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Understanding the Experiences of Underemployed First- Generation Hmong Graduates

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UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES OF UNDEREMPLOYED
FIRST-GENERATION HMONG GRADUATES

By

Mong Vang

A Dissertation Submitted to the

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In Partial Fulfillment of the

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UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES OF UNDEREMPLOYED
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By

Mong Vang

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family.

To my dog Lily:

You are truly a man's best friend.

To the Thao & Vang family:

Thank you all for your continued love and support.

To my wife:

Thank you for your unwavering belief in me and encouragement. I love you always.

To my kids:

I love all of you.

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This success would not be possible without the many people that helped me along the way. Without them, this accomplishment would still be nothing, but a mere thought.

First off, thank you to all the Pacific Benerd Sacramento professors for teaching me new practical skills and knowledge, while challenging me to go beyond my comfort zone. My education at Pacific has inspired me to keep creating impact for me, my family, and community for years to come.

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UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES OF UNDEREMPLOYED
FIRST-GENERATION HMONG GRADUATES

Abstract

By Mong Vang

University of the Pacific
2020

Underemployment has a rich and lengthy body of literature spanning across multiple disciplines, such as economics, business, psychology, and sociology. Past scholars studying the phenomenon have provided a framework for understanding underemployment and have identified the harm it has on organizations and individuals. Although underemployment is not a new phenomenon, gaps are present in understanding how it affects first-generation, Hmong graduates. This study provides a framework for bridging this gap. As such, this study answered three questions related to how underemployed, first-generation, Hmong college graduates describe their experience finding adequate employment after graduation, perceive the relationship between their personal upbringing and their education that effected their underemployment, and their challenges in regard to underemployment.

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of underemployed, first-generation, Hmong college graduates and their perceptions of the primary factors affecting or influencing their underemployment. To achieve that goal, the researcher employed a generic qualitative methodology to examine the experiences of four first-generation Hmong graduates. Four umbrella themes emerged from study: 1) the practical disconnection between college and workforce application; 2) social capital inequality; 3) upbringing and underemployment connection; and 4) the reality of being underemployed as a first-generation Hmong graduate.

With context supporting these themes, the researcher concluded with implications for action by suggesting strategies to innovate the college academic experience and academic support programs, as well as bring awareness to the Hmong community about underemployment.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

It is a common belief amongst many Americans that education opens up new paths for upward mobility. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2019b), an individual holding at least a bachelor's degree earned on average \$1,198 per week compared to someone with a high school diploma at \$730 per week (as of 2018 data). Statistically, higher education is a key for increased economic and social mobility. Thus, for the many people that immigrate to America with hopes of achieving the American Dream, an ideology based on the principle of hard work and perseverance to reap economic and social benefits, higher education plays a pivotal role in making those dreams come true. Yet, while statistics demonstrate that individuals with a college degree reap economic rewards long term, many recent graduates are having a different experience as they leave college and enter the workforce.

In 2017, over 3.8 million graduates obtained their bachelor's degrees in the United States (U.S.) (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2018). However, the Federal Reserve Bank of New York (2020) revealed that from 2016 to 2018, an average of 43% recent graduates were underemployed, taking on jobs not requiring a college degree or unrelated to their skillsets. With the trend of college graduates holding a bachelor's degree or higher expected to outpace jobs requiring a college degree (Cappelli, 2015; Vedder et al., 2013), it is troubling news for the many prospective students and families who believe in higher education to achieve their goals. For current underemployed graduates, the saturation of recent graduates entering the workforce will only make finding adequate employment more competitive.

While there are many underemployed alumnus, Hmong American graduates in particular are one of the least recognized groups experiencing underemployment. For many of them, they

were the first in their families to pursue higher education and came from low-income households, where neither parent was formally educated in America (Xiong & Lee, 2011). Often, Hmong graduate experiences are lumped together with other Asian American groups. This aggregation hides the success rates of Hmong graduates because of the model minority stereotype, which posits that all Asian-Americans are well-educated, have high household incomes, and successful careers (Lam & Hui, 2016). This belief positions Asian-Americans as the ideal group that other minorities should model themselves after because of their educational attainment and higher status achievements (Lam & Hui, 2016; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Pang et al., 2003). However, to assume that all Asian-Americans are advantaged and economically successful, masks and ignores the struggles that many other Asian American sub-groups, such as the Hmong, must endure in order to achieve economic prosperity.

When disaggregated, the data show that the Hmong fall below Hispanics and African Americans in educational attainment, with less than 12% holding a bachelor's degree and one of the highest poverty rates at 25%, compared to the U.S. national average of 11% (Pfeifer et al., 2012; Reeves & Bennet, 2004; The Campaign for College Opportunity, 2015; Yang, 2017). Yet, many are not aware of this because the model minority myth masks and discounts the ethnic differences and experiences that exist within the Asian American population. For example, the top five earning Asian American groups are Asian Indians, Filipinos, Taiwanese, Sri Lankan, and Japanese with the median household income highly over the U.S average household income of \$55,000. In contrast, the bottom five are Hmong, Nepalese, Mongolian, Burmese, and Bhutanese with the lowest at \$30,000 (Edlagan & Vaghul, 2016). The assumption that all Asian Americans share the same cultural backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives is misinformed.

The educational attainment and success rates of Hmong Americans are nowhere close to the top performing Asian American sub-groups.

Underemployment continues to be an increasing problem because there are over 13 million graduates seeking adequate jobs, but not enough positions to meet that demand (Federal Reserve Bank of New York, 2020; Vedder et al., 2013). Therefore, for future first-generation, Hmong graduates to have a better chance of avoiding underemployment when entering the workforce, gaining a better understanding of the experiences of first-generation, Hmong graduates already in the workforce is an important step towards creating a practical solution. Currently, literature documenting the struggles of underemployed, first-generation, Hmong graduates are non-existent.

Background

The researcher provides a snapshot of Asian American immigration and Hmong history along with an elaboration about the model minority stereotype within the Asian American community to the reader. This provides a better understanding about the historical context of the Hmong people and the negative effects of the model minority stereotype.

Asian American Immigration to the U.S.

The first wave of Asian immigrants came to the U.S. between the 1840s to 1930s seeking the American Dream. Most first wave Asian immigrants were Chinese and Japanese with limited numbers of Filipinos, Koreans, and South Asians. The second wave of Asian immigrants, arriving between 1965 until the late 1990s, came to America as a result of the U.S.' participation in wars in Southeast Asia (Takaki, 1998). The majority of the second wave were Southeast Asians, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Hmong, and Laotians, who entered as refugees.

They were poor, less educated, and worked primarily in agricultural societies (Portes & MacLeod, 1996).

Hmong History

There is no clear answer from what country the Hmong people originated (Yang, 2009). Many believe the Hmong were natives of China, but conflict with imperial China forced the Hmong to migrate to the neighboring countries of Laos, Thailand, Burman, and Vietnam.

As the fear of communism spreading rose in the 1960s, President John F. Kennedy authorized the recruitment of ethnic minorities in Laos to participate in covert military operations. A sharp increase in the number of Hmong troops, supported by American military and CIA advisers, along with huge drops of military supplies, signaled the start of what is known as the Secret War (The Special Guerilla Units Veterans and Families of USA, Inc., 2010).

By 1971, the Secret War took a major toll on the Hmong people as Hmong soldiers were dying by the thousands and young male teenagers were recruited to join the secret army (Minnesota Historical Society, 2014). In February 1973, a cease-fire and political peace treaty was signed in Paris requiring the U.S. and all foreign powers to withdraw all military activities from Laos. As America left war torn Laos, Hmong soldiers and people were left behind to fend for themselves. Most ended up in refugee camps, other continued to fight against communist soldiers who were still hunting them, and others were left for dead. Some were fortunate to be the first of the Hmong people to settle in the U.S. as refugees in 1975 (Chan, 1994; Hamilton-Merritt, 1999). According to the most recent U.S. Census Bureau (2010) an estimated 260,000 Hmong people now live in the U.S. The larger Hmong communities are in Fresno, CA; Sacramento, CA; Minneapolis and St. Paul, MN; Green Bay, WI; and Winder, NC.

Historical Context of Model Minority Myth Stereotype

Being Asian American in the U.S. automatically bounds the Hmong to the model minority stereotype that portrays all individuals of Asian-descent as high achievers; academically, socially, and economically. The cultural and social construction of the model minority phenomenon began in the mid 1980s as an exaggerated ideology by the media. The New York Times, Newsweek Magazine, Sixty Minutes, and the Washington Post were a few popular media outlets that boasted about how the success of Asian Americans personified the American Dream of academic excellent and economic prosperity (Wu, 2002), so much so that even President Ronald Reagan, and later George H. W. Bush, celebrated Asian American success and called them “exemplars of hope” (Wu, 2002, p. 41). As the media exaggerated the success of Asian Americans, it also picked up steam in academic research.

Aggregate academic research reinforced the model minority stereotype as studies showed Asian-Americans were not academically disadvantaged (Museus & Kiang, 2009). The challenge, however, was that many studies were lumping all Asians together and masking the actual success of each sub-Asian American group. Generational differences between Asian Americans already living in the U.S. for decades, and recent arrivals, were not evident in aggregate data (Ngo & Lee, 2007). This lumping complicates the understanding of the academic and economic success of Hmong graduates and alters the reality of their struggles and experiences.

Statement of the Problem

Asian Americans are the third largest ethnic-minority group in the U.S. after Latinos and African Americans. They also are the fastest growing population in the U.S., fueled mostly by immigration, with over 21.4 million nationwide (Brown, 2014; U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). As

the Asian American population increases, it is necessary to understand the many sub-groups within the Asian American community given their diverse languages and cultural and ethnic differences, to help them thrive in a globally competitive economy. Many subgroups of the Asian American community, particularly the Hmong, remain underserved, as evidenced by their low achievement rates and socioeconomic status (Xiong & Lee, 2011; Xiong & Lam, 2012). Misrepresentation hovers over Asian-Americans as a homogenous racial group. It is important to research and study sub-group differences within the Asian American population, and not just cross-ethnic differences, in order to generate new literature identifying the unique challenges of each group. With no literature about underemployed first-generation Hmong graduates, the researcher used related literature regarding non-Hmong, first-generation graduates and underemployment partnered with the limited Hmong literature echoing similar themes, to lay the foundation for this study. As such, developing the characteristics employers wanted proved difficult for many first-generation, Hmong graduates.

Purpose of the Study

No literature exists about the experiences of underemployed, first-generation, Hmong graduates. Even the most authoritative and widely-cited scholarly journal devoted to academic studies related to the Hmong diaspora, culture, and history since 1996, the *Hmong Studies Journal*, has no literature documenting the phenomenon of underemployment amongst first-generation Hmong graduates. The purpose of this qualitative research study was to understand the experiences of underemployed, first-generation, Hmong college graduates and their perceptions of the primary factors affecting or influencing their underemployment. The themes found in this study offer insight into how Hmong students experience and understand underemployment and what, if any, influence the experience has had on them.

Research Questions

The following three questions guide this study:

1. How do underemployed, first-generation, Hmong college graduates describe their experience finding adequate employment after graduating?
2. How do underemployed, first-generation, Hmong college graduates perceive the relationship between their personal upbringing and their education that effected their underemployment?
3. How do underemployed, first-generation, Hmong college graduates describe their challenges in regard to underemployment?

Inquiry Objective

Many first-generation Hmong graduates looked to their family members, relatives, or friends for guidance in navigating the higher education system. When they were unable to find answers, it often made them feel lost or on their own (Xiong & Lam, 2012). Consequently, they depended on academic resources on campus, such as counseling and academic support programs, to address their questions and concerns (Xiong & Lee, 2011). However, when many graduates were unable to use these resources due to familial obligations, work, or lack of awareness (Xiong & Lee, 2011), they missed opportunities to learn and develop themselves for life after college.

This study is useful for many college campuses dominated by first-generation, Hmong students in gaining a more in-depth understanding about creating innovative solutions to serve this population. With 40% of the student population in the U.S. being first-generation (NCES, 2019a) and 43% of Hmong, high school graduates transitioning to college annually (NCES, 2017), the underemployed, first-generation, Hmong graduate phenomenon needs more literature, knowledge, and attention to decrease future underemployment in this population. The underemployment of Hmong graduates may decrease if both higher education institutions and

first-generation, Hmong graduates are able to bridge the disconnection by understanding their experiences that hindered their inability to have the tools to attain adequate employment.

Additionally, faculty and staff at universities could also learn from this study to assist them in becoming more emotionally intelligent and culturally competent leaders in their academic communities. As the main contacts for future Hmong graduates, they are possibly the most important available resource. It is critical that faculty and staff not only acknowledge that Hmong students are an integral part of their campus community, but that Hmong students yearn for additional help that may assist them in becoming self-sufficient after graduation. Making the mistake of deeming Hmong students as just another Asian student discounts the fact that they, like all other ethnic groups on a college campus, come with their own unique experiences, challenges, and stories. Being ignorant to this uniqueness results in a lack of understanding of this student group as whole.

This study could also catalyze more interest and research about underemployed, first-generation, Hmong graduates. No research exists about these particular graduates. Exposing the lack of literature in this field is an important step towards creating new knowledge to inspire further research regarding the phenomenon.

