Annals of Social Studies Education Research for Teachers (ASSERT)

Disrupting Deficit Discourses about Hmong Culture: Perspectives of Hmong Americans on Gender and Sexuality

Bic Ngo

University of Minnesota Twin Cities, Minneapolis and Saint Paul, Minnesota, USA

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bic Ngo

I am a Professor of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities where I hold the Rodney S. Wallace Professorship for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning. My ultimate goal is to shed light on the complex meanings of culture and identity among immigrant youth and communities, the persistence and perniciousness of subtractive schooling, and insights for advancing social justice in education. I am interested in immigrant identity, culturally relevant pedagogy and anti-oppressive education. Most recently, my scholarly inquiry has explored the ways in which community-based arts programs serving immigrant youth may innovate culturally relevant pedagogy. Outside of my professional pursuits, my world is animated by my partner and two little ones who share with me the joys of dance parties, daily walks, and Taco Tuesdays.

Pages: 10-18

INTRODUCTION

Over forty-five years ago, in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, the first group of Hmong refugees were resettled to the United States (K. Yang, 2013). Although research has advanced knowledge of the cultural transitions of Hmong children and families, dominant discourses persistently portray Hmong Americans as stuck in time, tied to traditions and generally "held hostage to a refugee representation" (Chiu, 2013, p. xi). Examples of deficit discourses circulated by the popular press emphasize the irreconcilable differences between "traditional" Hmong culture and hegemonic, white, middle-class U.S. culture; where the

ASSERT
Research for Teachers in a Hurry

problems faced by young Hmong Americans are attributed to Hmong culture (see, e.g., Ellis, 2002; Louwagie & Browning, 2005a; 2005b).

The construction of Hmong culture as a social problem (Spector & Kitsuse, 2000) are part and parcel of White supremacy's "unnamed political system" (Mills, 1997) that seeks to maintain a system of White racial domination (Allen, 2005). Instead of analyses that tease out the complexities of ethnicity and acculturation, the discourses of White supremacy represent the Hmong family as a site of the oppression of Hmong youth based on gender, nonconforming gender identity and sexuality (Jesilow & Xiong, 2007; Ngo, 2002; Ngo & Leet-Otley, 2011).

THE RESEARCH

In this article, I focus on studies that bring attention to the perspectives of female Hmong American college students on teenage marriage (Ngo, 2002), Hmong American community leaders on Hmong gender (Ngo & Leet-Otley, 2011) and gay and transgender Hmong American young adults (Ngo, 2012; Ngo & Kwon, 2015). I approached the qualitative case studies from the standpoint that "the opportunity to learn is of primary importance" (Stake, 1995, p. 6). Data collection involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the Hmong American participants. The interviews with first-generation Hmong college students explored their experiences navigating the pursuit of college with family expectations. The interviews with Hmong community leaders focused on their perspectives on (1) the relationships between the Hmong and non-Hmong communities; (2) the relationships between Hmong youth and adults; and (3) the negotiations of culture and identity by Hmong youth and adults. The interviews with LGBT Hmong young adults focused on their experiences as queer Hmong Americans, including their negotiations of sexuality with peers and family.

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

The study on the "early" marriage practices of Hmong female college students (Ngo, 2002) offered an alternative explanation for understanding young women's decisions to marry that moved beyond the cultural difference model. It suggested Hmong female students engaged in marriage as a response to unhappy experiences with the social institutions of school and family. On college campuses, the students were faced with isolation and alienation due to hostile campus environments that required them to monitor their dress and behavior and confine themselves to "safe" spaces. They reported marriage enabled them to gain freedom from the oppression of predominantly white institutions. Within their families, young Hmong women were constrained by parents' exacting restrictions on their social behaviors and movements due to concerns about Americanization and female propriety and views about female household duties. The students shared marriage enabled them to gain freedom from parental restrictions. The Hmong American women thus appropriated the practice of teenage marriage available within Hmong tradition for their own purposes rather than an

ASSERT
Research for Teachers in a Hurry

obedience to Hmong traditions suggested by dominant discourses.

The study with three Hmong American community leaders (Ngo & Leet-Otley, 2011) explicated their recognition of the dominant discourse of an oppressive, patriarchal Hmong culture. Hmong leader Mai Xiong reiterated dominant culture's explanation of a Hmong culture opposed to gender equity, pointing to forced teenage marriage, expectations for grandchildren, and lack of support for women's education. By contrast, Hmong leaders Kou Vang and Dia Lee challenged the simplistic tendency to blame Hmong culture for the struggles of Hmong girls and women. Kou Vang emphasized the parental support for the education of Hmong daughters, and argued for an understanding of Hmong teenage marriage as an issue about teenage pregnancy rather than an issue about Hmong culture. Dia Lee particularly refuted the prevailing discourse of an all-encompassing oppressive Hmong culture for girls and women that demanded assimilation and the annihilation of Hmong culture. Instead, the Hmong leader pointed to Hmong social relations that supports gender equity and nurtures strong, educated Hmong women.

