-identified Hmong female student whom I also interviewed at the church. At the time of the interview she was going into fifth grade at an elementary school in a neighboring county, making her the youngest participant in my study. She said she was born in the southeast, that her father was born in California, and that her mother was born in Michigan. Cassie said that she has been attending schools in her southeastern school district since pre-K.

Like Justine, Cassie described the difficulty she has in explaining to others her ethnicity. “A lot of people are like, ‘Mmm... you’re Asian, you’re Chinese.’ I’m like, ‘No, I’m Hmong.’ And they’re like, ‘What’s Hmong?’ I’m like, ‘It’s an Asian race.’” She said that these cases of mistaken identity lead her to feel “kind of bad.” She said that because of the relatively small number of other Asians in her school, she feels much happier coming to her church and being around other Hmong people. “They’re all the same race as me so they understand everything.” When asked what she would like to share with others about her culture, she replied, “I would like to tell them that each race is equal, and it’s not different. The only thing different is our skin color.”

**Yi.** Yi is a 20-year-old self-identified Hmong female. She is unlike the majority of the other students that I interviewed in that she was several years older than the others and was about to enter her senior year of her college undergraduate studies at a state university in the southeast.

Also, unlike the other students I interviewed, she did not identify as Christian, but rather identified as practicing aspects of shamanism; she shared with me that her father actually is a practicing shaman in her community. She stated that she was born in Thailand, and that she and her parents (who were born in and fled from Laos) moved from a refugee camp to the United States when she was approximately 2 or 3 years old. She said that her parents described the refugee camp as “really cramped up” and that “the living conditions aren’t really good.” Yi said that first her family lived outside of Detroit, Michigan but that later her father moved their family to the southeast primarily because of the promise of good schools. Yi said that at the time of her family’s move to the southeast she transferred in as a high school junior in a school district within the same metropolitan area as the other participants in the study. As she nears the completion of her undergraduate degree, she stated that she has aspirations of continuing into graduate school to earn a Ph.D. in pharmacology and that she is currently conducting some undergraduate research towards this goal.

She described several social differences between high school and college and how this relates to her cultural identity. “I guess my Hmong skills are kind of deteriorating because I’m not around a lot of other students and we just speak English... I came here to college and I only found this one girl that’s Hmong but I don’t hang out with her anymore because she commutes.” She stated that some of this cultural loss has been because of the choices her parents have had to make in order to provide better educational opportunities for the family. “My parents focused on education a lot. We had to move to places where usually taxes are higher and then the education is better, and that has less Hmong people. So [I’ve] just been associating with less and less Hmong people.”

**Overview of Model (Categories and Properties)**

The purpose of this study was to understand the counseling needs and resilient strategies of Hmong students living in the southeast. Through the grounded theory analysis I conducted, I developed a model that describes the strengths and areas of need of Hmong students in the southeast as well as possible strategies to help school counselors become more effective in working with this population (Figure 2).

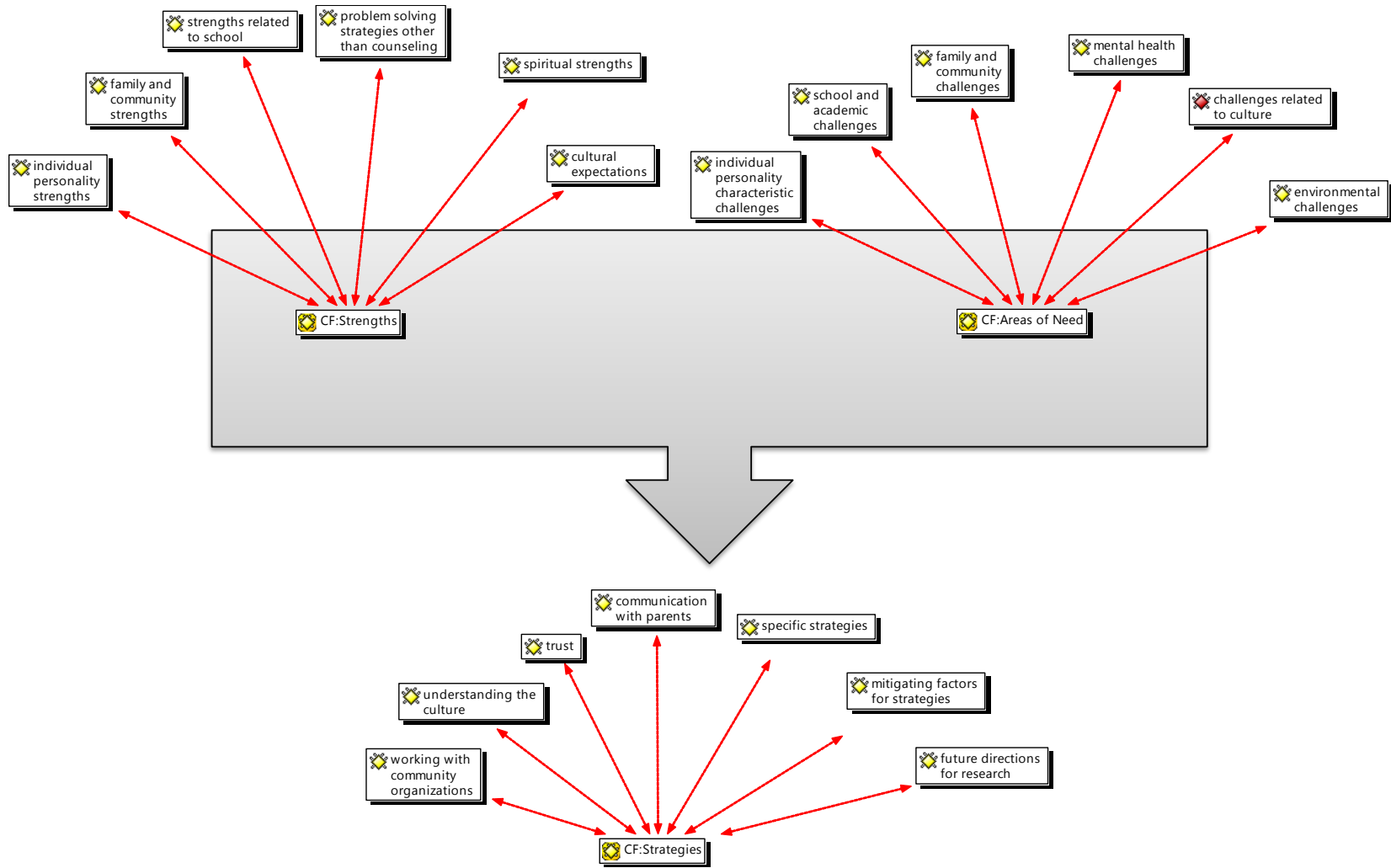


Figure 2. Model of Counseling Strengths, Needs, and Strategies



In this model, grounded in the data gathered from my participants, I present the various strengths, challenges, and possible strategies surrounding the needs of Hmong students in the southeast. The strengths of the Hmong students included characteristics of their individual personalities as well as characteristics of their families and communities as a whole. Additional strengths were related to school issues leading to academic success and positive school environments. Many of the students also described problem solving strategies that they had developed on their own without the assistance of a counselor. Other students also described the strengths based upon their faith beliefs. And finally, several cultural expectations and values also contributed to the strengths of the Hmong community.

My model also describes several areas of need voiced by my participants. Some of these areas of need were related to individuals' own personality characteristics, while others ranged from dealing with school-based challenges. Additional challenges came from Hmong students' families and communities. Several participants also directly described, as areas of need, the challenges with regard to mental health and seeking mental health services. Finally, additional challenges presented themselves with regard to cultural forces and social or environmental forces.

It is of note that both the category of strengths as well as the category of areas of need contain some similar properties. For example, the model presents individual personality characteristics as a property of both the strengths category as well as the areas of need category. This dual membership highlights the finding that some aspects of a person's individual personality or experience as described by my participants were beneficial in some ways but also presented challenges in other ways. For example, several participants described themselves or the students they worked with as being independent and self-disciplined. However, participants

also described that to others outside the Hmong student community, these same characteristics were sometimes viewed as shyness, being reserved, and not participating in class discussions. As a result, the model illustrates some of the complexities of the experiences of Hmong students in that areas of strength can also create challenges for the community (and vice versa).

