Adolescent Hmong Marriage & Risk of Depression

Bao Lee | Senior
Vocational Rehabilitation

Abstract

Hmong women who marry before the age of eighteen are more likely to develop depression later in life, compared to Hmong women who marry after the age of eighteen (Bartz & Nye, 1970; Gangoli, McCarry, & Razak, 2009; Vang & Bogenschutz, 2011). Hmong are understudied and need more representation, which is why this research is crucial. The participants were between the ages of 20-30 years old, and included Hmong women from the Wausau, Wisconsin area. These participants are broken into three categories: married before they turned eighteen, after eighteen, or had never been married. They were recruited via snowball sampling, and individually interviewed using the Beck Depression Inventory and interview questions. After collecting the data and comparing the results, the researcher could not conclude that getting married young had a direct relationship with depression. However, someone who married before adulthood (before 18 years old) is more susceptible to depression relative to someone who married after 18 years old, or had never been married.

Keywords: Hmong women, adolescent marriage, teen marriage, depression, beck depression inventory

Background of Hmong

Hmong are an indigenous group whose roots can be traced back to China. During the Vietnam War, Hmong assisted the United States (U.S.) in helping bring down the communist government in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, also known as The Secret War (Hamilton-Merritt, 1993; Quincy, 1995). Hmong leader General Vang Pao was assured if the U.S. lost the war then Hmong could immigrate to the U.S. for safety. However, after the fall of Saigon, the American soldiers fled Laos, leaving

Hmong culture supports marrying before age 18. The tradition is valued and has been promoted among those residing in the US. Traditionally, Hmong marriages may happen in numerous ways such as, elopement or mutual consent, arranged marriage, and bride capture (without the bride’s consent). If the bride changes her mind and does not want to follow through with the wedding she may bring shame to her family and be ridiculed by the community (Vang & Bogenschutz, 2011). The potential for shame and ridicule pressures the girl to stay in the marriage (Gangoli et. al, 2009; Vang & Bogenschutz, 2011). In addition, sexual purity and chastity is highly encouraged; premarital pregnancy can bring great shame to the family name. Therefore, if a teenage daughter gets pregnant before marriage the parents will use forced marriage as a way to atone her shameful actions (Alvi et. al, 2005; Gangoli et. al, 2009; Vang & Bogenschutz, 2011).

Consequences and predictors of depression in teen marriages:

Studies show there is a common trend of consequences for getting married at a young age regardless of ethnicity or background. Some consequences are lower education, lower socioeconomic status with lower paying jobs, more symptomatology of depression, and higher risk for domestic abuse (Bartz & Nye, 1970; Culp & Beach, 1998; Gangoli et. al, 2008, Vang & Bogenschutz, 2011; Whitton et. al, 2007). According to Vang and Bogenschutz (2011), “45.4% of Hmong women are married, 37.9% have never been married, and lesser percentage are widowed, divorced, or separated (7).” Women who marry young are likely to drop out of high school, achieve less college attendance, and experience more poverty than young women who did not marry.

Social class placement, such as socioeconomic status, is a
negative outcome for marrying young regardless of ethnicity. Bartz and Nye (1970) mentioned that early marriages do result in lower social class placement. Early marriages may disrupt education and cause individuals to drop out of school, thus resulting in lower paying jobs (Vang & Bogenschutz, 2011; Bartz & Nye, 1970). Studies have shown that early marriages in Hmong culture do not affect the individuals academically (Hutchinson & McNall, 1994), but no further research has been done that focused on teenage marriage and the risks that could impose on Hmong women’s mental health, like depression. Hmong in the United States are more likely of lower-socioeconomic status due to social, political, and historical factors. Family socioeconomic status may be the motivator for young Hmong girls to enter adolescent marriages hoping for security (Vang & Bogenschutz, 2011). Bartz and Nye (1970) supported the latter, concurring that the more a girl anticipates satisfaction from the marriage the earlier she will get married. In other words, she leaves her stifling family situation or environment in hopes of finding more satisfaction in her marriage.