The study which explored the "going home" (Chou, 2000; Tan, 2011) experiences of Teng, a Hmong transgender youth challenged dominant "coming out" discourses of individualism and family rejection (Ngo & Kwon, 2015). Teng nurtured support for his queer identity through an intentionally casual process where he introduced his mother and family to his love interest, disclosed his female-to-male transgender identity, and shared plans for marriage. By "going home," he avoided threatening family relationships and gradually gained acceptance (Tan, 2011). Teng's experiences navigating queer identity and family was less about an outward journey of leaving the family in pursuit of self-fulfillment, and more about maintaining close relationships with blood family.

Likewise, the study featuring Fong, a gay Hmong American, showed coming out discourses do not adequately account for the importance of the family and family reputation (i.e., "saving face") in the Hmong community (Ngo, 2012). Because Fong's identity was interconnected with the group identity of his family and clan, disclosure of his gay identity had ramifications for members of his immediate family and extended family (P. K. Yang, 2008). Fong disrupted binary discourses of individualism versus collectivism by maintaining family relationships and integrating his responsibilities to his family with his gay identity. This included agreeing to marry a Hmong woman for the sake of the family reputation, while persistently communicating with his wife and family about his gay identity and commitments to his same-sex partner and the LGBT community.

PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR TEACHERS

The experiences and perspectives of the Hmong American youth in my research provide us with alternative discourses for understanding their social identities and familial experiences that refute pervasive representations that impugn Hmong culture and families. Discourses about the oppressive patriarchy and traditions of Hmong culture, the assumption that queer Hmong children need to leave the Hmong family, and Hmong parents who do not care about the education of female children are mechanisms of White supremacy that seek to

ASSERT
Research for Teachers in a Hurry

negate, debase and destroy Hmong culture. Social studies teachers are uniquely positioned to engage curriculum and pedagogy to counteract dominant discourses that instantiate the values, worldviews, culture and structures of White supremacy.

Teachers may explore with students the ways in which dominant discourses are instrumental in the enactment of anti-Asian policies and practices. Abundant examples of anti-Asian institutional racism in U.S. history stemmed from the concept of the "yellow peril" that first appeared in the late 19^{th}-century (Kawai, 2005; R. G. Lee, 1999). For instance, the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act prohibited Chinese labor immigration; the 1907 Gentlemen's Agreement Act was an agreement between the U.S. and Japanese governments to limit immigration from Japan to the U.S. where the U.S. protected the rights of Japanese immigrants in the U.S in exchange for Japan's restriction of passports to the U.S. for Japanese laborers; and Executive Order 9066 of 1942 authorized the incarceration or internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. More recently, anti-Asian discourses focus on threats to the U.S. from Asian capitalism (Chen & Yeats, 2014), radicalization of Muslim Americans (El-Haj, 2015), and infection from COVID-19—coined as the "Chinse virus" or "kung flu" by Donald Trump during his presidency amidst the pandemic (Chun, 2020).

Further, there exists a need to explicate the complexities of immigrant acculturation and White supremacy's demand for assimilation. Hmong American adults see Americanization and the divestment of Hmong language and culture as the primary threat to their children, families, and community (E. Lee, 2005; Ngo, 2013, 2017). Their response to assimilationist mandates that may manifest as strict rules for daughters cannot be adequately explained by the cultural difference model's emphasis on the domination of women at the hands of Hmong culture in contrast to the autonomy granted by "American" culture (Vang & Nibbs, 2016). Additionally, the ideology of American individualism requires teachers to interrogate and counter the racist discourse of individualism that underscores merit in achievement (Augoustinos et al., 2005), ignores structural racism (Augoustinos et al., 2005; Diangelo, 2010) and excludes a view of education and success that embraces a collective vision of family and community (Fishman, 1991; Ngo, 2013, 2017; Valenzuela, 1999).

Lastly, there is a need to examine social institutions (e.g., family, school, criminal justice system) to elucidate the complex ways they open up or foreclose possibilities to support the interests and lives of Hmong American, Asian American and other minoritized communities. The shooting death of Fong Lee and murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police in my hometown provide examples for an analysis of a racist criminal justice system. The privileging of Whiteness in school that strip Hmong students of their heritage language and culture (Ngo, 2013, 2017), and undergirds racist practices (E. Lee, 2005; Ngo, 2002) is a starting point to dismantle the notion that school is a meritocratic institution and move towards an understanding of school's critical role in the reproduction of racial inequality, increasingly through the school-to-prison pipeline (Meiners & Winn, 2010).