In order to capitalize on the strengths of the Hmong community as well as to address the needs raised by the participants in the study, the model also suggests several strategies for working with the counseling needs of Hmong students in the southeast. Some of these strategies involved participants' partnering with local and community-based organizations working with the Hmong. Other participants also described developing and disseminating a better understanding of Hmong culture, developing trust in working relationships with Hmong students, and enhancing the communication with Hmong parents. Participants also suggested a variety of specific strategies to help counselors working with Hmong students.

In the graphical representation of the model, I have also attempted to illustrate through the vertical placement of the strengths and needs at one level and the strategies at a different level that the various strengths and needs derived from the data in turn inform and drive the various strategies for working with Hmong students. In other words, the presence of various strengths and needs within the community can help counselors and community members develop counseling strategies for this population. For example, a strength of Hmong students in the community of interest (which I will discuss in further detail subsequently) is that many teachers and community members view these students as being respectful and quiet. This strength also creates challenges at times for Hmong students such as if their teachers view them as being passive and having poor class participation. As a result, this characteristic (which is both a strength and area of need) informs and drives a strategy for working with Hmong students,

namely to have a better understanding of the culture and to understand the nuances of Hmong cultural values as represented by my participants. Indeed, one of my participants (Bao), a Hmong teacher, utilized this very strategy herself in which she educated a fellow teacher about how one of their Hmong girls was exhibiting this ideal image of a quiet, respectful student in class. I will discuss this particular example as well as several others in this chapter.

In the next several sections of this chapter, I present the various categories and properties associated with the model I have developed. In presenting the categories and properties, I will also provide supporting data from the participant interviews that grounds the categories and properties in the original data.

### **Category 1: Strengths of Hmong Students**

The first category I present is the strengths of the Hmong students, their families, and their communities as were described by my participants. This category is supported by various properties including individual personality strengths, family and community strengths, school and academic strengths, problem solving strategies, spiritual strengths, and cultural values and expectations. I will describe in detail each of these properties along with supporting data.

**Personality Strengths.** Participants described several particular personality characteristics of Hmong students in the southeast that they viewed as strengths. For example, participants described that Hmong students work independently, are disciplined, and are generally obedient and with good behavior overall. As Loretta stated with regard to the Hmong students she taught, “Behavior was never really an issue with my kids other than the little social things amongst themselves... I never had discipline issues. Never had to write anybody up in 4 years.” Bao said that her parents strongly encouraged her to be self-disciplined as she was growing up. “The thing about my parents is they are very hard-working and they’re always

telling us set your goals and work on them.” George described his relative level of independence as a personality strength. “I’m pretty much a solo flyer, just an individual. If we have something, we just deal with it on our own.” I interpreted these statements by my participants to mean that Hmong students (in the particular community I studied) are individuals who are dedicated, hard-working, and (at least according to some participants) relatively free of unruly behaviors. The students in this community also tended to be able to rely upon their own internal resolve to address issues, a characteristic which I will discuss in further detail with regard to other ways they solve problems besides going to counseling.

**Family and Community Strengths.** Participants also described that Hmong students draw their strengths from their families, relatives, and the communities in which they live. Nadine, who has visited many Hmong family homes as part of her work as a school social worker, stated “they’re ambitious and they pull together as a family. They work real well together as a family.” Emma, a school counselor, furthered Nadine’s sense of a strong family system by saying, “they’re very proud of their heritage and of being of Hmong and telling other people about the heritage. They seem to be very loyal to one another. They’re a close knit sort of community.” Cassie described how she learned in her Sunday school class that individuals in a family will often take on additional responsibilities based on changing needs. “My teacher once lived back in Laos when he was a kid, and he had to take care of his sister and his whole family. Then, my grandpa, his dad died, so he had to be the leader of his whole family.” Some participants also described Hmong parents as being very supportive of education. Andrew noted this about his work with Hmong parents, saying, “I can’t think of one instance of a Hmong parent coming in with a chip on their shoulder where they’re complaining... Generally that just doesn’t happen. And maybe that’s a thing that’s a cultural difference.” The themes discussed by

my participants demonstrated that family and social units within the Hmong community I studied are generally strong and cohesive. Family members rally together to support one another and to support the students with whom I interacted.

**School and Academic Strengths.** Many participants said that a particular strength of Hmong students was their relative level of academic success. Additionally, participants also described several instances where Hmong students were in school environments that they found helpful to them. Andrew, in his role as a graduation coach, spoke of the relative success of Hmong students in his school. He cited a report of the state graduation statistics for various racial/ethnic groups which stated that the average number of Asian students who graduated was 86.2% relative to 65% for Black students, 60% for Hispanic students, and 77% for White students. “Asian students in general across the state are performing at significantly higher rates,” he stated, noting that the majority of the Asian students at his high school are Hmong. He went on to share what he perceived as the perseverance of Hmong students compared to other groups. “Whatever barriers exist, they seem to be overcoming those better than some of our other students.” Michelle described one of the ways she was able to overcome such barriers was through the help of one of her ESOL teachers. “We had a female teacher and my whole class was Hmong kids,” she described. “She’d pronounce the words for us if we had trouble reading.”

Finally, and of particular interest to this study, several Hmong students stated that they found their school counselor to be helpful in their personal and academic success. This finding is of particular relevance to this study because ultimately this investigation has several implications for the practice of school counselors working with Hmong children. Such findings highlight ways in which counselors have been and could be helpful to Hmong students in terms of identifying strengths and providing helpful strategies. Michelle, as described in her individual

introduction, sought help from her counselor after an episode of race-related bullying during which she met with the perpetrator through the help of her counselor and talked through their conflict. Cassie, who also had experience in seeing a counselor in her school, described that having a counselor of the same race was helpful to her. “I once had an Asian counselor, and she stated, ‘I know what you’re going through because my family went through the same thing.’”

I wish to show by the findings within this property that individuals in this particular southeastern community tended to view Hmong students as being academically successful, able to overcome academic barriers collaboratively, and at times willing to utilize available resources such as counseling, particularly if the Hmong students felt that the counselor could be helpful to them because of shared culture or a willingness to help.

**Problem Solving Strategies.** Despite the examples mentioned above where some Hmong students had actively sought out their counselor for help, many of the Hmong students described by participants were able to develop their own problem solving strategies, often without the need to see a school counselor. Loretta describes that many of the Hmong students whom she taught would seek help from an older sibling or would resolve a problem on their own. “I got the sense that they wouldn’t go to their parent over a concern or an issue. They were taught to be more independent and take care of themselves, and they’d be more likely to go to an older sibling than to go to a parent.” George said that when he is dealing with a problem he at times will seek this assistance of his parents or his friends. “I go to either my friends or tell my parents about it.” Justine stated that she doesn’t typically talk to her parents but that her approach to dealing with problems is simply that “I let them go.” Just as some Hmong students were willing to seek counseling as described in the previous property, many other Hmong

students in the community I studied gained assistance through other resources such as family members and friends.

**Spiritual Strengths.** The Hmong students that were described by the participants in this study typically fell into one of two groups, those who identified with Christian spiritual beliefs and those who identified with alternative beliefs such as shamanism. Bao estimated that the split is about 50/50. “I’d say 50% of the Hmong people are Christians,” she reported, “and the other 50 are shamans.” Bao said that one particular strength of Hmong Christians is that in her experience they tended to be more literate, i.e., able to read and write in Hmong. “If you were to go through the church the majority of the parents can read Hmong. A lot of people don’t have any literature or any purpose or any reason to read Hmong, where at church a lot of people read their scripture in Hmong.” George described his Christian spirituality as being a “big influence for me.” He stated that this Christian viewpoint also impacted his future aspirations, values, and priorities. “As a Christian, I don’t care so much for the money. Because the more money you have, the more tempted you are to do things.” Similarly, Justine said that her friends from church help keep her on her desired path in life. “It is helpful, because my church friends keep me accountable here... They encourage me and they make sure that I don’t do bad things or anything like that.” As described earlier, Nadine and Emma both explained how the Hmong Christian church in their community had helped them to reach out to a family who was reluctant to have their daughter tested for special education services. In this respect, the Christian Hmong students in the community I studied tended to value their Christian beliefs as a source of strength and a positive influence in their lives.