Finally, this study will provide the researcher with a greater appreciation and understanding of the true struggles first-generation, Hmong graduates experience. As a previous underemployed, first-generation, Hmong graduate, the journey to work toward a career worth having was one filled with struggles. However, when the underemployment was finally resolved, the researcher had many questions as to why it even occurred, and that if he experienced it, many others may have shared the same phenomenon. There was knowledge to

share and stories to tell. Therefore, this study takes an initial step toward decreasing underemployment among first-generation, Hmong graduates.

Conceptual Framework

This study focused on understanding the phenomenon of underemployment amongst first-generation, Hmong graduates using a comprehensive inductive and deductive approach to understand the data. As such, the researcher implored a generic qualitative research method because more focused qualitative approaches, such as ethnography, case study, grounded theory, and phenomenology, are methodologically inflexible (Percy et al., 2015). The research methods are further explained in Chapter 3.

Three concepts emerged from the literature review that provided the framework in guiding the researcher to understand the experiences of underemployed, first-generation, Hmong graduates, which include: (1) FGS and its effect on the individual; (2) relative deprivation and its relationship in how graduates compare themselves to successful others or future hopes and expectations; and (3) social capital and its relationship with social and cultural capital for Hmong graduates. The conceptual framework is illustrated in Figure 1. The literature streams expressed within the framework are elaborated upon in Chapter 2.

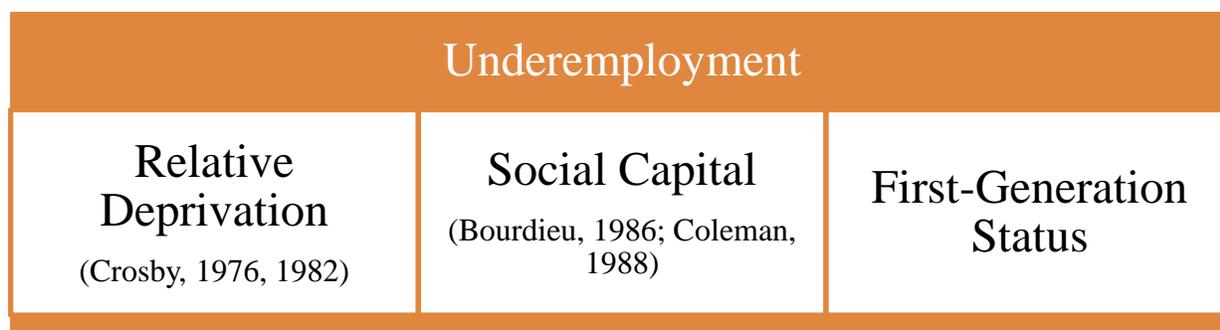


Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

Definition of Terms

Adequate employment: Having a job that meets at least one of the following characteristics: (1) equivalent education required by the job; (2) skills or experience applicable to job; (3) employed in field of area of education; (4) full-time or equivalent level of work; or (5) competitive pay commensurate with surrounding major competitors with talent, holding similar educational backgrounds (Maynard et al., 2006; Nunley et al., 2017).

Asian-American: “A person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018, para. 5)

College: In the context of this study, college refers to any public or private, 4-year, higher education institution in the U.S. (NCES, 2017).

First-generation graduate: First-time enrolled, college graduate with neither parent having obtained any form of post-secondary education or degree (NCES, 2017).

Underemployed: In the context of this study, underemployed means the individual meets at least two of these criteria: “(a) more education than required by the job; (b) more skills or experience than required by the job; (c) involuntary employment in a field outside of area of education; (d) involuntary employment in part time, temporary, or intermittent work; (e) low pay, relative to either a previous job or to others with similar educational backgrounds” (Maynard et al., 2006, p. 511), or (f) has a college degree and working a lower paying job than the national average hourly rate of \$18.58 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019a).

Summary

This chapter began by introducing the benefits of having a college degree and the high number of graduates that higher education institutions are producing, where half will be underemployed. This phenomenon is particularly harmful to underemployed, first-generation, Hmong graduates, a sub-group of the Asian Americans living in the U.S., having fallen victim to the model minority stereotype. The model minority stereotype posits that all individuals of Asian descent are successful, both academically and economically. As such, their experiences and struggles often go unacknowledged because aggregated statistics show them as a thriving group.

One consequence of the aggregated data is the limited research about underemployed, first-generation, Hmong graduates. Thus, the researcher stresses the significance of why there needs to be more research regarding this phenomenon, as the Hmong are actually one of the lowest-achieving populations in the U.S., both academically and economically. Three research questions were posed that guided the study of this phenomenon. The outcome may lead to the betterment of academic support programs, education of staff and faculty at college campuses, further research, and personal growth of the researcher.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Many college graduates accepted jobs unparalleled to their education and skills (Nunley et al., 2017). The amount of recent underemployed college graduates has also remained stagnant between approximately 41% and 44% (Federal Reserve Bank of New York, 2020). According to Abel and Deitz (2016), 45% of Americans are underemployed, with recent college graduates making up a fifth of that population. That statistic translates to millions of underemployed college graduates working in occupations that do not require a college degree, working part-time involuntarily, working a low paying position, or having more skills or formal education than required. First-generation Hmong graduates are no exception to the underemployment problem, but a lack in literature regarding underemployment amongst first-generation, Hmong graduates has masked the phenomenon.

According to Scott (2014), key requirements that employers desire in filling high-end jobs include subject-matter expertise, research/technical skills, analytical thinking/problem solving, maturity, ideation, innovative assistance, leadership potential, and change adaptation. Thus, it is inferable that pre-college, peri-college, and post-college social, cultural, and economic situations influence the experiences of underemployed, first-generation, Hmong graduates. It is during this time-period that underemployed graduates should develop the necessary soft and hard skills and theoretical and practical knowledge, and use existing academic support programs, to assist in their professional development to ensure the best possibility of attaining adequate employment after graduation. The lack of necessary skills and knowledge result from relative deprivation, social capital, and FGS.

This study explored underemployed, first-generation, Hmong graduates to garner more understanding about their experiences. This chapter lays the foundation for the study by focusing on previous research related to the phenomenon. First, the chapter begins with the researcher explaining underemployment and its negative impacts. Second, the connection between underemployed, first-generation, Hmong graduates and relative deprivation and social capital literature streams that established the conceptual framework for this study is discussed. Third, the general characteristics of first-generation, college graduates are presented. Fourth, the chapter concludes by the drawing of the connection between general first-generation, college research and first-generation, Hmong graduates in the literature.

Conceptual Framework

The purpose of this qualitative study was to capture the experiences of underemployed, first-generation, Hmong college graduates and the factors affecting their underemployment using a combination between an inductive and deductive approach. The conceptual framework evolved from the literature related to social capital theory (SCT), relative deprivation theory (RDT), and first-generation status (FGS). Figure 2 graphically illustrates how the streams emerged to inform this study.

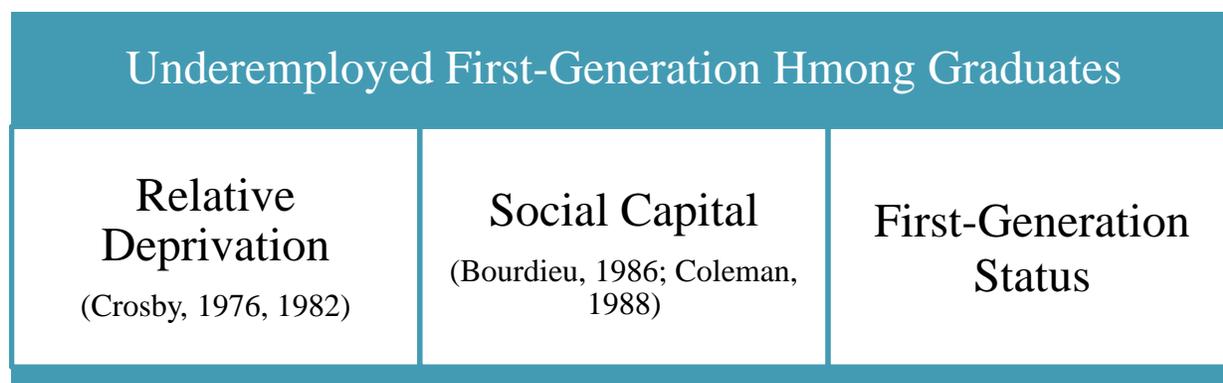


Figure 2. Conceptual framework model.

Literature Gap

There is no literature specifically documenting the underemployment of first-generation, Hmong graduates. Most scholarly literature regarding Hmong Americans and Hmong college graduates focuses on psychological needs, poverty, socioeconomic status, or academic struggles (Moua, 2018). The limited literature may be a result of only 4.1% (n = 5,495) of total Hmong Americans actually holding a graduate or professional degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Compared to Hispanics (n = 62,900) and African Americans (n = 88,800), two of the most recognized marginalized groups in academia, Hmong are still 11 times behind Hispanics and 16 times behind African Americans in terms of postsecondary degree attainment (NCES, 2019b). The lack of Hmong academic scholars possibly limits the opportunity to publish literature related to Hmong underemployment. Hmong Americans in graduate school have slowly begun to increase (Moua, 2018), but there needs to be more Hmong scholars publishing new research before a dent can be made in the existing literature gap. “Even with the *Hmong Studies Journal*, only a few articles have focused on Hmong Americans in college” (Moua, 2018, p. 5). Therefore, this dissertation is the first of its kind to bridge the literature gap between underemployment and first-generation, Hmong graduates.

The Underemployment Phenomenon

Underemployment is a global phenomenon. The International Labour Organization (ILO) held conferences and meetings to develop a method to measure underemployment. Initially, the ILO created the Labor Utilization Framework (LUF) (Hauser, 1974). The LUF conceptualized the overall workforce into either those with labor used adequately or those with labor used inadequately. It categorized inadequate work to anyone experiencing labor underutilization as either: unemployed, part-time employed, low wage employed, and over-

skilled or over-educated employed (Slack & Jensen, 2003). Unfortunately, while the LUF shed light upon different levels of inadequate work, the fourth categorization regarding over-skilled/over-educated was not as clear as the first three.

Therefore, to have a clearer definition of underemployment, the ILO continued meeting until it adopted a new guideline. During the 16th International Conference of Labour Statisticians, the ILO stipulated that any worker is underemployed in at least one of three ways: involuntary part-time work, low-income work, and job mismatch (ILO, 2013). As the ILO adopted the new underemployment framework, it sparked the creation of new theories that conceptualized underemployment the scholarly world.

Underemployment is an increasing problem amongst recent graduates. According to the NCES (2018), over four million bachelor's degrees were awarded between 2015 and 2017. This resulted in increased attention toward the job markets' ability to provide adequate employment opportunities for recent graduates (Scurry & Blenkinsopp, 2011). Some recent studies have shown the job market appearing grim for new graduates. For example, an analysis by Abel et al. (2014) concluded that recent graduates "entering the labor market since the 2001 recession face[d] more challenges in finding a good job" (p. 7). Another empirical study revealed there was an *overinvestment* problem within the higher education system, as the supply of jobs requiring a bachelor's degree was growing more slowly than the supply of college graduates (Vedder et al., 2013). Underemployment affects individuals across a variety of professions including youth, older workers, women, ethnic minorities, and immigrants (De Jong & Madamba, 2001; Prause & Dooley, 2001, 2011; Slack & Jensen, 2002; Weststar, 2011). In some instances, underemployment overshadowed unemployment.

Nunley et al. (2017) conducted an experiment measuring job prospects in nine major cities: Atlanta, Baltimore, Boston, Dallas, Los Angeles, Minneapolis/St. Paul, and Portland, utilizing 9,396 fictitious resumes for job applications. The researchers found that “applicants who were unemployed for 3 months are 1.2 percentage points more likely to receive a callback than applicants who were employed and applicants unemployed 12 months or more received fewer callbacks than those who were employed” (Nunley et al., 2017, p. 655). However, there was no statistical significance found between the unemployed and employed. This means that the number of callbacks received were no different among employed and unemployed applicants.

In contrast, the researchers found statistical significance between underemployed applicants and callbacks. Applicants who were underemployed received fewer calls for interviews. Being underemployed hurts individuals’ job prospects. The researchers contended that underemployment does more harm to future employment prospects because prospective employers felt those applicants were lower-quality prospective employees due to the inability to obtain adequate employment even after a few years of graduating with a bachelor’s degree (Nunley et al., 2017). Maynard et al. (2006) also found there were many negative outcomes affiliated with underemployment, such as lower job satisfaction, higher turnover, and a poor work attitude. These findings regarding underemployment appear to be the fate of many recent graduates.

According to Li et al. (2015), underemployment and over education are of major concern in the U.S. with research revealing that approximately 48% of the labor force is overeducated for their positions. There are also arguments that a college degree has lost its value due to rising tuition costs and the heavy student debt burden (Davidson, 2017). High student debt forces job seekers to take any job and they suffer wage penalties taking on employment in an unrelated

field (Vedder et al., 2013). With an exception for those who studied business or a business-related field (e.g., accounting, logistics, international business) where the wage penalty was smaller, all other fields did not experience a wage premium (Li et al., 2015). Underemployed individuals believe that higher education increases career opportunities, but experienced a harder time gaining employment opportunities commensurate with their knowledge and skill set (Nunley et al., 2017). The return on investment graduates made were minimal and caused job dissatisfaction. Thus, underemployment has a negative relationship to job satisfaction (McKee-Ryan & Harvey, 2011). For graduates working unsatisfactory positions, their jobs are viewed as a means to an end—a stepping-stone for future career opportunities. As many underemployed workers believe they will transition to better positions, their motivation to excel in their current roles diminished. Instead, underemployed individuals do not excel at their jobs, have a low commitment to their work, are unlikely to be involved, and have low motivation.