Q & A WITH BIC NGO

Question #1

Teacher's Question:

Can you suggest good resources (websites, nonfiction books, YA literature, or other resources) for teachers to gain a broader understanding of Hmong history, current issues, and diverse experiences between Hmong populations around the world, both at the elementary and secondary levels?

Bic Ngo's Response:

Children's Books:

- Map into the World by Kao Kalia Yang
- The Most Beautiful Thing by Kao Kalia Yang
- The Yang Warriors (forthcoming) by Kao Kalia Yang
- Jouanah: A Hmong Cinderella by Jewell Reinhard Coburn and Tzexa Cherta Lee

Non-Fiction Books:

- People's History of the Hmong by Paul Hillmer
- Diversity in Diaspora: Hmong Americans in the Twenty-First Century, edited by: Mark Pfeifer, Monica Chiu and Kou Yang
- Up Against Whiteness by Stacey J. Lee
- Longing for Culture (forthcoming) by Bic Ngo
- The Latehomecomer (memoir) by Kao Kalia Yang
- The Song Poet (memoir) by Kao Kalia Yang
- Staring Down the Tiger edited by Pa Der Vang

Websites:

- https://www.hmongcc.org/
- https://www.hmonglanguageresourcehub.org/

Question #2

Teacher's Question:

You argue that teachers need to "interrogate and counter the racist discourse of individualism that underscores merit in achievement". For someone who is just beginning, how would you explain what this means in practical terms, including how their view on teaching might change as a result?

ASSERT
Research for Teachers in a Hurry

Bic Ngo's Response:

U.S. institutions are grounded in white supremacy, articulated by Frances Lee Ansley (1988) as "a political, economic and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings" (p. 1024, endnote). As such, institutions such as school are designed to privilege and instill white cultural values such as individualism and "pull yourself up by the bootstraps" meritocracy.

For teachers to "interrogate and counter the racist discourse of individualism that underscores merit in achievement" mean questioning their views of teaching and learning that favor and support individual accomplishment and competition over communal achievement and cooperative learning. Because white supremacy imbues institutions such as school, we must question the predominant, "common sense" ways in which they operate.

Question #3

Teacher's Question:

There are likely a lot of social studies teachers who struggle with accepting cultural norms that run counter to White American norms. I am thinking particularly about the status or perceived status of women. How would you suggest a teacher accept or embrace cultural expectations of women that run contrary to their own?

Bic Ngo's Response:

When considering cultural norms, including gender role expectations, I suggest avoiding binary oppositions that position White American norms as the benchmark for good/appropriate behavior and those of Hmong American and other groups as bad/inappropriate. There are abundant examples of White American practices that perpetuate the oppression of women and girls (since patriarchy is a pillar of white supremacy) including workplace gender inequality, prevalence of rape culture, and the influence of sexism during the 2016 election. As educators consider gender and culture, I suggest paying attention to questions such as: How can we talk about Hmong parents valuing education as well as family for their daughters? How can we understand teen marriage without reducing it to a problem of Hmong culture? How can we broaden concepts about gender equity in immigrant communities in ways that move beyond a sole focus on culture?

Question #4

Teacher's Question:

Can you share state or district level educational efforts to bring more accurate, inclusive, culturally sustaining curriculum?

ASSERT
Research for Teachers in a Hurry

Bic Ngo's Response:

The Hmong Language Resource Hub (https://www.hmonglanguageresourcehub.org/) is the result of an effort by The Lub Zeg Zog (National Educators Coalition) Project, a partnership between Hmong language, literacy and culture teachers from K-16 settings across Minnesota, Wisconsin, and California, in cooperation with the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater's College of Education and Professional Studies. The Project involved educators working with Hmong elders, youth, artists, community members and organizations to collect, create, and share culturally sustaining curriculum materials.

Question #5

Teacher's Question:

The majority of the Hmong population outside of Vietnam and Laos is concentrated in just a few concentrated areas in the world, including Wisconsin and Minnesota in the U.S., Southern Ontario in Canada, France, French Guiana and Argentina. What insights for the classroom can all social studies teachers—even those without Hmong students—draw from the educational experiences of the Hmong youth and families?

Bic Ngo's Response:

The experiences of Hmong youth and families provide at least two significant insights for teaching about immigrant (and other ethnic and racial minority) groups in the U.S. First, teachers should examine dominant discourses about immigration and immigrants. For example, discourses of the U.S. as a "melting pot" promotes a view of assimilation that purports the cultures of ethnic groups merge into one singular pot. This narrative denies the nation's persistent racial hierarchy, privileging of dominant White culture that divests minoritized groups of their languages and cultures; and enduring systems of segregation such as education and housing. Second, the experiences of Hmong youth and families bring attention to what scholars have called the "new racism" where minoritized groups are denigrated without reference to race. Instead, the values, traditions and customs of groups (such as the Hmong) become proxies for "race." Cultural practices (e.g., teenage marriage) are thus racialized in ways that devalue the groups and mark them as different and Other.