With regard to shamanism, Loretta stated that it is important to understand that not all Hmong families practice the same form of spirituality, Christian or otherwise, and that for many

Hmong families shamanism is a source of strength. “You have some who are still very traditional, animism, and they have the shaman that they go to. And you have some who are converted to Christianity and have nothing to do with that because they see that as conflict. But the majority of families do a little bit of both and don’t see a conflict... You can’t assume either end of the spectrum is true for any one family. You have to know the family.” Yi, who stated that her father is a shaman, explained some of the complexities of that particular form of spirituality and how the shaman could be viewed as a resource in the community. “They would take a child to a shaman and then the shaman would perform the necessary ritual to get rid of the spirits... When things are strange, or when you start to hear voices, or if things start to happen, or you start seeing things, usually people who have the old tradition tend to go seek a shaman ...” Although Yi denied that her father had performed any such rituals himself, she did say that for those who practice the traditional beliefs that a shaman would be viewed as the go-to person to help oneself, including with respect to mental illness. Thus, as Christianity served as a source of strength for my participants who identified with that particular faith orientation, participants also viewed alternative forms of spirituality as providing direction and assistance in their lives.

**Cultural Values and Expectations.** Participants in my study also described several overall cultural expectations of Hmong students including social values and norms that are viewed in the community as strengths. For example, Bao described the ideal of respect and terseness in Hmong culture, particularly for women, even though that may come across to others as being shy and reserved and in many ways counter to American culture. “Most of the girls that are in my class, they’re fairly quiet. I don’t think they’re shy but that’s just the way that their parents told them all throughout school to be respectful, be quiet. Being respectful is being quiet for us, the Hmong. I know in America it is prized to be outspoken, be an individual, be who you



are, but most of these students, I think they that's just the way they were raised." Bao went further to explain that another strength of the Hmong community is that an individual is viewed as an adult and independent once they are married, even if that marriage occurs as a teenager. "There are a lot of young, married couples in the Hmong culture, because it's very taboo to not be married and have a child. When you are married you're considered an adult, whether you're 15 or 16. In that respect, if you were a counselor and you had a student who's pregnant, you probably wouldn't call her parents. More than likely if she's married she lives with her husband's family, even if they're both from the same city or town." The cultural values of the Hmong students in my study served as a source of strength in terms of providing a framework for social norms and expectations, although as discussed above they were sometimes at odds with the values of the dominant or Western culture.

## **Category 2: Areas of Need**

The second category I present is the various areas of need for Hmong students that my participants described, particularly with regard to various aspects of counseling and psychological needs. This category is supported by various properties including individual characteristics, school and academic challenges, family and community challenges, overall mental health challenges, challenges brought about by various aspects of cultural values and expectations, and finally social and environmental challenges. I will describe in detail each of these properties along with supporting data.

**Individual Characteristics.** In relation to one of the last properties presented above in the area of cultural values, being respectful, reserved, and independent are seen as strengths and cultural values for Hmong students. However, this same strength also creates a challenge for Hmong students when it comes across as shyness and an unwillingness to verbally participate in

class activities or seek out the assistance of others. Bao gave the example of a Hmong girl whom she referred to be in an Advanced Placement (AP) level class but was seen by the AP teacher to be too reserved for her own good.

I had a student; she was very bright, quiet, and to herself. The [AP] teacher, we had a discussion about how she was doing because I put her in the AP level... The teacher said she wasn't doing too well because she's not outspoken enough. "She's very book smart but she might not be AP quality." And then I was thinking about the perfect Hmong student where if she is an obedient child then of course she would not fit to that category because that would be rude for her. And then I talked to the teacher and told her, "Well, it's not that she's quiet, but you just have to direct her in the right way because she's being the perfect student or trying to portray this perfect Hmong image of what a student should be." So [later] the teacher came back and said that she's doing much better now. I think it just took that little misunderstanding.

Mai, another Hmong teacher, also described that even with her shared cultural background with her Hmong students she still found them to be quite shy in her presence. "Being able to share your feelings and do any kind of showing of the emotions is one of those things that they tend to keep to themselves. It took half a year to warm up to the two girls that were in my class. They knew I was Hmong but they never spoke to me in Hmong. And when I spoke to them in Hmong they'd look at me in Hmong and go, 'Why are you speaking like that to me?'"

Jane noted that this shyness extends not only to interactions with school personnel but also with other students as well. "Since there's not a lot of Hmong people, we don't know a lot of Asians out there, and we basically keep to ourselves. We try to make friends with the other races but they expect us Asians to be shallow and independent. We don't socialize that much,

but we want to though.” In this respect, cultural values that could be seen as strengths within the Hmong community could also create challenges for my participants, particularly if they were at odds with others’ perceptions of what is considered exemplary behavior for students (such as being outspoken) or if other groups had certain preconceived negative expectations of Hmong students.

**School and Academic Challenges.** In contrast to the previous section’s description of many Hmong students being academically motivated and successful, other participants reported that there is a proportion of Hmong students who behave in the opposite manner and have very low goals for themselves. Justine describes, “There are the ones that are into learning and make good grades,, and there’s the other kids that are laid back. They don’t care about learning. They just go there for friends.”

Bao noted that many of the Hmong students she knows are directionless when it comes to preparing for college and future careers. “What do I do after I graduate?” they would ask her. “And I respond, ‘You’re a senior, you don’t have anything in place?’” “No. We’ll see what happens,” they would tell her. “So for counselors you’re there to help support them and to realize that most of these Hmong kids don’t have direction. I believe most of them are just going to end up working in the factory or just to provide for themselves so their parents won’t nag them about not having a job. I would say 50% have no goals.”

Others explained academic barriers as originating from the schools themselves as institutionalized barriers. Andrew described a lack of transportation for students as one specific barrier to Hmong students being more involved in school activities. “Those students as a general rule of thumb have no choice what time they show up in the school. So a lot of our students who would benefit from extra academic help never get it because they can’t get here early and they

can't stay here late." Anna also described the lack of involvement of Hmong students in school activities. "They don't get involved in the activities after school, before school, whatever... A lot of times it's transportation. A lot of times maybe it's just fear, or distrust, or I don't know."

Loretta described another institutionalized barrier associated with the cost of getting documents translated into languages such as Hmong. "It's pretty expensive if you contract to get something translated. Probably 3 or 4 times as much as getting it translated in Spanish."

Brandon gave a similar response, saying, "We can get Spanish, we can get French, we can get anything. Try getting a Hmong letter." Several school employee participants described that the best the district was able to do was to provide an attachment to important school documents that simply stated (in Hmong) that the document was an important one and that if the reader was unable to understand the document, then the reader should seek someone to assist them in translating it for themselves. In this property, then, I wish to illustrate that my participants in this community experienced many institutionalized barriers with respect to language, transportation, scheduling, and other resources that created challenges for working with or being a part of the Hmong community.

**Family and Community Challenges.** Nathan, a school social worker, described the relative difficulty he had seen in getting Hmong families involved in school activities. "One of the teachers is trying to have those culture days. But a lot of the times they said that the Hmong families won't come and participate. It would be a great strength if they did, and we could learn from them as well as they could learn from the others." Nadine stated that she suspects some of this lack of involvement may come from the work schedules that many Hmong parents have. "Usually both parents are working. They're staying with grandparents or another relative and the grandparents usually cannot communicate with us. And it is hard to reach the parents

because they are working several jobs just to get by. But at least they're trying... I don't judge people for that because I feel like they're trying to provide for their family."

Bao also noted that another challenge presented by Hmong parents is that due to her parents' relative lack of formal education, she had little to go by when it came time for her to apply for college. "For me personally my parents didn't graduate from elementary school. They didn't have any education, so of course when it came to going to college there was no one there for me." Mai echoed this by saying, "When I was growing up my parents never attended school in America, so it was a lot of self-motivation." Similarly, Yi stated that parental support of academics and advanced education varied from family to family, and that in some cases with which she was familiar, there was very little support.

My parents are really different from my uncle... My parents saw education as a way to get out of poverty... They moved us out to a suburb, into a better school district, and so they really enforced education as a top priority. But then my cousin, and my uncle and his children, their parents didn't care about their education. A lot of parents don't give a crap about education... Since my parents enforced education, I was able to excel in school and read, but then I noticed that my other Hmong counterparts didn't have that parenting discipline. They just slacked off.

For the students and their families in the community I studied, then, many challenges presented themselves including working conditions that would not permit their participation in school activities as well as the relatively lower levels of education that Hmong parents have in many cases. These lower levels of education may have created an unfamiliarity with Western models of education which made it more difficult in some cases for Hmong students to pursue postsecondary options.