There seems to be a connection with gender roles and expectations that lead women who marry young to feel a sense of helplessness and show more signs of depression (Gangoli et. al, 2009; Vang & Bogenschutz, 2001; Whitton et. al, 2007). The patriarchal nature within Hmong culture and the feelings of inadequacy as a woman contributed to feeling that sense of helplessness (Alvi et. al, 2005; Vang and Bogenschutz, 2011). Bargai and Shalev (2007) concluded that learned helplessness (LH) is a psychological trait, which, theoretically, results from repeated exposure to uncontrollable and aversive events. Additionally, LH is associated with male dominant background and cultural influences that promote female submissiveness. Bargai and Shaley (2007) concurs: “this kind of psychological trait may imply that it may not only be a result of early cultural influences, but also act as a promoting cultural agent of the multi-generational cycle of female vulnerability to victimization.” Hence, studies that indicated Hmong culture is a patriarchal hierarchy, where men dominate, would explain the gender distress, helplessness, and risk of depression due to being victimized (Alvi et. al, 2005; Bargai et. al, 2007; Vang & Bogenschutz, 2011).

Another predictor of depression due to adolescent marriage
is bicultural stress. According to Vang (2011), bicultural stress is defined as having a conflict between two cultures. Bicultural stress is positively correlated with depression and less optimism among adolescents. Bicultural stress is more prominent within the Asian culture.

**Method**

**Participants**

The participants were Hmong women over the age of 18 (between ages 20 to 30 years old). Due to the challenges with the sample the initial 12 participants number were lowered to 9. There were 3 individuals who married before 18, 3 who married after 18, and 3 who never married. The participants were from Wausau, WI and were recruited via snowball sampling. According to Streeton and colleagues (2001), “Snowballing samples emerge through a process of reference from one person to the next, quickly building up and enabling the researcher to approach participants with credibility from being sponsored by a named person.” [The] consent form is located in Appendix B.

**Measures Beck Depression-Inventory**

The Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) is a 21-item, self-report rating inventory that measures characteristic attitudes and symptoms of depression (Beck, et al., 1961). These items (e.g. I have nothing to look forward to) were selected because they were relevant to a person’s mental health (Cronbach’s alpha = .86). Participants were asked to rate the severity of how they feel about themselves and their situations. Severity is measured on a four-point scale (0=I don’t feel, 1= I do feel, 2= I feel a lot, 3= I’m hopeless). The Beck Depression Inventory is a self-report rating inventory where individuals can score themselves after and see the levels of depression symptoms they fall under.

**Interview**

The interview questions consisted of 15 open-ended questions asking the participants about their marriage situation, gender role responsibility, support, background information, and reasons for marriage. Interview questions were determined according to participant background. Questions for the group that never married were directed towards education. Since the group that married before 18 had no higher education,
questions focused more on their marriage and responsibilities. Lastly, for the group that married after 18, the questions were a mix of education and marital responsibilities. These questions were only guidelines; researcher may have asked other questions that are more tailored to each group or individual. See Appendix A.

Procedure
The researcher met with the individual participants in a place where they felt most comfortable and safe to do the personal interview. The participants signed and read the consent forms stating that what was said will remain confidential, and if at any time they chose to leave this interview they could. The participants answered the BDI first, followed by the interview. The interview questions were used as a guideline to generate conversations instead of strictly asking the questions verbatim. The sessions were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. After the interview, the researcher debriefed each individual participant, telling them about the research and how their participation is greatly appreciated and helpful to the community.

The qualitative data was analyzed by organizing the interview questions into three tables: never married, married after 18, married before 18. Because each interview was tailored differently depending on the participant, the tables were organized by questions that came up the most during these interviews. Each table had three columns: initials of participants, the interview question, and the participant’s response to that question. After entering the data from the interview patterns, themes, and relationships that emerged were analyzed.