Underemployment also leads to lower levels of life satisfaction overall (Maynard et al., 2006).

Underemployed individuals also experienced learned helplessness, leading to lower self-esteem, increased depression, and a feeling of having no control over one's personal life (Feldman & Turnley, 1995; Virick & McKee-Ryan, 2017). Many individuals are frustrated with their underemployment, leading to negative job attitudes (McKee-Ryan & Harvey, 2011) since they felt constrained by their disliked positions. This potentially translates to underemployment being a strong factor in influencing the attitudes of underemployed graduates, since most expect to graduate and find optimal and rewarding employment afterward graduation (Bui, 2002; Feldman 1996). Feeling like failures, graduates felt discouraged and unobligated to perform at high levels.

Relative Deprivation and the Underemployed, First-Generation, Hmong Graduate Connection

Relative deprivation theory (RDT) (Crosby 1976, 1982) explains the comparison when individuals want a certain outcome and feel they deserve the outcome but do not receive the outcome or see others receiving the outcome. In relative deprivation, individuals' expectations about their desired possession or deserved outcome come about when they compare their situations to others. The comparison is made between themselves and others, such as friends, family, neighbors, or someone holding a specific status (e.g., wealthy doctor, female college professor). As such, relative deprivation theory focuses specifically on the concept of comparison to an aspect of the past, present, or future.

RDT presumes that individuals compare their current work situation with their desired or preferred employment based on some standard of comparison, normally that of peer comparison (Luksyte & Spitzmueller, 2011). RDT provides a deeper understanding between underemployment and its negative psychological outcomes on individuals. It also helps to explain job satisfaction, voluntary turnover, and income and pay satisfaction (Erodogan & Bauer, 2009; Fine & Nevo, 2008; Sweeney et al., 1990). Empirical evidence appears to support the underlying assumption that negative outcomes associated with judgments vary with an individual's subjective assessment of their work status (Bernstein & Crosby, 1979). RDT provides a working framework for understanding the discontent of the underemployed workforce because comparisons lead to resentment if individuals perceive themselves as not being in a situation they deserve. This resentment is a result of relative deprivation.

When someone experiences relative deprivation, they have a feeling of resentment resulting from wanting something and feeling entitled or deserving of a desired outcome

(Crosby, 1976). In the sense of underemployment, a worker may feel they deserve a job that pays better with better hours and health benefits because they graduated from college for that expected outcome. Individuals experience relative deprivation under three conditions: 1) the individual makes a personal comparison; 2) a stressor deemed by the individual to put them at a disadvantage is present; and 3) there is an unfair disadvantage deemed by the individual leading to resentment (Smith et al., 2012).

Resentment is the most common attribute of relative deprivation (Crosby, 1982), however, the resentment experienced is subject to one's personal circumstances. Each circumstance then leads to a self-perceived discrepancy. Thus regardless of the phenomenon of comparison, the discrepancy results in the experience of relative deprivation (Crosby, 1976, 1982). Many underemployed, first-generation, Hmong graduates experience relative deprivation resentment. They are experiencing a challenge regarding higher education—saturation. As Vedder et al. (2013) stated that, “the value of a bachelor's degree declines as a larger proportion of the population achieves it” (p. 8). The decreased value of the college degree makes it so that graduates are expected to have adequate soft and practical skills favored by employers (Finch et al., 2013), yet employers have made it clear that many graduates lack adequate knowledge and skills, such as teamwork and communication, to be attractive job candidates (Grant, 2016; Wagner & Dintersmith, 2015). Therefore, a college degree appears to be only as valuable as the graduate's ability to supplement it with the desired qualities a prospective employer seeks. Unfortunately, since first-generation, Hmong graduates are less likely to take advantage of academic resources, while having limited knowledge about how to navigate college, developing the necessary skills to supplement their college degree is just another challenge in the long list of challenges they face (Vang, 2015; Xiong & Lee, 2011). First-generation, Hmong graduates are

leaving college without the proper skills to be competitive in the workforce, and consequently, are accepting underemployment positions making them resentful.

Additionally, underemployment for many first-generation, Hmong graduates are a forced consequence. College tuition in the U.S. continues to rise, making it ever more expensive to attend (Davidson, 2017). The federal government mandates that graduates start repaying their loans within six months from graduation. Combine rising tuition, mandatory repayment within six months, and first-generation graduates being more likely to take out larger loans while in school, and it is no wonder first-generation, Hmong graduates have to accept inadequate employment positions (Furquim et al., 2017; Vedder et al., 2013). Like many other students experiencing the massive college loan debt, first-generation, Hmong graduates are accepting lower paying positions than they are prepared for academically, in an effort to repay their student loans (Davidson, 2017; Vedder et al., 2013). As a result, underemployed, first-generation, Hmong graduates may experience deprivation and resentment as they question the value of their college degree (Henry, 2015), and what they could have done differently to avoid underemployment.

Social Capital and the Underemployed, First-Generation, Hmong Graduation Connection

Bourdieu's (1986) conceptualization of social capital recognizes that capital not only exists as an economic means, but also a social entity related to relationships and connections. He framed social capital as accrued resources acquired by individuals or groups through mutual acquaintance or recognition (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). As such, his work emphasized the political, economic, social, and cultural factors that limit a person's ability to make a decision. For Bourdieu (1986), social capital is a tool used by the elite to vet those they do not deem acceptable.

Coleman (1988) defined social capital as having three forms: (1) obligations and expectations, the common idiom of “you scratch my back, I scratch yours;” (2) information channels, where one depends on gathered information before acting; and (3) social norms. However, where Bourdieu (1986) focused social capital on power and status, Coleman viewed social capital as a tool where the actions of one person benefits the whole. As stated by Coleman (1988), “social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible” (p. 98). His emphasis that social capital is a collective phenomenon, residing in the relationships of those around the individual rather than the individual only, is an important aspect of a person being able to find success in their environment.

Thus, social capital is critical to individual success (Settle, 2005). Social capital produces benefits or outcomes for individuals generated through structural sources (Burt, 1992). A person or group form an important asset through networks contributing to optimal levels of personal achievement (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). Social capital also has three components: structural, relational, and cognitive (Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998; Wellman, 1988). According to the interpretations of Abbasi et al. (2014):

the structural dimension involves social interaction the individual uses to gain access, information, or resources. The relational dimension encompasses aspects that arise from the interactions (including trust and loyalty). The cognitive dimension includes attributes such as shared norms, codes of action, and convergence of views. (p. 2)

Social capital has a strong emphasis on establishing relationships to benefit the growth of the individual (Coleman, 1988), and with the lack of social capital well documented amongst first-generation students; it is no wonder underemployment is a phenomenon experienced by many first-generation, Hmong graduates.

The lack of social capital among first-generation, Hmong graduates possibly played an integral role in their underemployment. This is because the relationships with other people and the resources from those networks make social capital important in academic and career success (Lin, 2001). Similar to other first-generation graduates, first-generation, Hmong graduates do not have parents to provide them with knowledge and wisdom about excelling in college (Vang, 2004-2005). Therefore, many first-generation, Hmong graduates end up having to figure out how to excel in college alone, hoping that their choices will lead to a promising career.

Unfortunately, many first-generation, Hmong graduates deciding to go at it alone does more harm than good. A study by Iannarelli (2014) revealed that while in college, 70% of Hmong students surveyed did not use academic-support or peer-support programs, citing not having time and not knowing these support programs existed as the primary reasons. Thus, the inability to learn how to effectively navigate and maximize academic resources may have effected their ability to develop important networking relationships and develop the soft and practical skills employers seek. Networking is one of the most important tools in attaining adequate employment as it allows individuals to have more access to job opportunities, increased job offers with higher wages, and careers with minimum turnover (Arbex et al., 2018).

Unfortunately for underemployed, first-generation, Hmong graduates, they will have to continue learning how to build networks with the hope of someday improving their career prospects (Tate et al., 2015). The lack of social capital among first-generation, Hmong graduates, therefore, provides a lens to better comprehend their underemployment phenomenon.

The Non-Hmong, First-Generation Graduate and First-Generation, Hmong Graduate Connection

Before they became underemployed, first-generation graduates were students. Like many prospective students, they pursued higher education with the belief of having adequate work after graduation (Pascarella et al., 2004). Colleges in America averaged 1.6 million new first year enrollments annually from 2015 to 2017, with a total estimate of 13.3 million students enrolled in 4-year, non-profit institutions (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2017). Approximately, 40.1% of undergraduates are first-generation, more likely to be a minority and came from lower socioeconomic households, with only a 20% college graduation rate on average (Bui, 2002; NCES, 2017; NCES, 2019b; Pike & Kuh, 2005). Their families are also less likely to be able to provide guidance for them due to a lack of knowledge about higher education (Bui, 2002). Although some first-generation students manage to graduate, they have less monetary resources to cover college expenses, are less prepared academically, and have less knowledge about fully taking advantage of college resources available to them (Gibbons, 2016).

As college tuition continued to increase, first-generation graduates are at a comparative disadvantage to learn about the financial resources available to fund their education. According to Feeney and Heroff (2013), previous first-generation and low-income graduates are less likely to complete their Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) application, even though they were the group with the most financial need. With this gap in financial aid application completion, they often missed precious grants that could have supplemented their educational expenses (Hodara, 2017). Many low-income households view the FAFSA application as being

more complex and confusing than filing a tax return. This discourages low-income parents from applying even though they would have had an expected family contribution of zero dollars (Davidson, 2017).

Additionally, the transition into college is often a stressful event for many first-generation graduates (Barry et al., 2009). Since many first-generation graduates need a social group to share their experiences, the inability to establish such a network while in college leads to many feeling overwhelmed, socially isolated, and frustrated (Choy, 2002). Unfortunately, for many first-generation graduates, colleges do very little to alleviate these feelings because students are expected to seek answers on their own (Choy, 2002; Stephens et al., 2012). First-generation graduates also spend less time on campus to develop relationships and network—an important part of developing social capital. First-generation graduates have lower educational aspirations than that of their second-generation peers (Barry et al., 2009). As such, they are less involved on campus. First-generation graduates perceive college as an unsupportive environment (Terenzini et al., 1996). Such perceptions hinder their ability to foster important and beneficial relationships since research has shown that those who are on campus and are more socially involved, show greater gains in academic learning (Davidson, 2017). For many of graduates, it is the result of a cultural mismatch.

Many of first-generation graduates earn their way to college by having emotional support from their families. However, once they arrive, they lose this support system. Their newfound independence becomes a burden because they are used to an interdependent support system (Stephens et al., 2012). Since, many universities reflect middle- and upper-class cultural norms, this new norm does not settle well with first-generation, college students since many were raised in working class, interdependent norms (Stephens et al., 2012). This mismatch leads to a

difficult college transition, and many colleges are unable to deal with the challenges first-generation graduates bring with them. Therefore, throughout their college career, first-generation students operate at a complete disadvantage and are left unprepared for the job market upon graduation.

Graduates lack the competitive advantage a degree is supposed to bring, as most struggle to find a well-paying meaningful position (Wagner & Dintersmith, 2015). Instead, many face a dim reality consisting of a small market matching their education and limited skills (Vedder et al., 2013). To make matters worse, many first-generation graduates borrowed more loans than needed while in college (Feeney & Heroff, 2013). Since many first-generation graduates do not have families or peers familiar with college financial planning, many of them accepted debt without proper guidance or knowledge (Furquim et al., 2017). Since all government loans require graduates to begin repaying their loans after no more than six months from graduation, many took on any job they could as a means to repay their loans (Davidson, 2017). Already in a saturated work force, with high underemployment at 43% among recent graduates, first-generation graduates have to overcome overwhelming odds to land an adequate position that matches their education and skills (Federal Reserve Bank of New York, 2020; Vedder et al., 2013). Like their first-generation peers, first-generation, Hmong graduates also endure underemployment. However, for many of them, their stories and struggles go untold.

Similar to their non-Hmong, first-generation peers, first-generation, Hmong graduates endure similar challenges that make the balance between school and home often difficult. Some key differences exist in the specific cultural challenges that first-generation, Hmong graduates experience. For example, in a study conducted at California State University, Sacramento, a college serving one of the highest populations of Hmong students, it was found that over 51% of

students cited cultural obligations as a main interference in their ability to have a successful academic experience (Vang, 2015). Particularly, the cultural expectations that parents have on their children to attend school, complete their academic work, and completing home chores make the school to home balance a consistent daily struggle. As one female Hmong student stated in Vang's (2015) study:

Being a daughter is pretty difficult. It's a lot of balance between what you want and what your family and your culture want. And I think that's just something that in order to achieve both, you kind of need to show to them that it's possible to do both. Go to school, do your homework, do your community outreach work, and then come home and being able to cook, clean, all the necessary stuff that needs to be done at home. Like what they expect from me as a Hmong daughter. (p. 23)

With cultural obligations set upon these students, there is less time dedicated to building the practical skills and knowledge critical to future job prospecting. The school to home balance is often a major challenge for first-generation, Hmong graduates and is different than for non-Hmong, first-generation graduates. First-generation Hmong graduates often have conflicts due to intergenerational differences in acculturation between themselves and their parents (Su et al., 2005; Ying & Han, 2008). A contributing factor is that many graduates live in homes headed by refugee parents suffering from trauma that affects their parenting style (Ying & Han, 2008). The intercultural conflict between parents retaining their traditional values and their children assimilating American values adds increased stress that makes it harder to succeed.