**Mental Health Challenges.** Barbara, an administrator, noticed a reluctance of Hmong students to seek help from a counselor or other school professional. “Because they’re so quiet, I would almost be tempted to say that they probably wouldn’t even ask. I don’t really know if I could see them going up to the teacher and saying, ‘There’s something wrong, I need to go see the counselor.’ So I think that because they fly under the radar they might not even say something to a teacher.” Anna similarly echoed, “A lot of times with them you can’t tell because they slip through the cracks. The grades are good, they’re quiet. Even if they’re not quiet, they’re obedient, they’re respectful, they’re disciplined, and they’re not going to seek you out.”

Others such as Loretta noted that many Hmong families were not accepting of Western views of mental health and psychiatric medication. She gave the example of one Hmong girl whom she suspected was mentally ill and the reluctance of her family to get treatment for her.

There’s a reluctance to use any kind of medication that would be a mental health medication... I know sometimes afflictions like that could be seen as being identified as having a special gift or the potential to be a shaman for example. I just started thinking, maybe she hears voices and maybe they see that as a clairvoyance and a connection to the spirit world and she has a gift. Maybe she is predestined to be a shaman or someone with great importance within the culture. And then you have the school and the teachers who are saying something’s wrong with your daughter. You need to put her on some medication... For the school counselor that could be something that you could be dealing with, trying to walk that fine line between respecting the culture and their beliefs and their values and how they look at western medicine and trying to separate that from what we think of as a society.

Similarly, several Hmong students whom I interviewed described a reluctance on their part or their parents' part to seek mental health services or counseling in the schools. Yi said, "It would be difficult for me to tell my parents [if I was depressed] because they'd be like, 'Oh, it's nothing, you don't need anything,' and I'd just be like, 'OK.' But then really I do need help for depression."

Many of the school employees whom I interviewed said they had never referred a Hmong student to see the school counselor, and similarly many Hmong students whom I interviewed said that they had never seen a school counselor other than for scheduling-related issues. "We don't really open up much," said Richard. "I'd say that all Hmong or most of them are good, so they don't really get in trouble and go to the counseling office that much." Some Hmong students, such as his sister Jane, did not see much of a value in talking to a counselor.

"Sometimes I think that if I do go to a counselor one day, I probably might get the same advice from them if I asked friends to give me advice." Michelle gave an alternate explanation, saying that the reason many Hmong students do not see their school counselor is "for private and personal reasons as well." "I had a Hmong friend when I was around 2nd grade. She was bullied by a lot of different races, and she tells me about it and I tell her to go to the counselor. She said she doesn't want to express her feelings in front of anybody. She's a bit shy, she doesn't want to expose anything about her family, and she's arguing back or fighting back to cover herself." Others, such as Cassie, suspected it was because it was likely that there would be a cultural mismatch between a Hmong student and their school counselor. "Maybe some of them think, 'Because we're Hmong, I don't think our counselor will understand our culture.'" As a result, various factors including a perceived lack of understanding about Hmong culture as well

as cultural attitudes and stigma towards counseling presented challenges for the Hmong students in the community I studied to seek mental health services.

**Cultural Challenges.** Bao as well as several others reported that there are big differences with regard to gender role expectations for boys and girls in Hmong culture. For boys, she describes, parents tend to be more relaxed in their expectations, whereas for girls, parents tended to have more strict expectations with regard to personal responsibility. When Bao spoke to the parent of one of her male Hmong students who was exhibiting behavior problems in class, “His dad just came out and said, ‘He hangs out with his friends all the time and he does this and he does that, but that’s how boys are.’ I can’t help him then if you’re going to say, ‘Well, that’s how he is,’ or, ‘That’s how boys are.’ There’s nothing I can do.”

Yi similarly described that as a female, her father initially did not have as high of expectations for her as he did for her brother, particularly when it came to potential career choices.

I think it’s different, expectation-wise, depending on your gender. Back in the days when my parents grew up, you could see that the woman would usually have no voice to express anything, and the men would have voice. So expectations I think change from generation to generation, like how you would expect the son to excel and then you would have lower expectations for the daughter... My dad expected my brother to reach this level but he was like, ‘Oh you can just be [a teacher].’ Not that being a high school teacher is bad, but I don’t want to be a teacher, I want to be a professor ... His expectations changed, so now he’s fine with me doing what I want. Before that I was a little mad.



In this way, the various and differing cultural expectations of males and females in the Hmong community I studied created tensions at times for my participants in interactions with their parents as well as with school authorities.

**Social and Environmental Challenges.** Another challenge presented by many of the participants related to social, environmental, and sometimes geographically imposed challenges. For example, many of the participants with whom I spoke described a sense of isolation that Hmong students experience when moving to the southeast, particularly if they have come from other areas where there were higher numbers or concentrations of Hmong individuals. Jane described that many of the Asian subcultures at her school tended not to interact with one another and that the relatively few number of Hmong students at her school had no choice but to stay with each other. “The Asians keep to their own race. They don’t talk to other Asians at all. Sometimes for Koreans, they see us walking around, they’ll see Chinese, or Hmong, or Vietnamese or whatever, but they won’t talk to them at all. They just go on with their crowd. It isolates us.” Yi shared a similar experience in contrasting her life in Michigan to her life in the southeast. “In Michigan, the Hmong students would hang out together, and then you’d have the usual Vietnamese students that would hang out with each other, so I would think everyone segregated into their own group. And I guess going to a different school where you’re the only Hmong student and everyone else had their own group... I think it would be pretty hard to adapt.” Participants, then, felt that the relative isolation and lower number of Hmong students in the southeast created challenges for them in terms of having fewer opportunities for them to connect with other peers of their same culture.

Socioeconomic factors were also presented by participants as a challenge for Hmong students in the southeast. Nadine, a school social worker, estimated that the majority of the

Hmong families whom she served tended to come from lower socioeconomic classes. “If we were looking across the board, probably very few upper class Hmong families. I would say they’re probably middle to middle-lower to lower. ...It’s hard too because [this county is] not a rich county either.” Michelle described how class issues sometimes led to bullying of Hmong children in her experience. “Their parents work really hard but they can’t get a lot of nice things for them, so they make fun of that, and for where they live.” Yi shared a story of the relative frugality of family celebrations such as birthdays. “My parents had 6 children, so we couldn’t have birthday parties for every single one of us. Money-wise we were really frugal about it, raising 6 children. We didn’t have a lot of opportunities to go out and have fun. I’ve heard that American families, probably the average is 3 or 4 kids, so they can afford to have birthday parties or go out on movie night, have fun, whereas us... It wasn’t really possible.” These and several other participants thus described the challenges that being of lower SES presented to them.

### **Category 3: Strategies**

The third category I present is likely to be the crux of this research in terms of helping to define this study’s practical implications for counselors working with Hmong students. Namely, given the various strengths, challenges, and counseling needs faced by Hmong, what are some potential strategies that school counselors and other mental health professionals can use in order to more effectively work with Hmong students? This category is supported by various properties and potential strategies for addressing this issue, including working with community organizations, understanding the culture of Hmong students and their families, developing trust in the working relationship with Hmong students, improving communication with Hmong parents, and other specific strategies and recommendations. I will describe in detail each of

these properties along with supporting data. The final two properties listed in the model related to strategies, namely mitigating factors to take into consideration when implementing these strategies as well as directions for future research, I felt were better suited to be discussed in the last chapter of this dissertation in the discussion that will follow regarding implications for practice and directions for future research. As such, these last two properties are not presented here but are reserved for a more timely discussion in the final chapter.

**Working with Community Organizations.** In my very own research, I discussed with my participants ways in which it would be best for me to be able to reach out to the Hmong community. The responses my participants provided to me with regards to research outreach would also, in my opinion, have similar implications as possible strategies for conducting counseling interventions with Hmong students and their families in the southeast. One strategy I explored with my participants was utilizing various community organizations such as the Hmong Christian church in the county as a means of interacting with members of the community in a setting familiar to them. One of my participants, Bao, confirmed this as a valid approach, saying, “If you were just to hand them a permission slip, most of them would, if they wanted to do it, sign it themselves. If they didn’t want to do it, they would throw it in the trash... You were good to go through the church or even ask the pastor. Hmong people, they work in clans. [For] Christians the leader would be the pastor.” As suggested in earlier sections of this writing, several participants mentioned that they had successfully persuaded a Hmong couple to agree to have their daughter tested for special education services after the school visited the home in the company of a leader from the local church. “We’ve learned that our best ally is the church,” Nadine stated. Similarly, Loretta received a suggestion after a series of poorly attended workshops for Hmong parents. “He very gently said, you might want to think about is working

through the clan leaders and the community leaders... They follow and listen to their leaders and if their leaders are saying this is a good thing to do or you need to do this or consider this then you're going to get a whole lot more participation." As such, my participants provided me with validation of my approach to conducting this research and also presented these types of partnerships as a means for continuing to work with this population.