Results

Never Been Married
After reviewing the data, patterns and relationships emerged. This group had either received their degree in higher education, would graduate college soon, or was still pursuing a post-secondary degree. They are between the ages of 23 to 25 years old. The participants in this group, when asked about their future goals, reported that they want to continue on to graduate school, get a stable job, get married, then have kids. Financial stability and independence were very import to this
group. When they were asked what contributed to their stress, they all reported being home made them feel more stressed because their responsibilities increased (helping parents and younger siblings, restricted social life). Participants within this group also stated that they wanted to get married and have kids before they turned 30 years old. However, they would only get married if all of the latter listed was fulfilled first. Moreover, this group showed higher academic aspirations than the two other groups. When asked if they have ever been diagnosed with depression, all the participants reported they have not been professionally diagnosed, but have felt depression at one point in their life. The contribution to their depression was mainly past relationships with boyfriends. All the participants are currently in a relationship, and when asked if they have talked about marriage and future plans, they all reported they have, but only briefly. Lastly, when asked what their biggest fear of marriage was, they all replied they feared their partner would change (become more controlling, show less affection after marriage), and feared the cultural expectations of being a daughter-in-law. Overall, when comparing the answers and questions, this group was highly motivated to become successful first before marriage.

Married Before 18

The participants of this group married before they turned 18 (15-16 years old). They all had their first child at or around the age of 18, and they have at least three kids. Two participants worked full-time jobs while the other one is a stay-at-home mom. Their full-time jobs paid them under 15 dollars per hour, and they all owned houses and cars. All three participants have been married at least 8 years or more, and obtained their high school diplomas. They all had the desire to pursue higher education, but could not due to familial obligations; such as taking care of their children, providing for the family, having no babysitters, and having financial burdens. For instance, one participant said she could not pursue higher education even if she wanted to because they needed the money more. When the researcher asked their reason for marriage, participants responded they wanted to “run away” or “get away” from their family or parents. Furthermore, participants were questioned about their thoughts on adolescent marriages. At first they seemed to be neutral with the idea stating, “if two people love each other and wanted to
get married no one can stop them.” However, when asked, “if your 15-year-old daughter wanted to get married because she’s in love would you allow it?” they quickly replied “no.” They stated their daughter would be too young, and they would not know anything about love, or how to make their own decisions. Lastly, the participants were asked if they marry young all over again, would they? Participants responded that they would not have gotten married at that age. They would have pursued higher education first, got a job, and then got married. These participants had lower academic aspirations than the other two groups. Nevertheless, it’s not because they are not motivated, but their circumstance prohibited them from pursuing their goals. Marrying young contributed to their lower education attainment, and lower paying jobs which also affects their mental health. This group reported feelings of “hopelessness” when filling out the BDI.

**Married After 18**

This last group seemed to be between the two groups listed above. There were no relationships that emerged within this group in particular. However, when comparing this group with the other two groups as a whole, relationships were formed. This group was married between the ages of 18-20 years old. Only two participants had children (2 kids & 4 kids), the third participant had no children yet. One of the participants graduated with her nursing degree and is working as a full-time registered nurse. As for the other two, they are working part-time and pursuing their degree full-time. Within this group, husbands showed more support in academia than the group who married before 18. When the researcher asked why they decided to get married, one of the participants said she felt like she was ready and saw a clear future with her husband. Another one said she was pregnant and decided it was better to get married. The third one said because of her family situations, such as not wanting to abide by her parents rules, she felt alone both financially and emotionally, and she did not get along with her parents. She also wanted independence because she did not want to follow her parents’ rules. However, she did not have the financial means to be on her own, so she married to alleviate her financial problems. When asked if they would do anything differently? they all replied that they would have waited until they were older,
accomplished more, and experience life first then get married.

**Beck Depression Inventory (BDI)**

All the participants fell under the normal range on the Beck Depression scale. However, there was one participant who married before she turned 18 and scored within the mild mood disturbance on the BDI. Those who married after the age of 18 and those who never married reported no depression symptoms. Individuals who married before the age of 18 experienced at least one or more symptoms of depression from the DSM-IV including feeling of worthlessness, depressed mood, fatigue, and loss of interest in activities (the DSM-V was not in print at this time).