Hmong graduates "receive limited support from their parents to excel in higher education" (Xiong & Lee, 2011). The support that graduates receive from their Hmong parents are limited to encouragement, childcare, emotional support, and spiritual support (Lor, 2008). Any type of information related to succeeding in college or finding adequate employment afterwards, the graduate must figure out on their own. The Hmong population in general has a low number who are highly educated (Xiong, 2012; Xiong & Lee, 2011). In the U.S., only

2.6%, or 5,704, Hmong have a master's degree or higher (Xiong, 2012). This limits who first-generation graduates could approach to learn how to manage their intergenerational conflicts at home, their academic challenges, and their underemployment.

Summary

Chapter 2 reviewed relevant literature about underemployment; presents the conceptual framework of this study; describes first-generation college students experiences pre-, peri-, and post-graduation; and the connection between first-generation, Hmong students and their non-Hmong peers. The literature review sets the stage for analysis of the phenomenon under study as gathered in interviews of study participants. It also provides a foundation of knowledge regarding the phenomenon, while demonstrating the gap in literature relating to underemployment of first-generation Hmong graduates. The literature review provides a premise for the context of this study that the research builds upon, later presented in Chapter 4, to build an understanding of the connections leading to the emerging themes developed through the data analysis, the process of which is described in Chapter 3.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

There remains a disconnection between universities providing the resources and support first-generation college students need and preparation for entry-level work as graduates exit college. Although the challenges that first-generation students experience while in college are well represented in the literature, there is minimal research demonstrating the experiences of first-generation, Hmong students as they make their way into the workforce. The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to learn more about the experiences of first-generation, Hmong graduates and their perceptions regarding their struggle to find adequate employment after graduation. The research questions guiding this study are:

1. How do underemployed, first-generation, Hmong college graduates describe their experience finding adequate employment after graduating?
2. How do underemployed, first-generation, Hmong college graduates perceive the relationship between their personal upbringing and their education that effected their underemployment?
3. How do underemployed, first-generation, Hmong college graduates describe their challenges in regard to underemployment?

This chapter outlines the research method design and data collection and analysis procedures conducted in this study. The research approach, study population, geographical location of the study, structure used to gather data, rationale, and role of the researcher are detailed. Data analysis procedures are also explained. The chapter concludes with the measures taken to ensure trustworthiness and validity. and the ethical considerations of this study.

Qualitative Research Approach and Rationale

In a qualitative research study, a central phenomenon is the key concept that requires exploration to develop an understanding (Creswell, 2012). Qualitative research “does not forecast what will happen in the future; rather it is an analysis that provides a depth of understanding for those who are interested in the events of a particular setting and time” (Zeeck, 2012, p. 32). This qualitative study portrays the experiences of first-generation, Hmong graduates.

A generic qualitative research approach is a form of qualitative study, that is methodologically flexible to make meaning of the phenomenon, leading to emergent themes with investigation into a participants experiences, attitudes, or beliefs (Liu, 2016; Percy et al., 2015). The researcher makes it clear why he or she wants to study a particular phenomenon (Caelli et al., 2013). In this case, the researcher conducted this study due to his shared experiences as a former underemployed, first-generation, Hmong graduate. The researcher’s role was to gather and transcribe the rich experiences of the interviewees, which in return, allows for an understanding of their experiences to emerge. The researcher analyzes the perceptions and experiences of participant, in this case first-generation, underemployed, Hmong graduates, to develop common themes that are purposeful (Liu, 2016) and that may educate stakeholders about resources to better serve the population under study. Additionally, future studies could replicate this research to explore further the underemployment of first-generation, Hmong graduates, as there is a literature gap pertaining to this population.

Population Description

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2017), the Hmong population in Sacramento County, one of the biggest counties in Northern California, is well over 100,000. Thus, any

findings and research in this study may be used to make a potential difference in this geographical location. The target population for this study were first-generation, Hmong college graduates who work and identify themselves as being underemployed. In narrowing the scope of the participant pool, the researcher recruited participants who graduated with a bachelor's degree from a four-year institution after 2010.

All participants were purposefully selected through snowball sampling. Creswell (2012) described purposeful sampling as “intentionally select[ed] individuals and cites to learn or understand the phenomenon” (p. 206). The snowball sampling methodology is “a form of purposeful sampling that typically proceeds after a study begins and occurs when the researcher asks participants to recommend other individuals to be sampled” (Creswell, 2012, p. 209). Thus, after contacting a potential participant, the researcher encouraged them to provide contact information of other prospective candidates who met the study criteria. The criteria for selecting participants that he or she: (a) is of Hmong descent; (b) resides in Northern California; and (c) is a first-generation graduate from a four-year institution.

Geographic Location

This study include participants from select Northern California counties. Northern California in this context is logistically from the San Joaquin County borderline to the Butte County borderline. All participants are first-generation, Hmong graduates who finished their studies since 2010 within the designated region.

The researcher selected the Northern California region due to its proximity to the researcher and its large Hmong population. This allowed the researcher the capability to drive to and meet with prospective participants without the financial burden of farther travel and lodging. Along with a focus on face-to-face interviews to make the interview experience more personal,

the proximity allowed for easier accommodations in case of last minute changes that might have occurred.

There were no challenges in regard to accessing the participants because there were no restricted locations. All meetings with participants were held at designated off-site locations neutral to both the researcher and participants. The alma mater of the participants remains confidential.

Research Methods

The methods to garner the most effective data were composed of multiple tools and triangulation. According to Creswell (2012), “triangulation is corroborating evidence...in descriptions and themes...to ensure the study will be accurate because the information draws on multiple sources of information” (p. 259). The methods used included (a) one-on-one interviews; (b) field notes; (c) recordings; and (d) a researcher journal.

One-on-One Interviews

One-on-one interviews net the most useful information and allow the researcher and participants to ask questions and give comments beyond the initial scope of questions (Creswell, 2012). One-hour interviews were conducted with 4 graduates, although the initial target was 10. The interview questions were open-ended to give the participant the freedom to express and share their unique experience, while giving them the opportunity to ask follow up questions as well (see Appendix A).

Field Notes

Body language and non-verbal expressions by participants were recorded into the researcher’s field notes. For example, when a participant shared a story that stirred their

emotions, these important data were used to strengthen findings. After each interview, the researcher wrote a brief reflection of his thoughts about the interview.

Recordings

Recordings gave the researcher the flexibility to check any information that may have been missed during the interviews. Interviewees granted permission to have their interviews recorded. After each interview, the researcher transcribed the context of the conversation and analyzed it. The interview transcription was created using Rev.com and participants were given the opportunity to review their transcription before it was analyzed. This helps ensure accuracy to avoid any potential ethical violations. All recordings were password protected and stored on the researcher's personal desktop computer.

Researcher Journal

The researcher kept a research journal to provide him with the opportunity to reflect on the interview process and reduce the possibility of bias toward the interviewees. Journal documentation was used throughout the study. The journal also served as an audit trail.

Participant Recruitment and Selection

The target participants were located the Northern California region of the U.S. For the purpose of this study, the Northern California region borderlines were established from San Joaquin County to Butte County. Research participants were asked to meet three specific criteria: (1) be of Hmong descent; (2) be the first in their family to graduate from college; and (3) not have attained adequate employment within six months of graduating.

The participants were selected using snowball sampling, which is a type of purposeful sampling. Once an initial participant is identified, the researcher solicited prospective

participants via telephone and/or e-mail follow-up. The researcher contacted the prospective participant by introducing himself and referral source.

The initial participant selected was based on personal affiliation. The initial participant in the study was a college colleague of the researcher who was experiencing underemployment. After completing the initial interview with him, the researcher requested that he recommend additional people meeting the study criteria. Another three participants were thus identified. The invitation disclosed all necessary information to comply with ethical expectations along with consent forms and confidentiality protection (see Appendices B and C).

Data Collection

The data collection process took place through two academic semesters. One-on-one interviews were conducted at a time and location deemed convenient for the participants. Interviews were conducted within an hour timeframe, with some running slightly longer. Data from the interviews were recorded using an audio recorder and were transcribed professionally for analysis. After each interview, the researcher generated a reflection in a research journal and made notes of the process in an audit trail. Interviews, recordings, transcriptions, notes, and journals will be stored for three years in a password-protected file and then destroyed.

Data Analysis

As a first-generation college graduate himself, the researcher reflected on his own experiences that made this study purposeful for him. However, he acknowledges, there may be some bias. Understanding the potential damage bias can cause to a study, the goal was to set aside any pre-conceived presumptions in order to objectively analyze and understand the experiences of the participants. The researcher's biases included previously feeling upset about the higher education system's inability to provide targeted academic support programs to Hmong

students, growing up in a family filled with challenges to acculturate, having been previously underemployed as a recent graduate, and falling victim to the model minority stereotype. The researcher employed phenomenological strategy by Moustakas (1994) in which the researcher disregarded prejudgments and conducted the interviews with an unbiased, receptive presence. The Greek word, *epoché*, was used to describe this process of suspending judgment or bracketing one's personal experiences from those of participants. "In the *epoché*, the everyday understandings, judgments, and knowings are set aside, and the phenomena are revisited" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 33). By using *epoché*, the researcher sought to understand participants' experiences from their perspective. Thus, the following steps guided the strategy for data analysis:

1. The researcher thoroughly reviewed the transcribed interviews to identify and acquire a sense of the essence of the background and experiences of the participants.
2. Using the transcripts, the researcher noted and highlighted significant statements potentially emphasizing the phenomenon.
3. The researcher developed interpretive meanings of the significant statements.
4. The researcher analyzed the statements to gather common themes that emerged from the interviews using *in vivo* categorization, which would be most appropriate for this analysis. According to Creswell (2012), *in vivo* codes are "labels for categories (or themes) that are phrased in the exact words of participants to locate phrases mentioned by participants that capture the intent of a category" (p. 431).
5. The researcher thoroughly described the themes.
6. The researcher generated an explanation of the experience.
7. The researcher shared this explanation with the participants to verify the inferences of the phenomenon. If participants disagreed, the researcher reflected on the previous steps to address any misinterpretations.

Credibility and Dependability

Qualitative research uses a personal approach with the goal of understanding the phenomenon studied with limited attempt to manipulate the natural setting or context (Patton, 2002). To ensure validity and reliability of this study, the researcher employed triangulation, member-checking, and external reviews by a trusted and credentialed professional.

In employing triangulation to establish credibility and truth value, researchers use a multitude of sources, methods, and theories to provide evidence and highlight a reoccurring theme or perspective (Creswell, 2013). An analysis of each source of information determines the relationship of any arising themes or perspectives. Also, field notes, in vivo coding, and digital recording instruments assisted in increasing the understanding of the studied phenomenon.

Additionally, all participants received data and findings periodically throughout the study to establish accuracy of conversations and interpretations (Creswell, 2013). Participants receive their interview transcriptions immediately to identify potential errors or need for clarification. One last check for trustworthiness consisted of an external review. A reviewer proficient with the research methods reviewed findings to help identify any inaccuracies in the data analysis.

Ethical Considerations

As this was a general qualitative study seeking to understand the experiences of underemployed first-generation graduates, it was important to emphasize to the participants that their experiences are important in this study. Participants were advised that no confidential information would be shared in any way. As a precaution, participants were assigned an alias to protect their identity.

All participants were made to understand at the recruitment process and initial meeting process that their participation was voluntary and optional. The informed consent form stated

that participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any stage if they wished to do so without any type of penalty, and that all data, if any, would be destroyed immediately (see Appendix C).

The researcher made sure to let participants know that they were participating on the basis of informed consent. The researcher provided as much information as possible for complete transparency with the participants to ensure they were making an informed consensual decision.

Limitations

Geographically, focusing on first-generation, Hmong graduates from Northern California limits the collection of experiences of first-generation, Hmong graduates from other locations throughout the U.S. The experiences of first-generation, Hmong graduates may differ depending on the region studied as a result of extraneous variables not considered by the researcher.

Also, focusing on first-generation, Hmong graduates only may or may not resonate with the experiences of non-first-generation, Hmong graduates who are not considered in this study. There may also have been a reluctance from the participants to talk about their true struggles of underemployment in complete detail. Instead, some important experiences may have been kept from the researcher.

Additionally, the length of time this study was conducted, approximately 15 weeks, may have prevented other themes from emerging because of ongoing life events that participants might have experienced during the study. These situations, depending on their significance to the individual, might have effected their responses, such as receiving an adequate, full-time employment offer during the time period before the interview took place or getting a promotion at their current place of employment.

Finally, there is a limitation based on the researcher's personal experience as a previously underemployed, first-generation, Hmong graduate. Although this study aimed to capture the experiences of the interviewees, the themes that evolved were subject to the researcher's interpretation of the data. In essence, the themes may be reflective of naturalistic generalizations made by the researcher. Naturalistic generalizations are a product of personal experiences "that derive from the tacit knowledge of how things are, why they are, how people feel about them, and how these things are likely to be later with which the person is familiar" (Stake, 1978, p. 6). As such, this study may reflect perspectives experienced by the researcher versus a researcher with no experience with the phenomenon studied.