**Understanding the Culture.** One of the items that Bao presents as a reason for not referring more Hmong students to see the counselor is because she has a relative facility with the culture as a Hmong individual herself. "The main thing is just understanding the culture, and that's one reason why I wouldn't ever refer to a counselor unless it was something going on in the family, abuse, or whatever, but in most cases I would just handle it myself because I understand the culture." As such, her statement behooves counselors to develop a better understanding of the culture of their Hmong students and the families from which they come. Bao and other participants suggest that having more Hmong professionals in the school system would provide more opportunities for Hmong students to be able to interact with school employees familiar with the culture. "I have a nephew who came down from California," she stated. "He said that he has a Hmong counselor and that the counselor was helping him out. He said that the only reason that he would go back to that school was because of the Hmong counselor." Yi explained a similar phenomenon she has noticed through her own experience. "Hmong parents tend to listen to Hmong people more. So if you had a Hmong counselor, like a psychologist or a Hmong counselor, and they're telling people that you need your child to see a doctor, then OK, versus a White person or an American telling them. In a situation where there's actually Hmong counselors, the Hmong parents would be more willing to listen and follow through on these things."

Other participants in the study took the opportunity to learn from other Hmong individuals who were not necessarily school employees themselves. Loretta described, “We had a teacher in second grade who’s Hmong and her husband was a student in Anthropological Studies related to the Hmong. So he was a fantastic resource... His father was a teacher in Laos in one of the villages there, so I had a lot of questions about how was the education, what was it like... It just ended up being a great network of people who were willing to help and share and help us to understand.”

Others describe that many counselors and school employees need to recognize their own culture and how that may be different from Hmong students’ experiences. Andrew explained, “It’s in many ways the responsibility of the school system to educate our teachers and our counselors about working with students from all different backgrounds. If you look at our faculty, the overwhelming majority are White, middle class, grew up around [this county]. And that’s not to say that those people aren’t capable of being good educators to a variety of students. But you know you have to address those issues. You can’t just assume that the teachers are meeting the needs of everybody or that the school is even set up to meet the needs of everybody.”

Loretta stated that one straightforward means of learning more about Hmong culture was to be open to hearing from the experiences of her own students. “As much as they were learning English and they were learning content, I was learning about them. I think that was very rewarding.” Emma said that this cultural learning can come from directly asking students about their culture. “I ask them to tell me about your culture, tell me what things would be helpful for you, and just being honest... What are things that you would do if you’re feeling how you’re feeling now?” Barbara summarized the need to better understand Hmong culture. “I think as a

school system, as counselors, everybody needs to be more aware of their culture.” As a result, my participants highlighted the importance for counselors to develop an understanding of Hmong culture in the southeast as well as continuing the support the self-reflection to recognize where one’s own culture could create challenges for working with this population.

**Developing Trust.** Brandon attributed his relative success in counseling with Hmong students to getting to know them better and developing rapport and trust with them. “Sometimes it’s harder to get to know Hmong students. I have less opportunities to interact with them, and the more you interact with them, the more comfortable that they feel with you, and the more they come to talk to you.” He said that sometimes with Hmong students this requires more effort. “Learn about the kids in the group. Make it a point to know about the kids, because they will talk to you. You’re not going to have the same opportunities to meet them as you will some of the other kids in other populations, so sometimes you have to go a little more out of your way. They’re not always coming and sit down and talk to you.” Mai similarly stated, “Get to know the culture, really get to know the child... A lot of times they’ll tend to want to not tell you everything and it takes a while to warm up... It takes a while to dig the information out of them.” Nathan described developing rapport not only with students but with Hmong families as well. “That’s the key, developing rapport with the family, in anything, so in broken English and everything and sharing, having conversation enough where he could understand what the need was, trying to make appointments, getting him to come to school and everything. So that was an ongoing process.” My participants, then, spoke at length of the fundamental importance of trust, rapport, and general relationship building in working with the Hmong students and families in their community.

**Communication with Parents.** Several participants also presented several strategies that would help improve communications with Hmong parents. As discussed earlier, Bao stated that it is important for counselors and school employees to recognize that for many Hmong parents working in the southeast, they may not have ready access to a phone during the daytime, so it would be preferable to try to reach them in the evening or during a break. “If you were to call them at home during the day, you wouldn’t reach them. Or even if you called them at work, most of them work in factories and they can’t just come to the phone. They have 15 minute breaks or a 30 minute lunch period or that’s the only time they can come and talk to you.”

Bao also mentioned another area of awareness for counselors when it comes to communicating with parents, namely that in some cases for Hmong students who are considered adults by marriage it may not be appropriate to communicate with the parents at all. “If you’re dealing with the male who is married, even if you spoke to his parents, they wouldn’t say anything because he is an adult in their eyes and he can handle those problems, so they probably would tell you, ‘Oh, he’s fine, yeah,’ even if he had issues, cause he’s married. Once you are married, they pretty much say you’re a responsible adult, even if you’re 16. They usually wouldn’t tell you what to do anymore.” My participants highlighted for me as well as for others in the mental health profession that having an understanding of appropriate ways of communicating with Hmong parents in their communities can be beneficial towards working with Hmong students.

**Other Specific Strategies and Recommendations.** Participants also provided a series of other specific recommendations for counselors working with Hmong students. For example, one strategy mentioned was providing more opportunities for activities during the school day so as to limit the need for additional transportation for after school activities. Andrew suggested,

“I’ve proposed to our administration that we rearrange our bell schedule such that there’s a built-in activity period, about 30 minutes during the day where students who need extra help or tutoring can get it.” A second strategy suggested was to have smaller-scale, school-based programs as opposed to larger, district-wide programs for parents and families. Loretta stated, “We had more participation from our parents when I was at the school level. Parents were more likely to come in and participate in the school function as opposed to coming to the central office for a district-wide function. Maybe they feel more connected to the school.” A third strategy suggested by participants was to utilize Hmong cultural liaisons in the community such as Hmong parents. As Emma described, “They put me in contact with the Hmong liaison who happened to be a parent of one of our students... She worked with the family and went with me to their home. We thought that when we go to visit, they feel more comfortable that they know someone from the community that also speaks the language. It was hard to have a stranger come to their house that doesn’t speak the language and tried to translate over a cell phone. That wasn’t very effective.”

The student participants in my study also described additional specific strategies and suggestions for working with Hmong students. One such suggestion raised by a student was to provide opportunities for them to share their culture with other students through clubs or other activities. Jane gave the example of taking a survey of what Hmong students like to do and then offering the suggested activities to the school at large. “They’ll learn more about each other and then later on they might spread their talent among other races too. The other races will see them as something more than just Hmong people.” Another student suggested that school counselors should consider having counseling groups or other outreach programs for Hmong students. As Justine stated, “If they had an organization or a group where Hmong kids could get together and



the counselors could actually talk to them, it would be easier for the kids to express themselves to the counselors. The school teachers don't know where we're from or how we deal with things, so it's hard for us to talk to the counselor and the teachers. It would be easier if they got the Hmong kids together or they actually talked to a Hmong kid, because that never happens... We don't go to the teachers. We do everything ourselves." Another Hmong student suggested that counselors would benefit from participating in Hmong cultural activities as part of one's own professional and cultural development. As Michelle stated, "We have Hmong New Year. Tell them to come here for the Hmong New Year to experience what we have to go through, our arts, and our history." These various other strategies presented by my participants and summarized by me in this property represent a collection of specific interventions that could be implemented by counselors working with the Hmong students in the community I studied.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I have provided the reader with a summary of the results of my grounded theory analysis on the counseling needs and strengths of Hmong students in the southeastern metropolitan area I studied. I presented my model in terms of three major categories: strengths, areas of need, and possible strategies. I also provided the reader with examples from the data in which the categories and their sub-properties are grounded. In the following chapter, I seek to further summarize my findings, relate my findings to the context of relevant literature, and also discuss practice implications and directions for future research.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Conclusions, Discussions, Recommendations, and Implications**

#### **Introduction and Summary of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to describe the counseling strengths and needs of Hmong American students in the southeast. In previous chapters, I have provided an overall introduction to the study, its purpose, and its relevant research questions. I have also provided the reader with a review of relevant literature regarding Hmong Americans in schools as well as relevant issues in Hmong mental health. I also described my methodology, namely conducting a series of semi-structured interviews with both school employees and Hmong students in the southeast and then analyzing my data via a constructivist, grounded theory framework. In this chapter, I again give a brief summary of my findings as well as situating these findings in the context of relevant literature. I also will discuss various research implications for my findings as well as directions for future research.