**Discussion**

Comparing the three groups, the researcher saw that when asked “if they felt there was gender inequality within their marriage” most of them did not say “yes there is gender inequality within my marriage” but they expressed that there was no choice because it was their culture and the way it has always been. There was one participant who was married before the age of 18 that expressed her frustrations of not being able to make decisions without her husband. He was traditional, dominant, and in order to avoid fights she obeyed. Two other participants expressed their frustration regarding gender inequality within their marriage as well. Moreover, the participants also expressed the unfairness they felt when Hmong community or elders dealt with marital problems between two spouses; Hmong men were often favored. Especially in cases when Hmong men commit adultery, the participants felt that the elders expected the women to forgive their husbands, continue to be patient with them, and obey them. Conversely, if a Hmong woman were to commit adultery, the participants felt that the elders and Hmong community would ostracize her and call her foul names. Therefore, all nine of the participants felt a great deal of unfairness when it came to how men and women were treated within Hmong community. For instance, one participant said, “If I have problems with my relationship . . . Hmong tends to push the women back saying that “ohh you should obey him more” and what more do they want us to obey?” However, there was one participant who felt that the elders’ way of helping
the spouses with their marital problems was beneficial. As she stated, 

“In the situations where I’ve been in meetings where the 
elders, they kind of give you options . . . they pretty much 
want to hear your side and your story then the guy’s side and 
his story.”

There were two participants who reported equality within their marriage, but one of them reported she only received equality when they were alone. She expressed that when they are around the elders and relatives she has to “pretend” to play the “submissive” wife. This participant said she felt frustrated sometimes having to play this role of a submissive wife.

It is evident participants are experiencing the psychological trait of “learned helplessness.” As Bargai and Shaley (2007) stated in their research, “learned helplessness is a trait resulted from repeated exposure to uncontrollable and aversive events.” The patriarchal society these Hmong women grew up in, and the cultural obligations they have to fulfill, is a contribution to their acceptance of their roles as Hmong wives. For instance, one participant concurred with the acceptance of the patriarchal society she lived in, “I feel like I don’t have any say in any kind of decisions. I just feel like it’s not fair, not fair for me and why should he get to do the things he want in life and I don’t . . . and I guess I just learned to accept it.”

When the participants were asked about their thoughts on adolescent marriages at least five of them said they do not have the right to say what is right and wrong (they felt neutral about adolescent marriages). The other four participants immediately affirmed their disapproval of adolescent marriages, and one of the four participants even said, “I think it should be banned.” All nine participants did agree that getting married at a young age came with too many responsibilities, and these teens were not ready for that kind of commitment.

The researcher also saw a connection with the participants who married before they turned 18. The reason these women married was to escape their unwanted situations in their home. According to Bartz and Nye (1970) a girl will marry early if she’s around tension or an unhappy environment, and it was evident that participants felt that way. For instance, a participant stated, “I’d say more than 50% why I got married was due to my family. I wanted to get away from my family so much as my mom is
pretty abusive.” Therefore, participants thought leaving an unwanted situation would bring happiness. Also, Bartz and Nye (1970) indicated that the earlier a girl starts dating, the earlier she’ll marry. This was obvious with the group collectively, (they all dated at an early age) which led a few of them to marry at age fifteen and sixteen.

The results of the BDI did not validate the hypothesis that Hmong women married before age 18 would be more likely to experience depression, but the data did show some support. It is not guaranteed that a girl married before the age of 18 would experience depression later in life, but she will be more susceptible to depression. The group who married before 18 graduated with a high school diploma, and were working at jobs (or not working at all) that paid less than fifteen dollars per hour. This aligned with other studies that have been done by Vang and Bogenschutz (2011) and Bartz and Nye (1970) where early marriages resulted in disruption of education, and lower social class placement. It was apparent the three participants that were interviewed did not have higher education and had lower paying jobs. The researcher could not conclude that getting married young has a direct relationship with depression. However, the researcher predict that someone who marry before adulthood (before 18 years old) is at higher risk for depression, relative to someone who marry after 18 years old, and never been married.

Limitations & Future Research

Some limitations of this study were small sample size, environment, and the short duration of interview. Hmong participants from a small town in Wisconsin could differ immensely from Hmong participants from bigger cites and states like Minnesota or California. Another limitation was the interview process. It takes time to get comfortable with someone first before sharing such personal details. Since these participants only spent an hour with the interviewer, they were more apprehensive to open up. For future research regarding this subject, researchers should use a larger sample in order to represent the population better. Enhancing the interview questions and using other depression tools to measure would improve results for this research.
References


Streton, R., Cooke, M., & Campbell, J. (2001). Researching the
researchers: Using a snowballing technique. 