Summary

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to describe the experiences of underemployed, first-generation, Hmong graduates and allow research findings to emerge from the frequent and important themes (Thomas, 2006). The target population for this study were five recent Hmong graduates in the Northern California region since 2010, four participants consented to be interviewed. One-on-one interviews were the primary data collection method along with field notes, recordings, and a reflective research journal. The data analysis employed in vivo coding and triangulation was employed to help ensure credibility and dependability by having the interviewees review transcripts for correct transcription and interpretation. An expert reviewer also reviewed the analysis the researcher conducted. Finally, ethical considerations and limitations of the study were presented in this chapter.

The limitations of this study included the geographic locations of the researcher and participants, time, participant criteria, and the researcher's biases. Other underemployed, Hmong graduates may not share similar perspectives. However, the goal of this study was to inspire

future researchers to bring upon practical change within the Hmong community by starting with a better understanding of underemployment, among first-generation, Hmong graduates.

Generating new material to help fill the literature gap helps bridge the disconnection between the experiences of the participants and knowledge about their underemployment.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Introduction

As previously shared, no literature exists regarding the underemployment of first-generation, Hmong graduates. Being a first of its kind, the purpose of this study was to achieve a better understanding of underemployed, first-generation, Hmong graduates and their perceptions of the primary factors that impacted their underemployment. As such, the experiences and stories shared by the four participants provide important and insightful qualitative data of the phenomenon.

The conceptual framework through which the data were analyzed consisted of RDT, SCT, and FGS. With RDT, individual expectations about one's desired possessions or deserved outcomes come to be when they make comparisons of themselves to others (Crosby, 1976, 1982). SCT posits that social capital is an entity related to having relationships and connections that become a resource resulting from mutual acquaintance or recognition (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Finally, the researcher analyzed data for FGS characteristics, such as socio-economic status, lack of guidance due to lack of knowledge, and having fewer resources. In this chapter, the researcher provides an overview of the research participants, explains the coding process, and provides a thorough discussion of emergent themes.

First, this chapter provides an explanation of the participant selection process. Second, it provides a description of each participant interviewed. Third, it provides an explanation of how coding was conducted upon conclusion of the interviews and transcripts. Fourth, the emergent themes discovered from the interview and transcription analysis is shared. The four themes are: (1) application of a college education to real life work force; (2) social capital and generational

differences; (3) post-graduation experiences; and (4) the struggle and reality of being underemployed. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do underemployed, first-generation, Hmong college graduates describe their experience finding competitive entry-level work after graduating?
2. How do underemployed, first-generation, Hmong college graduates perceive the relationship between their personal upbringing and their education that effected their underemployment?
3. How do underemployed, first-generation, Hmong college graduates describe their challenges in regard to underemployment?

Participant Selection Process and Demographics

After the first interview with a self-identified underemployed, first-generation, Hmong graduate, the researcher employed snowball sampling to identify prospective participants to participate in this study. Unfortunately, although there were many leads in recruiting prospective participants, the data collection process proved difficult. Chapter 5 discusses the recruitment limitations further, but with snowball sampling being the primary method, it did allow for a diverse set of participants to be included in the study. Although the number of interviews did not reach the intended goal of five due to some unforeseen circumstances, of the four participants selected and interviewed, each one provided unique information and knowledge towards the under-researched topic of underemployment among first-generation Hmong graduates.

Participants were split evenly by gender; there were two males and two females interviewed. Of the four, one male and one female were in the first month of a probationary promotion period, however, all four still identified as being underemployed per the researcher's definition. All four participants earned their bachelor's degree at a university in Southern California. One moved away for college and the other three moved to Northern California after earning their degrees and finding jobs in the Sacramento area. The two males in the study also

earned a master’s degree in addition to their bachelor’s degree, with one attending a Southern California graduate school and the other attending a Northern California graduate school. Table 1 provides a general description of participant characteristics.

Table 1
Participant Overview

Alias	Age	Gender	Degree Earned	Academic Major	Year Graduated
Mai C	33	F	BA/Minor	Creative Writing/Gerontology	2011
Mai N	28	F	BA	Criminology	2014
Sam	31	M	BA/MA	Psychology/Applied Behavior Analysis	2013, 2019
Spike	28	M	BA/MS	Mechanical Engineering	2013, 2019

Coding and Analysis

Analysis of the interview transcripts began with coding. “Coding is the process of organizing the material into chunks or segments of text and assigning a word or phrase to the segment in order to develop a general sense of it” (Creswell, 2014, p. 247). Therefore, the researcher first began using first cycle coding methods. Since there are a wide variety of first cycle coding methods (Saldaña, 2009), the researcher chose in vivo coding and descriptive coding, while reviewing the transcripts and assigning codes. In vivo coding was chosen because it is applicable to all qualitative studies and uses the participants words to form the codes and categories (Creswell, 2013; Saldaña, 2009). In descriptive coding, the researcher “assigns labels to data to summarize in a word or short phrase—most often a noun—the basic topic of a passage

of qualitative data” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 74). After going through all the transcripts and coding the interviews, the researcher wrote the codes on a whiteboard for the next coding step, known as second cycle coding.

With second cycle coding, the goal “is to develop a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization from [the] array of First Cycle codes” (Saldaña, 2009, p. 149). In going through the codes written on the whiteboard, the researcher recognized 20 patterns. However, within those patterns, some appeared to be quite similar. Therefore, the researcher went through those 20 patterns and condensed them into eight groups on the whiteboard. Then the researcher collapsed some of those patterns further, and four prominent themes emerged.

The four themes are: (1) application of a college education to real life work force; (2) social capital and generational differences; (3) upbringing influencing underemployment; and (4) the reality of being underemployed. With the themes identified, the researcher went through each one and developed several categories within each theme. The context of the interviews helped create the categories to support the rich depictions of the themes. In essence, the themes, partnered with the categories, allowed for the construction of an outline to describe the words, actions, experiences, and thoughts of the participants. The themes and categories are addressed in greater depth in the next section.

Discussion of Themes

Four themes emerged after interview transcription analysis. The first theme that emerged is the practical disconnection between college and workforce application. The second theme is social capital inequality. The third theme reflected the upbringing and underemployment

connection. The final theme portrayed the reality of being underemployed as a first-generation, Hmong graduate.

The Practical Disconnection Between College and Workforce Application

The first theme revolved around the education participants received while in college and how they all felt it applied to their underemployment experience. While Sam and Spike emphasized a desire to have had a more practical curriculum while in college, Mai C and Mai N felt it was their individual choices while in college that played a role in their underemployment. However, the experiences shared by all the participants regarding a college education had one common characteristic, that how one chooses to apply themselves while in college is a strong predictor of employment readiness and employability after graduating.

Practical knowledge over theoretical knowledge. Each participant shared an experience where the theoretical material learned in a classroom failed to transfer to practical experience in the workforce. As such, this lack of application became a gap in their ability to attain adequate employment. Spike shared his experience regarding this gap: “I think it would’ve been great, just, you know, [if there was] more practicality...there were some courses that I took that was... I’m just kinda like, “What am I doing here?”...cause it was more theory based [than practical].” He also shared that although his university required students take classes outside of their majors to make students “become a more well-rounded person,” he feels he would have been better served if his university had required students take on courses more applicable to his major. In his case as a mechanical engineering major, he felt they should require a “programming course, that deals with C++ mainly because a lot of jobs [he]

found...highly desired that programming [knowledge].” Spike also shared a small excerpt of conversations with a professional emphasizing why he desired a more practical academic curriculum:

I spoke to professionals here and there. They say, “Oh, you know, that stuff? You probably won’t use it. Throw it in the computer and it spits it out.” You know? So yeah, you understand the theory behind [a concept], but practicality wise, you know, you couldn’t really use it. So far, I’ve had no use for any of the [theoretical] stuff.

Likewise, Sam, echoed a similar message for practical knowledge:

When it comes to like going to classes, you know, and like the material that you’re learning, um, I think that at some point, uh, maybe someone could have said something, you know, that maybe pertains more to the, to the real life. Because I think in college, like, based on my experience, I feel like a lot of professors would kind of push you towards what you wanted to be, you know, but at the same time, it’s like, what you want to be isn’t always what you’re going to get paid for. Like I was encouraged to chase after my dreams...[and] to go out and do something that [I] wanted to do, instead of something that [I] should be doing. It would better prepare [a person] for the real world...[if there was] some kind of, uh, you know, class or instruction of some sort that would kind of prepare you for the real world, instead of just academic instructions.

Whereas, Sam and Spike felt the universities had a greater responsibility in providing courses that emphasized practicality, Mai N and Mai C, shared a different response, leading to the next category in this theme: the effects of individual choices made in college.

The effects of individual choices made in college. Deviating from giving responsibility to their universities, the two female participants emphasized their own individual choices as having a greater influence on their underemployment than the schools they attended. Mai C shared:

Growing up the way I did, I thought that I knew what was best for me, but I don’t, at that time I didn’t think about the money. I just thought that if I just did what I loved to do, then it would get me somewhere. But I found out shortly after I graduated that doing what you love to do sometimes, or most of the time, doesn’t really get you anywhere. Because a lot of times, a lot of fields out there, you know, they need the experience; they need the [right] degree more than they need the love and the passion.

Mai C emphasized that individuals who enter college prioritizing earning prospects after college are more likely to reach those goals because “if they know exactly what they’re going to do and they think about the money, then...the college helps them get there.” In addition, she shared based on her experience that, “when you choose a field that, a lot of people don’t really [major in] and you think that that will make a difference, sometimes it, it doesn’t [as] there’s a reason [why] people don’t really choose that [major to study].” Echoing a similar thought, Mai N, deviated her underemployment to her own choice rather than the school as she stated:

College isn’t like high school where people are constantly reaching out to you. College is more a, “Hey, we’re here for you, but you’re the one that has to take advantage of the resources.” And I’ll say it’s my fault for not doing it, because I always felt like, “Uh, I knew what to do already.” I always thought it was very simple. “I’ll just go to school for this and once I graduate, I can just find a job, it’ll be a piece of cake.” I always thought, “Well why can’t you just go for this degree that you wanted to and just apply for it and get it?” I didn’t think that, “Oh man, it must be very competitive after graduating.” I was just like, “...I’m sure I’ll get a job like right after I graduate. It’s not as hard as people make it seem.”

Both Mai C and Mai N felt it was more their individual choices that effected their underemployment in college, whereas Sam and Spike, although not neglecting their individual choices, felt the universities could have created a curriculum that reflects the practical demands of what the workforce seeks.

Social Capital Inequalities

The second theme revolves around social capital and generational differences, as described by the participants, between first and second-generation college graduates. To reiterate, social capital is a collection of components individuals use to gain access to information, resources, and networks used to establish relationships that benefit the growth and success of the individual (Coleman, 1988; Settle, 2005; Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998; Wellman, 1988). The participants shared stories and experiences demonstrating their lack of social capital

compared to second-generation graduates who are more likely to have such relationships, knowledge, guidance, and connections to navigate through college and post-graduation. The participants did not specifically mention the words social capital, but the researcher analyzed and deemed the experiences portrayed social capital characteristics. The research participants demonstrated their disadvantages and hardships through their stories.

The lack of social capital as a first-generation college graduate. Each participant echoed experiences demonstrating a lack of social capital, resulting from being the first in their families to attend college. Although the participants did not specifically mention the lack of social capital, their experience reflects how a lack thereof clearly put each one at a disadvantage during college and after graduating as they entered the work force. As Spike shared:

It just goes back to, uh, not having enough information when your parents don't know English and you just can't, you just kinda get thrown into this world...all of a sudden you get thrown into this adult world that will kinda expect you to know at least a little. I mean, I went to school. People are talking about things that I don't know, I don't know what they're talking about. Some are talking about housing, you know. That's one, one example. [Somethings] we've never experienced before and like I said, the information just wasn't there and never got passed down to you...the information was very limited. But the biggest step is to know how to find a job first...and knowing how to work the system.

Spike shared an interesting point about having the proper information to work the system. Although the system in this context is not a physical entity, it represents an important aspect of social capital—networking. A recent study by Batistic and Tymon (2017), concluded that networking is an important aspect of social capital that improves employability outcomes for graduates. Mai N, shared how a lack of networking affected how she went about searching for jobs:

[I knew of networking, but] I didn't really have a very, clear understanding of, uh, what a network was...[even] when I was in college, I wasn't sure what networking was. I hear a lot of classmates talk about it. I hear it, I read about it in like papers, I hear about it from professors, and I didn't really understand it as much. I think the base was just as long as

you knew certain people in certain fields that [could] basically hook you up with the job that you want.

Mai C shared her challenges with social capital and how those who she depended upon to assist her may not have always provided the best advice:

See, for me, I...I think I didn't have a lot of people to help me. So I made a lot of decisions myself. A lot of the counselors that I went to, I told them my goal, so all they did was help me get to my goal. They didn't really ask me, "Is this what you really want? Is this, you know, this doesn't really make a lot of money." They don't tell you those stuff. They just tell you, "Okay, you want to do this? We'll get you there." And they didn't really spend much time talking about your goals. You know, they talk to you, they just want to make sure that you have all your class...and sometimes they, they're not always there...like the office is closed and [when] you have to make appointments, sometimes they don't come to your appointments. And then you're just really stuck doing it yourself. You know, you ask [professors, and] sometimes they help you, or sometimes they don't...So it's very hard to find the right resource.