#### **Summary of the Findings**

My findings can be summarized by the following model (Figure 3) which I developed after a constructivist, grounded theory analysis of my raw interview data.

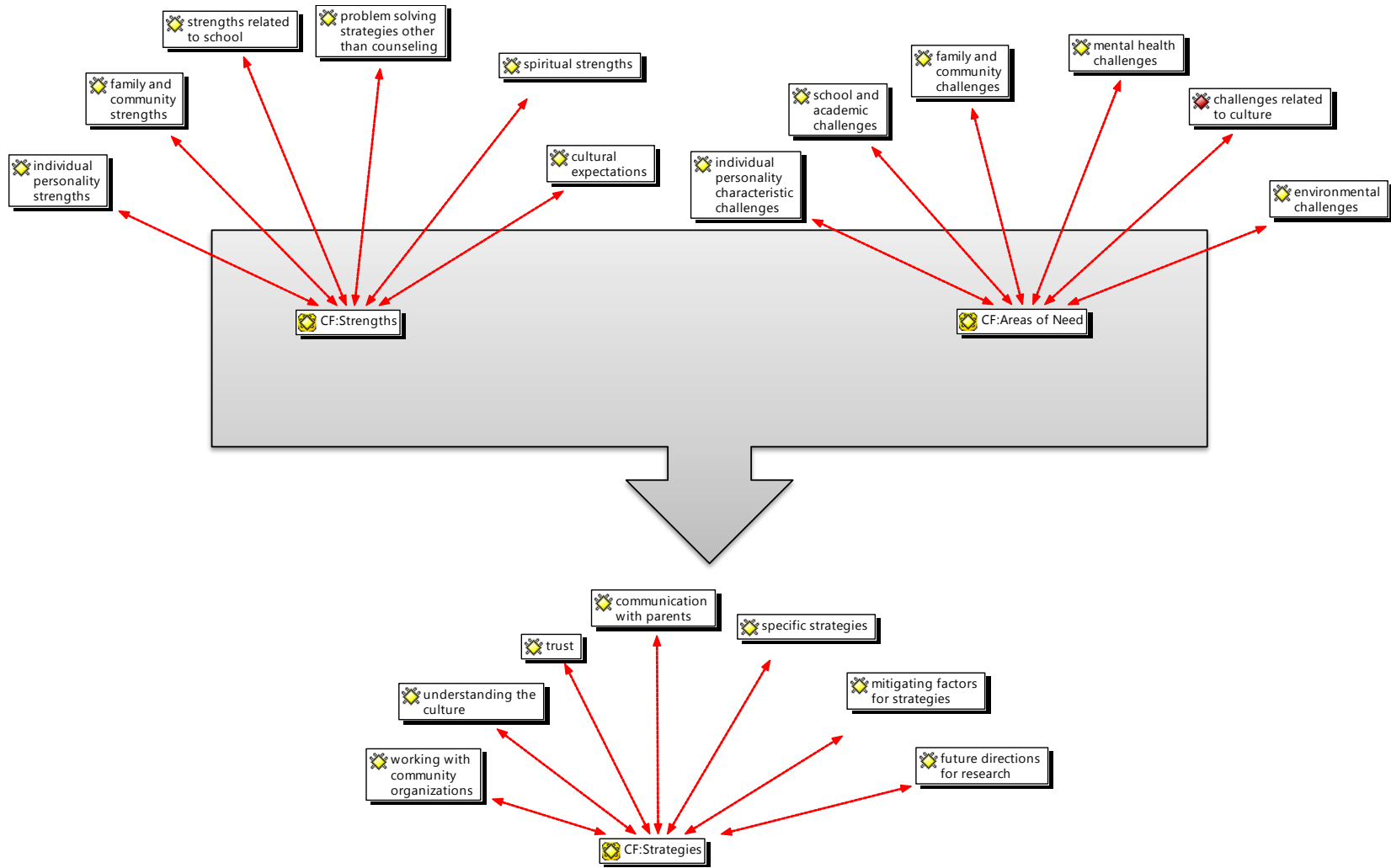


Figure 2. Model of Counseling Strengths, Needs, and Strategies

This model consists of the main categories of strengths, challenges or areas of need, and strategies for counselors to work more effectively with Hmong students. Each category is in turn comprised of various properties which more specifically describe the strengths of the Hmong community, the challenges faced by Hmong students, and possible strategies in light of these strengths and areas of need. The strengths and areas of need raised by my participants in the geographic area which I studied in turn inform and drive the creation of strategies for working with Hmong students in this particular community.

### **Conclusions and Discussion**

Given my academic training and growth in both school counseling as well as counseling psychology, I have written this study utilizing the perspective of these two fields with which I identify professionally. With this in mind, I begin my discussion of the findings from this study by situating them within the definitions of both counseling psychology and counseling. The American Psychological Association (1999) has a broad definition of counseling psychology which includes concerns related to education, health, vocations, development, and social welfare. Counseling psychology deals with both normal developmental concerns as well as more severe psychopathology. Similarly, the American Counseling Association through their 20/20: A Vision for the Future of Counseling initiative, also provided a common definition of counseling which includes concerns related to diversity as well as “mental health, wellness, education, and career goals” (2010). Furthermore, APA’s multicultural guidelines (2002) as well as ACA’s Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development’s multicultural counseling competencies (1996) call for psychologists and counselors to understand the cultural contexts of the populations they serve. The experiences of the participants presented above suggest that Hmong students living in the southeast may have several areas of need that fit within these broad

areas of concern of counseling psychologists and counselors. Concerns related to language barriers in the school system, post-secondary school emphasis, gender, and acculturation issues described by participants are areas that should be addressed by psychologists and counselors.

**Gender Roles and Post-Secondary Education.** The current study's findings of various gender role expectations in the Hmong community in the southeast fit with other researcher's findings in other Hmong communities. In her study of Hmong American women who were pursuing degrees in higher education, Lee (1997) describes cultural expectations and barriers that Hmong women face in going to college that are similar to the experiences described by the present study's participants. Lee more specifically states barriers such as a push for women to get married when young. Motivating factors for the women included a desire to achieve a higher level of education than their parents after witnessing the difficulties their parents faced with little education. These findings are similar to the descriptions participants in the current study gave of lower levels of education and literacy among Hmong adults. Furthermore, other researchers (Vang, 2004) examining the trends of Hmong students attending college found that many Hmong students did not receive adequate preparation from their school counselors when it came to applying for colleges. Similarly, in my study, several participants stated that Hmong students in the southeast did not always receive adequate college preparation but attributed this to lack of parental support or lack of goals beyond getting a job after high school to support the family.

Another study by Lee (2001a) states that while previous attitudes in Hmong culture towards the education of Hmong girls may have encouraged girls to drop out of school to marry and have children, more recent attitudes among Hmong parents have shown a greater valuing of a high school degree. Lee explains that this change in attitudes has come due to the difficulties Hmong parents have faced with job opportunities and advancement due to their lower levels of

education. Participants in the current study similarly explained a valuing of primary and secondary school education as well as lower dropout rates among Hmong students in the southeast; however, as explained above, the participants described that there was mixed support in terms of motivation to pursue college degrees. The current study also support's Lee's findings of differential attitudes towards Hmong girls and boys, where Lee found that "girls are expected to stay at home while boys are allowed to go out to socialize with their peers" (p. 3).

**Challenges of Acculturation.** While the current study has found several areas of acculturation difficulties for Hmong students in the southeast, Lee (2001a) states that the picture is more complex than Hmong students deciding between maintaining versus rejecting the culture of their parents. Instead, Lee states that in addition to these intracultural pressures, intercultural pressures from the dominant culture also have an effect on Hmong students. She gives the example of how teachers who may look down upon early marriage in Hmong girls may cause the Hmong girls to feel disconnected from the school. Findings in the current study also suggest that cultural sensitivity on the part of a school system involve developing a greater understanding of the Hmong culture and recognizing barriers that may be in place through pursuing only Western forms of treatment for students.