REFERENCES

Allen, R. L. (2005). The globalization of White supremacy: Toward a critical discourse on the racialization of the world. *Educational Theory*, *51*(4), 467–485.

Ansley, F. L. (1988). Stirring the ashes: Race class and the future of civil rights scholarship. *Cornell L. Rev*, *74*, 993–993.

Augoustinos, M., Tuffin, K., & Every, D. (2005). (Vol. 16). Discourse & Society. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926505051168

Chen, J. K. W., & Yeats, D. (2014). *Yellow peril!: An archive of anti-Asian fear*. New York: Verso.

Chiu, M. (2013). Diversity in diaspora: Hmong americans in the twenty-first century (pp. vii-xviii). In M. Pfeifer, M. Chieu, , & K. Yang (Eds.), . University of Hawaii Press.

ASSERT
Research for Teachers in a Hurry

Chou, W. S. (2000). *Tongzhi come home: Politics of same-sex eroticism in Chinese societies*. Binghamton, NY: Haworth Press.

Chun, C. W. (2020). The return of the 'Yellow Peril': The fear of getting sick from the Other. *Journal of Language*, *2*(2), 252–259.

Diangelo, R. J. (2010). Why can't we all just be individuals?: Countering the discourse of individualism in anti-racist education. *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies*, *6*(1).

El-Haj, T. R. A. (2015). *Unsettled belonging: Educating Palestinian American youth after 9/11*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Ellis, A. D. (2002). Lost in America. *The Fresno Bee*.

Fishman, J. (1991). *Reversing language shift*. Clevedon, Avon: Multilingual Matters.

Jesilow, P., & Xiong, M. (2007). Constructing a social problem: Suicide, acculturation, and the Hmong. *Hmong Studies Journal*, *8*(1).

Kawai, Y. (2005). Stereotyping Asian Americans: The dialectic of the model minority and the yellow peril. *The Howard Journal of Communications*, *16*(2), 109–130.

Lee, E. (2005). Orientalisms in the Americas: A hemispheric approach to Asian American history. *Journal of Asian American Studies*, *8*(3), 235–256.

Lee, R. G. (1999). *Orientals: Asian Americans in popular culture*. Temple University Press.

Louwagie, P., & Browning, D. (2005a, October 9). *Shamed into silence.* Retrieved from http://www.proquest.umi.com

Louwagie, P., & Browning, D. (2005b, October 10). *Shamed into silence: Culture clash can stymie help.*

Meiners, E. R., & Winn, M. T. (2010). Resisting the school to prison pipeline: The practice to build abolition democracies. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *13*(3), 271–276.

Mills, C. (1997). *The racial contract*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Ngo, B. (2002). Contesting "culture": The perspectives of Hmong American female students on early marriage. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, *33*(2), 163–188.

Ngo, B. (2012). The importance of family for a gay Hmong American man: Complicating discourses of "coming out. *Hmong Studies Journal*, *13*(1), 1–27.

Ngo, B. (2013). Culture consciousness among Hmong immigrant leaders: Beyond the dichotomy of cultural essentialism and cultural hybridity. *American Educational Research Journal*, *50*(5), 958–990.

Ngo, B. (2017). The costs of "living the dream" for Hmong immigrants: The impact of subtractive schooling on family and community. *Educational Studies*, *53*(5), 450–467.

Ngo, B., & Kwon, M. (2015). A glimpse of family acceptance for queer Hmong youth. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, *12*(2), 212–231.

Ngo, B., & Leet-Otley, J. (2011). Discourses about gender among Hmong American policymakers: Conflicting views about gender, culture and Hmong youth. *Journal of Language, Identity and Education*, *10*(2), 99–118.

Spector, M., & Kitsuse, J. I. (2000). *Constructing social problems*. New York: Routledge.

Stake, R. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Tan, C. (2011). Go home, gay boy! Or, why do Singaporean gay men prefer to "go home" and not "come out. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *58*, 865–882.

Valenzuela, A. (1999). *Subtractive schooling: U.S. Mexican youth and the politics of caring*. Albany, NY.

Vang, C. Y., & Nibbs, F. (2016). *Claiming place: On the agency of Hmong women* (Vang & M., Eds.). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Yang, K. (2013). The American experience of the Hmong. *Diversity in diaspora: Hmong Americans*

in the twenty-first century, 3–53.

Yang, P. K. (2008). A phenomenological study of the coming out experiences of gay and lesbian Hmong. In *from Dissertations & Theses @ CIC Institutions* (Vol. 3338995).

ASSERT
Research for Teachers in a Hurry