Whereas Mai C desired more advice from her counselors and the right resources to help guide her decisions, Sam, wished that immediate family offered the advice for him as a first-generation student:

If I had, like, let's say an, older sibling who, you know, graduated and, you know, who found out what the real world was like and, you know, just someone to kind of guide me, towards where I, where I wanted to go. Um, I think that, that would definitely [have been different for me].

The lack of social capital was also reflected by participants explaining their experiences seeking employment post-graduation. When asked about what she knew about finding adequate employment, Mai C shared:

Honestly, I didn't know much. I just thought I knew. I went to college with this [perception] thinking that I knew what I was going to do, and then when I came out of college, it was something really unexpected than what I was hoping. What I thought I knew. When I went into college, I thought that if I went into these fields that I went into, I would come out as successful. But, coming out of college, I couldn't do much with my degree, so I wasn't successful as I thought I [would be].

Sam echoed:

I guess I didn't really know anything, other than maybe my degrees would, you know, make it easier for me to land a better paying job. But as far as, the interview process, you know...[and] applying, it was more of just, self-taught. I kind of just had to figure that out on my own. I never really got any assistance on how to do any of those things.

For Spike, his perception about getting adequate employment after college began while he was still in high school:

For me [it] goes back to when I was in high school where everyone always said, "Oh, you go to college. You're gonna get a good job." So, to me, I guess being a first-gen, you always have that thought where you're like, "Oh, it's more like a promise," I guess. [Finding employment after college], it wasn't even much of a thought. It was more of a promise, [even though] no one said it was a promise, but that's what I took it as. So, once I graduated, I assumed that it'd be easy to get a job, but, of course, I spent the whole first year being unemployed before I actually found [employment]. But even then, I feel like could [of been] doing more at that point. That was how I took it. [For me, I believed] it was pretty much guaranteed that whatever you study, you'll get a job in.

With Mai N, she shared that she knew "a few stuff" when asked about what she knew about finding employment. However, she did not dive deeper into those topics. Instead, she shared that she "started [looking for jobs]with [the] internet, going to job sites, making accounts, and [would] hopefully [find a job] that peaks [her] interest or that's related to [what she] studied."

Upbringing and the Underemployment Connection

As first-generation college graduates, the participants reflected on pieces of their personal upbringing and the effect it had on them towards their underemployment. The third theme brings light to these experiences.

The struggle to find a balance. Sam alluded to family obligations that affected his educational path. It was a constant struggle to balance between family expectations and prioritizing his personal education:

Growing up, my parents owned their own cleaning business and so they always made us go out to work with them...sometimes [with] no pay and, you know, it was just one of those family obligations. They started me off at a young age and I was probably like in

middle school or something...and I've pretty much been working ever since then...My parents prioritized the working over, like let's say my schoolwork.

With this struggle to balance his family obligation towards his family, a conflict between him and his family eventually arose:

For a lot of years my, my education suffered [and] I eventually got to a point where I was like, "You know what? This isn't going to happen anymore. I need to get my education on track," So I ended up having a real huge argument with my parents about whether I should be out there working with them or whether I should be focused on my education.

As he decided to dedicate himself more to his studies, once again, family expectations conflicted with his educational path:

When I started attending community college, there was this real big issue about what...I wanted to study versus what my dad wanted me to study. My dad wanted me to study...[and become a pharmacist]. [But] to me, I just never really felt like that was me. And during that time, I wasn't too familiar with psychology yet, but I took a few courses on it, I really liked it and so, uh, I ended up going, into that field instead. Um, you know, but, it, it was just a lot of, psychological and emotional struggle just having to go through, the whole issue of what my dad wanted me to study versus what I wanted to study. And this wasn't something that was just, one argument and then it was a done deal. It was something that went on for years and years and years of my dad just constantly bombarding me with, "Oh, well, you need to do this," or, "You need to do that. This is what you need to study."

However, even with a history of constant battles with his father about his educational career choices, he reflected that there may have been an underlying message in his father's words:

You know, I think, as I've gotten older and as I've been underemployed, I think I've really come to see, a little bit more of his side [about] why he wanted me to go into a certain field instead of going into the field that I wanted to. I kind of feel like it was a little bit of a reality check, but during that time was I was too young and, and stubborn to, to really put a lot of thought into that.

Echoing similar challenges revolving around a balance between family and education,

Spike added his struggles with trying to meet cultural expectations as a Hmong male:

Being Hmong, it's very tough. [I can't speak for the Hmong female experience] but, coming from a Hmong male, Hmong men have different roles in the Hmong culture. It's a very patriarchal society. So, from my experience, I feel like...we are required to know the [cultural] steps [and] processes. We are required to be an adult at an early age, that's

what I feel like. That when you go to school and you try to balance all that responsibility you know...it becomes really hard to balance it out. You know, you're away for college and [close relatives] call you and you have to respond. If you don't respond, in this case, sometimes you lose face, and it brings shame on not just you, but your parents and siblings. So that makes it a little bit tough. Let's say if you have cousins who are calling you out to go help them and you can't. [Generally, it should be okay], but later on down the road, they tend to bring it up [about how you didn't go help them]. And, again, with you being in college and trying to find a job, you know, you're already demoralized enough and then you come home just to be demoralized again [by them saying], "Oh, you're not helping out?" You know, "Everyone's here except for you. You're away from home." It's pretty painful.

Sam also shared how the inability for Hmong culture to assimilate into American culture becomes a roadblock because Hmong culture "feels stagnant:"

Things are gradually changing. It doesn't wait for you. You know, you get a job...and you're required to learn something new every day. [But when you try and] introduce new ideas [within the Hmong culture], they want things the old way. And so, it's really hard to grow [with that mentality].

Additionally, Sam shared experiences that demonstrated the Hmong culture's inability to promote individual advancement:

As far as the Hmong culture that I come from in my city, there was a lot of...drinking...you know, just hanging out and playing sports and stuff like that. There was not a lot of...guys who, who actually, you know, talked about real things, you know, like real questions. Such as like, "Hey, what are we going to do to, you know, to make a better living for ourselves?" Or, "What are we going to do to improve our lives?" It was more of just every time you met, it was just a lot of drinking, it was just a lot of messing around.

Sam and Spike, reflecting on the expectations between culture and family influencing underemployment, revealed how they can sometimes be an ongoing challenge to overcome.

However, it is not to say that culture and family are the only factors contributing to underemployment. For Mai C, underemployment resulted from limited work experience.

Limited work experience. Mai C alluded to the fact that her limited work experience in retail was an obstacle in attaining other career opportunities, even though her parents taught her to be a hard worker. She shared about this limitation:

Retail was the only experience I [had] throughout college. Even when I was still in college, I was still working in retail stores. And that's the saddest thing, is that you think that when you're out of college you're going to be out of retail stores, [but] the saddest part for me [was] even when I [was] out of college, I was still working retail. Then that's where it hits me very hard. That's when you realize that college, you know, that [it] didn't really help [me]...The experience that I [had], it just didn't cut it for me.

Despite Mai C's efforts as a hard worker, career advancement opportunities seemed halted by the fact that the majority of her work experience in retail was not transferrable to other job opportunities in her desired field. Thus, with the participants sharing personal life events contributing to their underemployment, being underemployed is a reality each one endures in their own way.

The Realities of Being Underemployed

The final theme resulting from the analysis focuses on the realities endured by each of the underemployed, first-generation, Hmong graduates. For the majority of them, there is evidence based on their transcripts about relative deprivation resulting from underemployment. To reiterate, individuals experience relative deprivation when there is a comparison between their situations and others. Failing to achieve the desired or expected outcome leads to resentment or negative feelings by the individuals (Luksyte & Spitzmueller, 2011). However, even with relative deprivation apparent, there were positive messages resulting from their struggles, as shared in these next categories.

Relative deprivation resulting from underemployment. Each participant felt negative emotions when discussing their underemployment. Mai C shared about feeling lost:

For a long time I felt an identity loss. I went to college, you know, with this identity that, I'm going to learn writing because I want to be a writer, I want to be an author. I'm going to be in gerontology because I want to go into the field and do something with the older population. Like a manager or something more. A director of assisted livings. But after I came out of college, my experience didn't put me there...even if I [applied] for a

position that was open, I still wouldn't be qualified for it. Because my experience still wouldn't be enough. So it made me feel very lost. It made me feel like I wasted my educational years.

She also shared challenging moments about comparisons to other, more successful individuals:

The hardest part is when you have your parents comparing you to others, telling you that other people only went to two years of school and they earn so much more than you. It makes you feel very bad about yourself. It makes you feel like you can't keep up with your parent's expectations, and you're at this age where you can't earn for yourself. I [felt] resentment because when people start comparing me like that, I feel like I made a wrong choice. And I don't like to feel like I made the wrong choice, but when people kept saying, [those things], I feel very bad because even after college and even to now, I'm still making...minimum wage only. And for my degree, it shouldn't be like that. So I always feel lost.

For Mai C, relative deprivation continued to persist in her state of feeling lost:

I still don't know what I want to do....You know? But I don't want... my parents to say, "Go into nursing. Go into, uh, law," I'm not. Because those are not for me. I'm not going to do that. But for them to keep saying, you know, people are making more than you, it's just, makes me feel like I wasted a lot of my time. I think that was my personal challenge.

Spike shared how underemployment affected his morale:

It's very demoralizing (sarcastic laugh). Because you graduate and, you think that you'll land your dream job. If not your dream job, something very similar. And that you would be making at least, you know, \$50-60K. But, when I came out, it took me a year to find a job and even when I did, it wasn't what I wanted. The pay [also] wasn't there. I mean, it was a great job, but those two were big factors.

Spike's resentment carried over to his applying for work as he realized the value of a degree was inflated and having to accept work because of expenses. He shared, "some of the requirements just listed high school diploma;" I was like, "Well, I worked so hard to get that degree, to get a good job, and I'm getting a job paying less than what I wanted.' And, with bills coming in, I just have to pick something and just go through with it."

Making matters worse for Spike was seeing others around him obtain adequate employment as he expressed:

I feel like I just couldn't get to the goal that I wanted to get right after I got out of college, you know. And then, of course, you see...people around you who are not, first-gen...landing jobs left and right. And, like I said, it's very demoralizing. It makes you kind of feel like you're, I guess, you're inferior to them. At that point, of course, it affects you mentally and then you just don't know what to do after that. You just kinda ponder a bit whether you should just give up your degree, wasted away...four years, and pick something else that you've never studied [for] or you've never did and just hope for the best. Or...stick with what you learned and try not to waste those four years and just keep on looking to see if there's something out there that you will like.

He also expressed frustration with his underemployment, that if he had more guidance starting in college, his career path may have been different:

...It was hard because it's...you see some people whose parents have gone to school who kinda knows the process at least a little bit. So, it's a bit easier to tell them, "Hey, this is how college works." You know, as for me...I jumped in blindly, you can say, not knowing as much as what I should know...Um, I just assumed that you pick a degree, you go in, and you just finish it...No one told me it was okay. You know, what I got...is just go to school, four years, finish. That was all I knew. It was just, they never said...the details. Never said what degree you should be going in or whatnot...I feel like my options were very limited. I didn't know what was out there, for example, going to school and then afterwards, I came out and I was like, "Hmm... Maybe I shoulda been a photography major because I like photographs?"...I wasn't aware of what I was actually doing besides ...[trying to make], like, middle-class money. You know, at this point, it's all about a career and start living your life.

Additionally, Sam echoed his disappointment resulting from being underemployed:

It affected me a lot. Raising a family of four as well, financially it hit me pretty hard and emotionally as well. I mean, I spent my whole entire career, you know, preparing for something that I wanted to do, only to find out that later on I'm going to have to switch gears. Just because, it's not something that I'm going to be able to make a living off of, in other words.

Mai N discussed how underemployment became stressful:

Being underemployed and not getting paid what you would want based on your degree, it can get very stressful. It can put a lot of burden on a person. It can make the person feel worthless, very little. It can make the person feel like they chose the wrong degree in life or feel like they shouldn't have followed their passion. And it can make a person feel like, you know, life's not going exactly how they want and feel depressed.

Mai N echoed symptoms of relative deprivation regarding her underemployment as it presented internal conflicts within herself. She shared:

There's the whole fact where, like my old high school and friends start having jobs, well-paying jobs, and I haven't found one yet. So there's that. It's a pressure from there. And then you get pressure from family, like you know, "How come you don't have a job yet?" "Go find a job. Just settle for this kind of job." And it's not the kind of job I want to do. Jobs that were suggested to me weren't what I want to do...I'll still apply for those jobs. But I still don't get it. You know, you get to a point where, "Fine, I'll just apply for this minimum wage job, and see if I still get it." And I didn't get it. And if I do get offered the job...I would turn it down, because, I just can't imagine myself working a minimum wage job. I went to school four years for this degree. So in the end, it, it's my conflict, it clashes with each other because I have one part of me saying, "Yeah, just go for this minimum job, wage job, and just find any kind of job for the time being" But then you have another job where it's like, "Why are you gonna settle for this job?" You know, "What are the chances of you actually finding a job that is worth your degree if you're getting this job?" Like. "what if you get comfortable in this job and you don't wanna go for another job anymore?"