**Strengths of the Hmong Community.** The various strengths described by participants in the current study, including strong families, communities, academics, and willingness to resolve difficulties fit with what Sandage et al. (2003) describe as a "multicultural positive psychology" (p. 566) of Hmong culture. This indigenous take on positive psychology examines strengths within a cultural context. Sandage et al. examined specifically a Hmong cultural strength of forgiveness, particularly in order to maintain group harmony as an important part of a collectivist culture. Similarly, participants in the current study described the strength of the

Hmong community and network in the southeast. Participants in the current study viewed Hmong students and families as willing to work together as a community and having organized themselves into various community groups such as the Hmong Christian churches and celebrating community wide events in the southeast such as the Hmong New Year.

**Partnering with Community Resources.** The utilization of community based resources, such as the Hmong Christian church which several participants (as well as myself) utilized either in direct counseling work with Hmong students or (in my case) research with Hmong students, also has precedent within the literature. Goodkind (2005, 2006) describes her work in community psychology interventions with Hmong individuals. In particular, she describes conducting her interventions within a Hmong community center as opposed to bringing her Hmong participants to an outside setting or lab to conduct the research. Similarly to my research, which largely was conducted within the auspices of a Hmong Christian church, this allowed for greater cultural buy-in for participants as well as also developing a sense of cultural efficacy for Hmong participants. As the school social workers whom I interviewed stated, conducting my research and conducting interventions through Hmong community organizations allows a counselor to meet Hmong American students on their own “turf.”

**Need for Cultural Brokers.** Several of the participants in the study also described how they derived or saw possible benefit in having other Hmong school employees or mental health practitioners as well as other Hmong professionals with whom they could consult or from whom they could gain a greater cultural understand. Similarly, other literature has described the use of “cultural brokers” (Singh, et al., 1999) as individuals who can consult with mental health professionals in the provision of culturally sensitive and competent services to minority populations. Participants in my study described cultural brokers such as Hmong liaisons,

parents, and Hmong school teachers going beyond the role of translators to also helping to educate the school professionals regarding more effective interventions with Hmong students. Similarly, Singh et al. describe that cultural brokers are more than just translators, but provide additional value added services beyond what a simple word translation can serve.

**Comparisons to Other Minority Groups.** I have intended this study to present a rich, narrative description of the counseling strengths, needs, and resilient strategies of Hmong students in the particular area of the southeast where my participants live. In presenting this more in-depth picture of one particular group, I chose a particular design and set of research questions rather than making a comparative study of this group of Hmong students to students of other cultures. However, I believe that these findings nonetheless beg the question of how my study fits in with the literature around the counseling needs and strengths of other Asian Americans in the United States and of minority population in general.

Participants in my study discussed various challenges related to acculturation and the negotiation between Hmong cultural values and the values of the dominant culture with respect to personal presentation (e.g. being quiet and respectful vs. being more outspoken in class) as well as family values (e.g. expectations for boys vs. expectations for girls). Scholars such as Okazaki, Lee, and Sue (2007) discuss that acculturation is a substantive area of content within the realm of Asian American psychology and is a phenomenon frequently experienced among Asian American subgroups. Okazaki et al. state that current research finds that there is no one single model or pattern of acculturation that is applicable to all Asian American groups. They also assert that acculturation is a complex process in which a group may retain the values of two different cultures rather than fully assimilating under one culture. Similarly, my participants discussed a process where certain Hmong cultural values clashed at times with those of the



dominant culture (e.g. around being quiet vs. outspoken) while at other times participants incorporated aspects of multiple cultures (e.g. females pursuing advanced postgraduate degrees that were not expected of them while also practicing shamanism).

However, the experiences of my Hmong participants in the particular area of the southeast that I studied also differ in comparison to other Asian American populations at large. For example, 2000 Census data (Tseng, et al., 2007) showed that 60% of Asian immigrants live in six states, namely California, New York, Hawaii, New Jersey, Texas, and Washington. As a result, then, there are relatively fewer numbers of other Asian students living in other parts of the southeastern United States such as the areas of Georgia and North Carolina that I have discussed in this study. The authors report that larger concentrations of Hmong Americans are found in areas such as Fresno, Sacramento, and Minneapolis-St. Paul. It seems true, then, that the isolation that many of my Hmong student participants discussed is supported by this kind of data and that not only is there relative isolation of the Hmong in the southeast but there are relatively fewer numbers of Asians in general living in this part of the country.

As discussed in Chapter 1, Tseng et al. (2007) as well as Reeves and Bennett (2004) go further to discuss that when compared to other Asian groups, Hmong Americans as well as other southeast Asians have much higher poverty rates as compared to other Asian immigrant groups with a poverty rate of 40% for Hmong Americans. Tseng et al. also report that while many Asian Americans belong to the middle class and that these students attend suburban schools, southeast Asians of lower SES tend to attend larger, more urban schools that experience more problems with safety, overcrowding, and underfunding (2007). One of the Hmong students in my study, Yi, described this experience herself of having initially attended inner-city schools

with fewer resources in Michigan prior to her father moving their family to the southeast with the promise of better school districts.

In respect to comparing the Hmong American students in my study to members of other ethnic minority groups, some of my participants did have various observations and perceptions of the Hmong students they worked with being individuals who were able to achieve academically at higher rates as compared to other minority groups. One particular school employee shared with me data from one high school that showed that Asians had a higher graduation rate than any other racial or ethnic group. This employee's finding is supported when looking at school report card data for districts in the southeast with high Hmong populations such as Barrow County, Georgia, where the graduation rate for Asians was reported at 72.2% as compared to 70.3% for Whites, 65.2% for Hispanics, and 53.6% for Blacks (Governor's Office of Student Achievement & November, 2007).

Such findings and observations from my participants of the relatively high rates of achievement of Hmong American students in the southeast could give credence to the "model minority" (Petersen, 1966) stereotype discussed earlier in this study, in which Asian Americans are compared to other ethnic minorities and held up as the ideal model of success to which other minority or immigrant groups can aspire. However, researchers such as Lee, Wong, and Alvarez (2009) discuss the negative effects that such a stereotype can have for Asian Americans. For example, they assert that lumping Asian Americans into a single, aggregate group to which one attributes success hides some of the nuances of the various subgroups. As discussed earlier, Hmong Americans tend to have much higher poverty rates than other Asian groups (Reeves & Bennett, 2004) and so by only looking at the relative success of Hmong Americans or other Asian groups compared to other minority groups with respect to some measures, one may not

fully appreciate the challenges faced by these communities in other areas. Lee et al. (2009) also caution that viewing Asian Americans through the lens of the model minority stereotype can also lead to interracial tensions between Asian Americans and other groups of color. They give the example of the erroneous viewpoint that while other minority groups may still require policies and programs to combat discrimination and inequalities, Asian Americans are sometimes seen as no longer needing these beneficial programs as well because they are seen to have overcome these barriers. In reality, the authors cite that Asian Americans continue to have experiences with racism and struggle economically, making less money than Whites when controlling for similar educational backgrounds (S. J. Lee, et al., 2009). With these factors in mind, then, I wish the reader to conclude that while my study highlights the strengths of this population, one must also be careful to examine the entire picture and be willing to also consider the challenges faced by Hmong American students in the southeast as well.

### **Implications for Practice**

For counseling psychologists, school counselors, educators, and others working with Hmong students, the current study presents several implications. A primary implication is that counselors working with Hmong students need to become more familiar with the Hmong culture itself. As suggested by one participant, spending time with Hmong families and getting to know them on a personal basis is one approach. However, several participants also stated that developing these relationships in order to better understand the Hmong culture relies upon building a degree of trust. In order to build this trust, counselors can reach out to Hmong students and get to know not only the individual Hmong student but that student's network of friends who may also be Hmong. As Brandon stated, "Sometimes you have to go a little more out of your way... they're not always coming and sit down and talk to you." Counselors can

also develop relationships with Hmong community organizations in order to better reach out to Hmong students and families and have the partnership of a cultural broker who is involved in such transactions.

Within the general category of strategies for working with Hmong students, the findings also suggested several specific, practical ideas that counselors and psychologists can utilize when working with this population. For example, school counselors can advocate for more scheduling accommodations that would allow for students to participate in extra-curricular activities during the school day as opposed to after school when many students (including Hmong students of lower SES) may not have available transportation. Such extra-curricular activities could also include clubs, groups, or other student organizations catering to Hmong students specifically, such as a Hmong cultural club or group. In developing these activities, counselors can involve Hmong students in a needs assessment to engage them in the process of building activities in which they would like to participate. In terms of engaging Hmong families, the findings suggest that smaller, more local school-based programs as opposed to district-wide programs may result in better participation from Hmong families who may feel more connected at a local level to their child's individual school. The findings also provided numerous examples of schools partnering with organizations in the Hmong community such as churches and utilizing the expertise of Hmong community leaders in implementing programs and interventions for Hmong students. And finally, suggestions were made for counselors and psychologists to participate in Hmong cultural events in the community such as the Hmong New Year so as to better develop a firsthand understanding of the culture.

