Hmong Women in Higher Education:
ANALYZING EMPOWERMENT, PATRIARCHY AND FAMILY, AND STUDENT-TEACHER INTERACTION

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ABSTRACT

Despite the increase in women entering higher education world-wide, there is still a low representation of women in the “higher level” of education (Chanana, 2012). In particular, student women of color within academia are confronted with obstacles that other women are not. This may impact their performance in college (Marbley, 2011); for example, Hmong women have been shown to lag behind other Asian women in educational and economic attainment (Yang, 2014). One factor shown to enhance student success and empowerment is student-teacher interactions. However, there are no studies showing connections between empowerment of Hmong women and their interactions with teachers. This is especially important because Hmong women have been heavily discouraged by cultural and gender norms, yet they continue to strive to complete a higher education (Moua, 2002), enabling empowerment through independence and social status. Gender and cultural norms stem from patriarchy, which is defined as male dominance within a system (Ngampornchai, 2003). Using grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and conducting focus groups with Hmong women at a predominantly white, midwestern university, we examined empowerment in higher education, emphasizing student-teacher interactions and family roles in the Hmong patriarchal culture.

METHODS

➢ 14 Hmong American women students (both traditional and nontraditional) were recruited via mass emails through the Office of Multicultural Affairs
➢ Conducted focus groups in the average time of one and a half hours
➢ Gathered data over the course of a month
➢ Sessions were transcribed and individually coded
➢ Used the Q-sort method to first categorize repetitive data then collapsed them into fewer categories
➢ Through the constant comparison method, we observed several emerging themes

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ1: How do Hmong college women students’ experience empowerment, patriarchy, and student-teacher interaction?

RQ2: How are Hmong college women students’ feelings of empowerment associated with?
   a) patriarchal communication in family of origin and
   b) quality of interaction between student and teacher?

EMPOWERMENT

RESULTS FOR RQ1
➢ Empowerment is:
   ➢ Having confidence
   ➢ Being in control of your life choices
   ➢ What builds motivation
➢ The empowerment that education creates for Hmong women is articulated as:
   ➢ Status
   ➢ Power
   ➢ Opportunities
   ➢ Some of the barriers that prevent empowerment from happening are:
     ➢ Gender roles and expectations
     ➢ No support from family
     ➢ Communication (specifically language)
     ➢ Self-perception

RESULTS FOR RQ2
Empowerment in education plays an especially important role in Hmong women’s lives because it gives other people (particularly their own family and community) the perception that they are educated women, giving them credibility and becoming resourceful. Hmong women are able to self-empower and empower one another in hopes of paving a path for other Hmong women to become successful.

Patriarchy in Family

RESULTS FOR RQ1
➢ Family values education
➢ Patriarchal power and characteristics exist within families
➢ Parents usually encourage sons more than daughters
➢ Participants influenced by both parents’ and siblings’ experiences
➢ Stability and status are due to education earned

RESULTS FOR RQ2
All participants acknowledge that patriarchal characteristics exist within their families, but are exerted on various levels. Patriarchal power exerted within families is not always bad; it also sometimes positively impacts these participants’ college experiences. Though their male siblings are usually more encouraged to attend college, these female participants are motivated and plan to use their college degrees to support their family financially while simultaneously increasing their social status.

STUDENT-TEACHER INTERACTION

RESULTS FOR RQ1
➢ Connects with one to two professors about twice a month
➢ Rarely sees advisor within their major
➢ Quality of Interaction
   ➢ Reasons to see professors
     ➢ Care about students
     ➢ Validation
     ➢ Comfort level and personally connected
➢ Reasons not to see professors
   ➢ Intimidation
   ➢ Discomfort

RESULTS FOR RQ2
Participants only interact with professors when it comes to the academic materials; otherwise they rely on themselves to figure out materials. A few students would ask another faculty member with whom they connect more; however, these faculty members are not always faculty in their majors. All participants expressed desire for more faculty of color to help them feel empowered because faculty of color give validation, comfort and familiarity in and outside of the classroom.

DISCUSSION/IMPLICATIONS

Throughout this study on Hmong women in higher education, we have come to the conclusion that education is a significant tool of empowerment for Hmong women students. This study addresses the different challenges that Hmong women are faced with regarding to finding a source of empowerment, finding their identity within a patriarchal culture, and finding a resource they can trust. Using grounded theory as part of our methodology, we used inductive reasoning to find that both empowerment and disempowerment were found but ultimately resulted in wanting to aid themselves and their family. This study also depicts how Hmong women are influenced by their family and how family affects their learning which motivates them to either respond positively to their situation or rebel against the norm. As a result, the implication that this study provides is the importance of Hmong women’s personal narrative as part of students’ voice at a predominantly white, four-year university. With empowerment, education has allowed Hmong women students opportunities to curate their lives in the direction that they desire despite the obstacles that they face; whereas with student-teacher interaction, they would rely on themselves to figure things out and choose to not ask for help from an “authority” figure. Additionally, this study will raise awareness in hope of increasing faculty of color and empower Hmong women students to change the way diversity, inclusivity and equity are constituted.