Although the participants expressed the downfalls that came with being underemployed, there were brief glimpses of hope and optimism that came from underemployment for some of the participants.

Positive takeaways from underemployment. With the participants going through underemployment, some of the participants embraced their current positions. Their messages shared moments of optimism, content, and hope for a better future. Mai N, shared a lesson she learned after witnessing an individual tell her that "passion doesn't pay bills:"

What she says is true. But, if I can go back, I would tell her, "But, that doesn't mean that what you're doing now is a mistake. You can still, you can still go for this degree and get a job, that can still help you pay your bills. It might not be the job you [wanted]...[and the one you] thought you would get, but at the end of the day, it's still a job, right? [If your passion's helping people, why do you have to get a high-end job just to make you feel satisfied helping people?] It's just like this degree. I didn't get this degree because, I wanted to make a lot of money from it. I wanted this degree [because] I felt like this degree was the best way to do it for me." Even if I'm underemployed...I don't think of it [that way]...And you learn to appreciate [your job]...It teaches you how to appreciate other things in life that you actually have a job.

For Mai C, she offers wisdom as a result of having experienced underemployment:

It's okay to do something you love, but, choose something [on the side] that will also back up what you love, so that you can still do what you love, but have something that can back you up with money. Because in that case, you can still do something that you

love, make money out of it, and [not] feel so lost. You won't feel like you lost your identity. Sometimes when you lose your identity, it's very hard to get it back because so much is going to go through your mind.

Interpretation

This section of the chapter reviews the researcher's interpretation about how the themes link with the guiding research questions. To reiterate, the themes are the practical disconnection between college and workforce application, social capital inequality, the upbringing and underemployment connection, and the realities of being underemployed.

RQ 1. Underemployed First-Generation Hmong College Graduates and Adequate Employment

Theme 1. The practical disconnection between college and workforce application.

Many people believe college is an important step for career opportunities. However, for the four participants in this research study, their experiences showed otherwise. In particular, they demonstrated how an individual needs much more than just a college degree to be successful. Instead, colleges need a curriculum practical for future professions, useful majors with a strong record for having an adequate return on investment, and the ability to provide connections.

Unfortunately, not every student enters a college campus fully prepared and on equal footing. For these first-generation, Hmong graduates, they exhibited experiences demonstrative of feeling lost or on their own (Xiong & Lam, 2013). Therefore, knowing how to find adequate employment after college can prove difficult, considering these participants portrayed that they had to learn that on their own. The participants would most likely constantly be trying to catch up with someone who already knows what to study, how to study it, how to use that degree after graduating, and having the right people provide advice on navigating college and the process to obtain adequate employment.

Theme 2. Social capital inequality. Connections are an integral part of being successful in the professional world, and knowledge is indeed power. Connections and knowledge are components of social capital. Social capital is a strong advantage to have in a competitive workforce because it helps an individual find success and establish the relationships beneficial to individual growth (Coleman 1988). The first-generation, Hmong graduates in this study demonstrated how their lack of social capital affected their underemployment. As the first in their families to attend college, all of them had to figure out how to get through college by themselves with minimal guidance from their families. Xiong and Lee (2011) shared a similar finding about how Hmong graduates “received limited support from their parents to excel in higher education” (p. 2). All of the participants shared how being first-generation often results in having little information, being forced into situations they are unprepared for, and having to make decisions for themselves, by themselves. They all tried their best in their situations, but not having the relationships, connections, and guidance put them at a clear disadvantage. They did not know how to take advantage of all the available college resources, and the know how to land an adequate job.

RQ 2. Underemployed First-Generation Hmong College Graduates and the Relationship Between Their Personal Lives Affecting Underemployment

Theme 3. The upbringing and underemployment connection. First-generation Hmong graduates have intergenerational differences between themselves and their parents (Su et al., 2005; Ying & Han, 2008). All of the participants grew up in households headed by refugee parents. For their parents, coming to America was an escape from war and persecution, with the hopes of providing their children opportunities they themselves never had. Coming from refugee households, all of the participants shared experiences that showed that they worked hard and

believed in higher education. However, as important as it may be to work hard and to earn a college education, there is a twist. Working hard and earning a college degree, is usually more beneficial with the proper guidance. All of the participants missed that proper guidance growing up.

Additionally, having grown up in households with strong family and cultural obligations, the expectations created challenges for the participants to find a balance between home and education. Instead of the college experience being a nurturing environment for the participants, it exhibited as more of a stressful event (Barry et al., 2009). The struggle to find this balance led participants to stray away from campus, and preventing them developing relationships and networks that are important to individual development (Barry et al., 2009). With the exception of one participant, every one of the participants commuted to school and worked part-time jobs. Even the one participant that moved away for college still had to struggle with family obligations, as his family often wanted him home for family cultural events. Thus, the way a first-generation, Hmong graduate is raised influences their employment prospects post-graduation.

RQ 3. Challenges of Underemployed, First-Generation Hmong College Graduates

Theme 4. The realities of being underemployed. Underemployment is an invisible phenomenon in the Hmong community. Many first-generation, Hmong graduates are still underemployed, but very few share their experiences, and even more go unnoticed. For many first-generation, Hmong graduates, underemployment is a reality they deal with daily. Dealing with underemployment has challenges and real consequences that affect morale, self-identity, and family. The participants in this study exhibited feelings of those challenges, which are symptoms of relative deprivation.

As discussed by Mckee-Ryan and Harvey (2011), underemployment is frustrating and leads to negative attitudes. As a first-generation Hmong graduate, the feeling was probably worse, because each participant believed that a promising career or job was waiting for them once they had their college degrees. For some of the participants, that is what they were taught to believe at a young age, that if they attend college and graduate with a college degree, their lives would be better. In essence, the participant's lives are better. The fact that they graduated with a bachelor's degree already puts them in the upper 12% of Hmong's with a college degree (Vang, 2012; Yang, 2017). However, not being in the career position they believed they would be in, and not earning what they expected to earn, it is a harsh reality, but with a glimpse of hope.

Although underemployment is a negative phenomenon to experience, it does teach some positive valuable lessons to current and future first-generation, Hmong graduates. Those positives come in the forms of wisdom and appreciation. Even with the challenges the underemployed participants experienced, they still wanted to be a voice to help others, a voice to teach first-generation, Hmong graduates about how to choose their majors more rationally and to consider their employment prospects after graduating. In addition, they have an appreciation for having a job, even if it may not be their desired job. Their underemployment at least allows for basic needs to be met, bills to be paid, and an even stronger desire to work their way out of underemployment.

Summary

Chapter 4 explored the four themes that emerged from the researcher's analysis of the interview transcripts. The first theme that emerged was the practical disconnection between college and workforce application. The second theme discussed social capital inequality. The third theme reflected on the upbringing and underemployment connection. The fourth theme

portrayed the reality of being underemployed as a first-generation, Hmong graduate. Amongst these four themes, several categories materialized in support. The first theme's categories were practical knowledge over theoretical knowledge and the effects of individual choices made in college. Forming the second theme's categories were navigating college alone and networking. Contributing to the third theme's categories were the struggle to find a balance and limited work experience. Finally, the fourth theme's categories consisted of negativities resulting from underemployment and positive takeaways from underemployment. After elaborating on the themes and categories, the researcher discussed the themes connections in addressing the research questions. The findings, analysis, and interpretations of this chapter laid the foundation for Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the experiences of underemployed, first-generation, Hmong college graduates and their perceptions of the primary factors impacting their underemployment. With no research existing about the specific phenomenon studied by the researcher, the researcher analyzed relevant literature, partnered with fieldwork that included comprehensive interviews with the participants, field notes, and a researcher journal, to understand the participants' experiences. Through the listed activities, the researcher sought to understand the participants' experiences and stories regarding underemployment as first-generation, Hmong graduates.

The researcher employed a generic qualitative approach while conducting the field research and qualitative data analysis procedures. This research approach was methodologically flexible, and not bound by specific characteristics, as may be seen with other qualitative research methods (Liu, 2016). This allowed the researcher to conduct field research in such a way that participants were able to communicate their experiences about underemployment freely. This resulted in rich qualitative data collection from the participants, which led to four emergent themes: the practical disconnection between college and the workforce application; social capital inequality; the upbringing and underemployment connection; and the realities of being underemployed.

The conclusions of this study derive from the findings detailed in Chapter 4, with the research questions serving as a guide for the researcher. The experiences and stories of the participants in this study led to the answers for discussion of the research questions. Listed

below are the three research questions that guided this study.

1. How do underemployed, first-generation, Hmong college graduates describe their experience finding adequate employment after graduating?
2. How do underemployed, first-generation, Hmong college graduates perceive the relationship between their personal upbringing and their education that effected their underemployment?
3. How do underemployed, first-generation, Hmong college graduates describe their challenges in regard to underemployment?

The following discussions begin with the connection between the literature and themes.

Following the research answers, recommendations for practice and future research are offered.

The chapter concludes with a summary and final reflection from the researcher.

Summary of Major Themes

This study yielded four major themes: (1) the practical disconnection between college education application and the workforce; (2) social capital inequalities among first-generation, Hmong college graduates; (3) the upbringing and underemployment connection for first-generation Hmong college graduates; and (4) the realities of being underemployed as first-generation Hmong college graduates. The themes of this study built upon previous related literature and created new literature about the specific studied phenomenon.

Connection to the Literature

In this section, the connection of the themes to existing research literature is discussed. First, the practical disconnection that exists with first-generation, Hmong college graduates education and its application to the workforce is reviewed. Second, the social capital inequalities faced by first-generation, Hmong college graduates is explicated. Third, the researcher elaborates on the upbringing of first-generation, Hmong college graduates and its connection

with underemployment. Fourth, the realities of being an underemployed, first-generation, Hmong graduate is described.

Practical Disconnection Between College Education Application and the Workforce Among First-Generation, Hmong College Graduates

The first theme describes the disconnection between a college education and its real-life application to the workforce. Findings from the analysis of the participants' experiences reveal that their academic accomplishments in college do not translate over to post-graduation success. Instead, it was not until after graduating and being underemployed, that participants realized the importance of not only choosing a practical college major, but also having the necessary soft-skills and problem-solving skills to supplement the pursuit of adequate employment. This realization from the participants parallels Finch et al.'s (2013) finding that in order to increase new graduates' employability, colleges should focus on student learning outcomes linked to the development of the soft and practical skills that employers desire. Without such skills, learning to develop them after graduating is a more challenging task as expressed by the participants in this study, because there are obligations and demands to consider (i.e., loan repayments, family). With a limited skill base, the participants were limited in their prospective job markets.

Participants reported that finding adequate employment in the existing job market proved difficult because they did not meet the job requirements expected of prospective employers. Even with many entry-level positions, they still required specific experience related to the profession. As a result, participants expressed that although they had a college degree and a wealth of knowledge, their experiences and skills did not align with jobs in their fields of study. Their responses reflecting their limited experiences and skills align with claims by Vedder et al. (2013) who argued that the mismatch between education requirements for occupations and the

amount of education required for those jobs will only continue to grow over time. As a result, future college goers might contemplate whether to invest in a college degree, and whether it is a worthwhile investment. For the participants in this study, it was too late, as they could only contemplate how their expectations of what a college degree would bring did not turn out as expected.

Social Capital Inequalities Among First-Generation, Hmong College Graduates

The second theme in the study formed due to the reflection that the experiences of the participants in this study were demonstrative of lacking social capital. A consequence of lacking social capital is that of being uninformed. As such, the participants figuratively and explicitly expressed that they knew very little about obtaining adequate employment after graduation. Even the one participant that mentioned she knew “a few stuff,” only spoke about the concept of networking but did not participate in activities relative to networking while in college. The responses shared by the participants demonstrate characteristics commonly associated with being a first-generation college graduate, while lacking the social capital to be a well-informed job seeker.

The participants in this study realized after graduating that their employment opportunities were limited. Thus, understanding the underemployment phenomenon among first-generation, Hmong college graduates requires reflecting back on their college experience. For these participants, they experienced common struggles affiliated with first-time college goers, one of those struggles being the unsupportive environment that exists in some colleges. Participants shared that campus resources failed to provide the guidance needed to make better-informed decisions about their career path. This resulted in participants making misinformed

decisions for themselves. This finding aligns with Terenzini et al.'s (1996) research that first-generation college graduates perceive colleges as having an unsupportive environment.

Additionally, participants expressing their inability to utilize on-campus resources for their employment goals post-graduation demonstrates how first-generation, Hmong college graduates are less likely to take advantage of on-campus resources. Participants recalled that they knew about on campus resources, such as the career center, but never utilized the services that it offered. Participants also shared that when there were attempts to use on-campus resources, such as academic counseling, the counselors neglected in assist the participants in making informed decisions about their academics to guide their careers prospects after graduation. Iannerelli's (2014) study supported this finding about Hmong students being less likely to use on-campus academic or peer-support programs. Iannerelli's findings showed that the most common reasons for Hmong students to not participate in academic or peer-support programs resulted from not having time, lacking interest, being unaware of the programs, or that the programs did not meet their needs. Iannerelli's research support the findings of this study that participants did not take advantage of on-campus resources.