Several participants also suggested that while employees could find many commonalities among Hmong students, developing an understanding of individual families was also important.

Participants described a diversity of experiences existing among the Hmong students in the southeast, ranging from those who are achieving well academically to those who are struggling with linguistic and other academic challenges. It is important for counselors, psychologists, and educators to understand that while many Hmong students are achieving at high rates, there are also many Hmong students who can benefit from additional assistance and cultural sensitivity.

As discussed earlier, one of the properties of the category of potential strategies for working with Hmong students was that of mitigating factors to consider when implementing these potential strategies. One primary concern raised by participants is that it is difficult to make broad generalizations about Hmong students and families and that while there are some commonalities, it is better to get to know the idiosyncrasies of individual students and their families. Loretta stated, “You have to really know the family. You really have to know each individual family, what their circumstances are, what their education level is. We have a family, dad’s a pharmacist, and then you have families that are just working in manufacturing type settings.” George, one of the student participants, also shared his awareness that Hmong students differ from county to county and from state to state. “There’s all different cultures for the Hmong,” he stated. “Hmong live really widespread... So in different places other Hmong people are like different people, different kind of lives.” In other words, when implementing a particular strategy for Hmong students in the southeast, one must take into account various regional differences that may come into play.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The current study leaves room for expanded research into the experiences of Hmong Americans. Additional research could both address the limitations of my study while also exploring new avenues of understanding. For example, while my findings are derived from the

experiences of participants living in one metropolitan area within the southeastern United States, I also discussed in my Limitations section that Hmong students are also known to live in multiple areas in the south including both Georgia and North Carolina (Poe, 2002; Reeves & Bennett, 2004). As such, future research could expand the current study to include interviews with Hmong students and school employees in other metropolitan areas across different states in the southeast where major concentrations of Hmong people are present.

Another limitation of my research which I have discussed earlier is that the majority of my recruitment efforts for student participants in the study came through my partnership with a local Hmong Christian church. A direction of future research, then, would be to include Hmong students of other Christian churches or of other faith backgrounds including shamanism. To this point, one of my participants (Bao) believed that the religion of my participants could influence my findings as well as the kind of community support that a Hmong person of a particular faith may receive. She suggested that examining more students of other faith backgrounds could be a direction for future research. “About 50% of the Hmong people are Christians and the other 50 are shamans... That would be a good to see if that has an effect on a person’s support.”

The grounded theory analysis utilized in the current study focused primarily on general counseling needs and strengths of the Hmong students described therein. However, I suggest that there is a wealth of additional information within the existing dataset that I collected that could be mined to help answer additional research questions not included in the current study. The data could also help inform the collection of additional data according to some themes that were not fully explored within the limits of this study. For example, a theme raised by many participants was the idea of gender role differences between boys and girls in Hmong culture. My current research questions did not address the topic of gender roles specifically, but further

data collection or an analysis of the existing data could help provide more information with regard to this aspect of Hmong students' experiences.

Additionally, two of the school employees studied had the unique experience of not only working with Hmong students but also being of Hmong descent themselves. One of these Hmong school employees also had the lived experience of growing up and attending school in the public school system which she later returned to as a teacher. Furthermore, one of the Hmong student participants in the study had the perspective of having completed high school in the metropolitan area of interest and now being enrolled in a local college. The experiences of these adult Hmong participants may be an area that further research could explore.

Understanding the viewpoints that these adult Hmong participants may have in looking back on their K – 12 schooling from the perspective of being a working adult or college student may be an important complement to the current study in understanding additional stages of a Hmong individual's development.

My current research into the experiences of Hmong American students in the southeast could also be further expanded by incorporating additional methodologies such as a mixed methods approach. My existing qualitative study and the data I collected could be used to inform the collection of quantitative data that could provide an additional viewpoint into Hmong students' lives. Researchers such as Greene (2007) describe a dialectical approach to mixed methods research in which qualitative data informs the collection of quantitative data (and vice versa). In such a "generative" (p. 79) approach to research, the complementary strengths of both qualitative and quantitative methods of research are utilized and engage in a dialogue with one another so as to create both "causal regularity and contextual complexity" (p. 80). As an example, further research utilizing mixed methods could examine such questions as

understanding the nature of college attendance among Hmong students in the southeast. Several of my participants discussed there being barriers to college attendance including varying amounts of parental support for going to college as well as unfamiliarity with the application process to students (which was also similarly unfamiliar to some of my participants' parents who had not attended college themselves). Furthermore, researchers such as Vang (2004) discuss that while 95% of the Hmong students he studied graduated on time from high school, only 10% to 15% of the students possessed the academic skills necessary to gain them admittance into college. A mixed methods approach could incorporate collection of quantitative data similar to Vang's (with the addition of other quantitative measures such as the actual college attendance rates of Hmong students reported by the school district) with qualitative findings similar to my interviews with Hmong students where they could be asked about their reasons for choosing or not choosing to go to college. By using multiple methods, such a study could highlight some of the multifaceted aspects of a phenomenon such as Hmong college student attendance in the southeast.

As described in the previous chapter, one particular property (which was largely based on a specific item from my interview guide) dealt with recommendations for future research that were provided by my participants. In other words, I asked several of my participants directly what kinds of things they would be interested in me investigating in the future. Various suggestions were made by my participants. For example, Loretta recommended looking at the dropout rate for Hmong students in the southeast and how this may affect college attendance rates. Bao suggested examining how parents' levels of education may in turn affect a child's highest level of educational attainment, drawing upon her own lived experience of having gone to college in a family where her parents had very little formal education. Nathan also



recommended further examination into the school-student relationship and soliciting from Hmong students (through further study) how they would know if the partnership was working for them or not. “How effective was a particular encounter or something with a counselor or teacher?” he asks. “Were you at ease? Did you feel uncomfortable? What does it take in the school to make you feel that my teacher and my school are proud of me?”

Finally, the current study presents implications for counselors and psychologists; however, counselors and psychologists must collaborate with educators, administrators, and policy makers in order to institute changes in a school system. Future research and findings could be presented at the school level or at the district level in order to heighten awareness of the needs and strengths of Hmong students.

### **Chapter Summary**

The present study illustrates the perceptions of the counseling needs and strengths of Hmong students in the southeast as well as possible strategies for working with Hmong students. As Hmong students represent a significant number of language minority students in certain areas of the southeast, understanding how to better work with Hmong students and their unique needs can come from stronger partnerships between counseling psychologists, school counselors, other school employees, and members of the Hmong community. As suggested by participants, developing a better understanding of the Hmong culture and their unique strengths can help psychologists, school counselors, and school employees achieve their goals of working to serve all students in the community.

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## **Appendices**

## **Appendix A**

### **Adult Interview Protocol**

1. How long have you worked for the school system?
2. What is your position or role in this school or office?
3. How many Hmong students do you come into contact with in your job?
4. What have been some of the experiences of Hmong students that you know?/Tell me a story about some Hmong students you have worked with.
  - a. What are some strengths that you see that Hmong students have?
  - b. What are some difficulties that you see for Hmong students?
  - c. What have your communications been like with Hmong parents?
5. What role do counselors play in your school?
6. What is the process for referring a student to see the counselor?
  - a. How often have you referred a Hmong student to see the school counselor or another counselor?
  - b. What are the reasons Hmong students self-refer or would be referred to see the counselor?
7. What do you think Hmong students think of counseling?
8. What are some ways in which counselors can help Hmong students?
9. What have the Hmong students you have worked with taught you about their culture?
10. What are some questions about Hmong students that you would like to know more about?

## **Appendix B**

### **Child/Adolescent Interview Protocol**

1. What grade are you in?
2. How long have you been in school here?
3. Tell me what a good day at school is like for you.
4. Tell me about a not so good day at school.
5. What do you think are some things that you and other Hmong students do well?
6. What are some difficulties that you and other Hmong students have:
  - a. At school?
  - b. At home?
7. What role do counselors play in your school?
8. How often have you been to see the school counselor or another counselor?
  - a. Would you be willing to share with me the reason you went to see the counselor?
9. What do you think of going to see a counselor?
10. What are some ways that you think counselors can help Hmong students?
11. What would you like to tell others about your culture?