**Appendix A**

*Sample Interview questions (married & never been married)*

1. What is your view of Hmong marriage?
2. What are some of your thoughts about how Hmong community deals with marriage?
3. How did you get married? According to Hmong custom, was it voluntary, negotiation or forced?
4. How old were you when you got married?
5. Do you have kids? How old were you when you had your first child?
6. What’s your occupation status? Who supports you financially through school?
7. How is your relationship with you husband and his family?
8. Do you feel you have enough moral support from your husband, friends and family?
9. How do you feel about teen marriages? Do you support teen marriages? Why or why not?
10. Do you feel there is gender equality within your marriage?
11. If you could do this over again would you make the same decisions? Why or why not?
12. What are your goals/plans for your future?
13. Where do you see yourself in 10 years?
14. Do you have stress? What kind of stress? How do you deal with them?
15. Have you ever been diagnosed with depression? Have you ever felt depressed? How severe was it? Why did you feel depressed?
16. Are you currently in a relationship? For how long? Have you two talked about marriage? Kids?
17. What kinds of responsibilities do you have? How do you deal with them?

Appendix B
Consent to Participate In UW-Stout Approved Research

**Title:** Adolescent marriage & Risk of marriage

**Research Sponsor:**
Dr. Pa Der Vang  
Assistant Professor  
St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas  
Phone: (651) 690-8647  
pdvang@stkate.edu

**Investigator:**
Bao Lee  
UW Stout Undergraduate Student  
Vocational Rehabilitation  
Concentration: Psychiatric Rehabilitation  
Phone: (715) 551-1036  
leeb@my.uwstout.edu

**Description:**  
This research is intended to find out if a Hmong girl gets married before the age of 18 if she’s more likely to develop depression later in her adult life, as compared to a Hmong girl who gets married after the age of 18. In order to test this theory we will be interviewing individual Hmong girls who are over the age of 18, but got married before they turned 18, and Hmong girls who got married after the age of 18. We will also look at girls who never got married as well to compare if teen marriage serves as a predictor for depression.

This study includes an interview section, and a survey that
participants will need to answer. During the interview session participants will be audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Along with the interview the participant will be taking the Beck Depression Inventory survey as well.

**Risks and Benefits:**

The benefits of this research will be able to educate Hmong community about adolescent marriages and the consequences of it. In addition, it will also promote awareness to Hmong teens as well as Hmong elders that teen marriage can potentially affect one’s educational future and life negatively.

The risks of this research may effect Hmong elder’s and their traditional views on marriage. Also, this topic can be culturally sensitive to Hmong community as a whole.

**Time Commitment and Payment:**

The participation in this project is voluntary. Participants understand that they will not be paid for their participation. They may withdraw and discontinue participation at any time without penalty. If they decline to participate or withdraw from the study, no one will hold them responsible for completion of this study. Participants understand that this study will last at least an hour.

**Confidentiality:**

Your name will not be included on any documents or during the audio recording. We do not believe that you can be identified from any of this information. This informed consent will not be kept with any of the other documents completed with this project.

**Right to Withdraw:**

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may choose not to participate without any adverse consequences to you. Should you choose to participate and later wish to withdraw from the study, you may discontinue your participation at this time without incurring adverse consequences.

**IRB Approval:**

This study has been reviewed and approved by The University of Wisconsin-Stout’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB has determined that this study meets the ethical obligations required by federal law and University policies. If you
have questions or concerns regarding this study please contact the Investigator or Advisor. If you have any questions, concerns, or reports regarding your rights as a research subject, please contact the IRB Administrator.

**Investigator:**
Bao Lee  
(715) 551-1036  
Leeb@my.uwstout.edu

**IRB Administrator:**
Sue Foxwell, Director, Research Services  
152 Vocational Rehabilitation Bldg.  
UW-Stout  
Menomonie, WI 54751  
715.232.2477  
foxwells@uwstout.edu

**Advisor:**
Dr. Pa Der Vang  
Phone: (651) 690-8647  
pdvang@stkate.edu

**Statement of Consent:**
By signing this consent form you agree to participate in the project entitled, ADOLCESENT MARRIAGE & RISK OF DEPRESSION.

_________________________________________________  
Signature  
Date

_________________________________________________  
Signature of parent or guardian  
(If minors are involved)  
Date