The participants in this study also expressed that their parents were unable to guide them in college. For all the participants, their parents were blue-collar workers with an education level no higher than high school. Thus, the participants acknowledged that their parents lacked the knowledge required to help them navigate the transition from college to the workforce. Their parents were also unlikely to know people who would have been able to provide that information. In essence, the participants' parents lacked the social capital necessary to guide them. Lin (2001) had parallel findings in his research. Lin posited that social capital inequalities occurred when groups cluster within disadvantaged socioeconomic positions and that those

individuals associated more with those from comparable groups and similar to them socioeconomically. Thus, with the participants' parents having neither pursued nor graduated from college, they lacked the knowledge to assist their children in college and afterward.

The Upbringing and Underemployment Connection for First-Generation Hmong College Graduates

The third theme formed based on participants' thoughts about their upbringing and the influence it had on their underemployment. In this theme, the participants reflected about their families' influences on them personally and professionally. One participant shared that for him, prioritizing his personal education was difficult because his family expected him to contribute towards the family business. As such, he could not commit more time towards his education and be more involved on campus. This finding aligns with Barry et al.'s (2009), discussion that first-generation students are more likely to work longer hours, along with having greater family responsibilities. Thus, first-generation college graduates are less likely to spend more time on campus to be involved in and utilize available resources.

One participant shared that the cultural expectations set upon him by being Hmong conflicted with his ability to balance school and cultural obligations. Even though he knew school demanded more of his time, he often put school aside to meet the cultural obligations of his family. When attending those cultural events, he could not prioritize his academics. Even as a graduate, he still has to make time for these cultural events, thus sacrificing time to apply for other employment opportunities or finding opportunities to network. Vang (2015) showed in his research that for many Hmong students, cultural obligations are often a main interference in their ability to lead a successful academic career. Often times, Hmong parents expect their children to

wear multiple hats by attending school, completing their academic work, and fulfilling familial expectations that are a major part of the Hmong culture.

In this study, two participants shared that their parents were supportive of them pursuing higher education and that they did the best they could with their limited financial resources to support them through college. However, the participants recognized that the support was limited to emotional and financial support. This finding resonates with previous studies regarding first-generation, Hmong students regarding financial and emotional support from Hmong parents (Xiong & Lam, 2013). Parents being able to take care of basic needs, such as housing and instilling the importance of college, shaped participants' attitudes, even though they were underemployed. Participants were appreciative of their family's ability to do the best they could with what they had. Even as underemployed graduates, the participants maintained an optimistic attitude that better employment opportunities will come.

The Realities of Being Underemployed as a First-Generation, Hmong College Graduate

The fourth theme portrayed what being underemployed is like for first-generation, Hmong college graduates. Reflections from all of the participants demonstrated that being underemployed caused many negative emotions to arise in themselves, and at times, with their families.

All of the study's participants experienced negative emotions due to being underemployed. One participant expressed that being underemployed caused her to have an identity loss because she believed studying her passion in college would lead to her desired career. Unfortunately, after multiple attempts to apply for jobs in her field of study without any callbacks, she ended up working odd retail jobs. Eventually, her parents began questioning why she could not find a job in her field and began making comparisons between her and other people

that they deemed successful. These comparisons resulted in her feeling resentful toward herself about having made the wrong decision. This participant's emotions were demonstrative with Crosby's (1982) findings, that resentment is the most common attribute of relative deprivation, and that individual circumstances lead to self-perceived discrepancies.

Another participant shared that seeing his peers who lacked college degrees or who were non-first-generation college graduates, land jobs more quickly than he did, demoralized him. The competitive edge he believed a college degree brought was not paying off and eventually led to feeling resentment toward and inferior to, those individuals. This finding aligns with Luksyte and Spitzmueller's (2011) position that relative deprivation occurs among individuals when their perceived employment goals are unmet as they compare their situations to peers. Relative deprivation demonstrates the negative psychological outcomes of the participants.

One participant also shared how seeing her high school friends land well-paying jobs made it challenging for her internally. She also experienced internal conflicts that brought upon negative feelings when trying to decide between trying to attain a minimum wage job or working towards something better. Her internal conflict reflected a tone of desperation and frustration from being unable to land a job in her field. Seeing her friends land adequate employment made it difficult, and having family pressure her to accept any job made it even more difficult. As this participant expressed dissatisfaction with her job prospects, it became apparent that her negative assumptions were reflective of her subjective assessments about herself (Bernstein & Crosby, 1979).

Underemployment also resulted from individuals accepting jobs they probably would not have under normal circumstances. Some of the participants shared that they took lower paying jobs because they needed money for financial obligations. One participant accepted a lower

paying job because he had to start repaying his student loans. Davidson (2017) explained that student loan repayment is a huge factor that forces graduates to accept lower paying jobs. With the federal government demanding students begin to repay loans within six months of graduating, participants accept lower paying jobs to meet repayment mandates.

In contrast to the negative emotions of underemployment, the participants also offered positive takeaways from underemployment. The first is providing advice for future first-generation, Hmong graduates. The second is expressing appreciation of their roots and optimism for new career opportunities.

At some point in time in their collegiate career, the participants thought that regardless of what they studied in college, having a college degree was a worthwhile investment. Therefore, the participants studied majors they were either passionate about or a field that would possibly lead to adequate employment. Unfortunately, as underemployed individuals, the participants acknowledged that there is much more to being successful post-graduation than earning a college degree or just working any odd job to gain work experience. Recognizing that, the participants shared stories and experiences that were not only beneficial in understanding the studied phenomenon, it offered advice to others who may be in similar positions but still in college. Their advice to future Hmong graduates is to do more while in college by building relationships and gaining necessary soft and practical skills to be successful in the job market, demonstrating how important those activities are to academic and career success (Lin, 2001).

In addition, the participants expressed that underemployment has taught them to be more appreciative of their family roots and that underemployment is a stepping-stone to a better future. While going through college, even with all of the challenges endured by the participants, they recognize that their families did the best they could with what they had and what they knew. The

guidance and support may not have always taken shape in a monetary or social capitalistic form, but having a roof over their head, food on the table, and at times, “tough love,” made them appreciate their families as they worked through underemployment. Lor (2008) found that Hmong parents often supported their children through encouragement, childcare, emotional support, and spiritual support. Thus, even as they continue to work their way through underemployment, the participants recognize that underemployment is a building block for them to land adequate future employment, as they continue receiving support from their families.

Implications

By design, the generic qualitative approach of this study allows cross-population generalizability (Liu, 2016). Therefore, the findings of this study have important implications for research and practice regarding underemployed, first-generation, Hmong college graduates. These implications developed with the inquiry objective in mind, to assist colleges dominated by first-generation, Hmong students with strategies to better serve them, bridge the disconnection between colleges and their first-generation Hmong alumni, and assisting staff and faculty to be more culturally competent leaders.

Implications addressed in this section discuss innovations to the academic experience by rethinking the classroom, having culturally competent professors, and championing institutions to measure their success through student impact via an innovated curriculum and partnerships. Afterward, the implications for innovative academic support programs that support first-generation Hmong students by rethinking student orientation and academic and career advising is discussed. Universities should innovate their academic curriculum to be better suited for students, such as first-generation Hmong, while improving academic support programs to

support these students. This study may also bring more awareness about the underemployment phenomenon to the Hmong community.

Innovate the Academic Experience

The first-generation Hmong participants described their academic experiences in relation to underemployment. Some expressed the disconnection of being able to apply the material they learned in college to the job market. Others shared that a majority of their knowledge had little value in the job market. A few expressed that many classes they registered for were unrelated to their major and the only reason for those classes were graduation requirements. All expressed discontent with the college material and that their majors lacked job opportunities in the workforce. As a result, their degrees were essentially useless, since they were accepting positions requiring no college degree. All of the situations mentioned above support the implication for action to innovate the academic experience so that it is more practical and meaningful to first-generation Hmong students and eventually graduates.

Innovating the academic experience may appear to be radical, and even seem unrealistic as a proposal to improve higher education. Many traditionalists and conformists would possibly even oppose the idea, considering many institutions of higher education continue to teach students the same way since the time of Socrates. However, times have changed, and with a lagging higher education system, innovating the way students learn in a constantly changing world has become even more important, especially for Hmong students. As previously shared, Hmong students are among the lowest academic performers in the country and come from some of the lowest socio-economic status households (Xiong & Lee, 2011; Xiong & Lam, 2012). Therefore, innovation should occur in the classroom, with professors, and with the colleges.

The classroom, naturally, is the first place to begin the academic innovation process for first-generation Hmong students. In a traditional college classroom, students are sitting in a large lecture hall, normally with a capacity of 100 students or more. The traditional learning process is repetitive and often, non-interactive. Some students furiously take notes. Some check their Facebook or Instagram newsfeeds. Some are not even present. With so many faces and an outrageous student-to-professor ratio, the professor continues lecturing, often not even knowing any names in the classroom; after all, there is a time limit and so many people. An hour later, the professor dismisses class until the next scheduled date to meet. No wonder many first-generation Hmong students are unable to apply their studies post-graduation. They are probably bored, cramming the night before to pass the necessary examinations and make their grades, or confused as to what they need help with. Therefore, to innovate the classroom, it needs to expand outside a lecture hall and beyond campus borders.

First-generation Hmong college students need a different type of learning experience. One beyond campus borders, where they could get the chance to learn about real problems in their communities. The students need to see and understand a real-world problem they care about, possibly hunger, homelessness, cyberbullying, accessibility, drug abuse, or racial equity, while learning about the rich possibilities of practical skills to tackle these issues, such as play, imagination, creativity, and collaboration. These problems, although not foreign to the general population, are taboos in the Hmong community. Rarely do Hmong community members discuss, promote, or acknowledge them. However, they do exist, and there are a few organizations and professionals in the Hmong community committed to tackling such challenges. First-generation Hmong college students need opportunities and a push to interact with these professionals and organizations in order to interact with people other than their classmates,

professors, and college. Learning should be taking place not only inside the classroom, but also in partnership with the many community organizations surrounding a college campus.

Expanding the traditional mindset of what a classroom is may do just that. Exposure to professionals and organizations would also allow first-generation Hmong college students to have networking opportunities, possibly securing future job prospects, while developing transferrable collaboration, speaking, and problem-solving skills. Any classroom, regardless of the academic subject, presents an opportunity for first-generation Hmong students to learn beyond classroom borders and develop practical skills they can carry through college and into the workforce. A classroom education beyond borders that not only teaches first-generation Hmong students the subject material but allows them to see how and why it matters and the connection to the real world would be invaluable.

The next step to innovate the academic experience are with the professors; after all, they are the leaders of the classroom. For many first-generation Hmong students, professors are someone they depend on for advice (Xiong & Lam, 2013). Therefore, professors teaching in colleges with a high Hmong student population should develop more cultural competence about first-generation Hmong students. Universities should provide training for professors to become culturally competent. Cultural competency sets a foundation for professors to become more aware about the diverse student populations they serve, and the unique challenges and traits of such diverse groups. Such training also opens up the door for professors to have a better understanding about Hmong students, their history, and their culture. A culturally competent professor is an emotionally intelligent one. With a culturally competent professor, first-generation Hmong students may look to them more for guidance on career prospects post-graduation.

Additionally, professors should engage more with their on-campus, Hmong student population. Engagement with the Hmong student population opens up opportunities for professors to create culturally competent learning spaces and culturally validating environments (Lin et al., 2015). Engaging with the Hmong student population gives professors a chance to not only be the teacher, but the student as well. Good professors learn from and about their students. The knowledge that professors gain from Hmong students may be adapted into their teaching methods and models to innovate the classroom experience.

Finally, institutions dominated by Hmong students need to innovate to better adapt to a constantly changing job market and world. There are approximately 9,500 reported Hmong college students in California (NCES, 2017) with enrollment continuing to grow. For some California colleges dominated by Hmong students, more than 75% of them will be first-generation students (Vang, 2015). Unfortunately, an increasing amount of prospective Hmong students may continue facing the same challenges many Hmong graduates experienced before them. Colleges can mitigate this historical repetition through innovation.

Higher Education Needs Innovation

At the rate negative changes are happening on many colleges campuses (i.e., rising tuition costs, classes getting cut, large student-to-professor ratios, lack of diverse faculty), students are paying the ultimate price, literally and figuratively. The researcher believes that innovation can occur at the institutional level by reforming the way in which collegiate decision-makers think about higher education.

The first is for institutions to measure their success through the impact they have on their students, rather than using a standardized metric. Many first-generation Hmong students chose to attend college because they believe higher education will have a positive impact on their life

(Lee, 2015). Institution should adopt a curriculum that still values research but also puts students at the core of research experiences through a guided research project, either alone or with a team. Mandating first-generation Hmong students to complete a research project as a graduation requirement would allow them to develop many skills. Developmental skills include the ability to define and explore a topic of interest, review existing literature, analyze data to vet credible information, and build on existing research or create new knowledge. First-generation Hmong students can do a project that matters to them, and in the modern world, knowing how to be a researcher is vital to success.

Second, institutions should adopt a beyond campus borders mentality. Institutions dominated by first-generation Hmong students can benefit tremendously by creating partnerships with other institutions that have a high concentration of first-generation Hmong students. This gives students and the institutions the ability to develop different perspectives to tackle all sorts of problems, while gaining a sense of existing or non-existing limits to a solution (Davidson, 2017). The real world is drastically different from what exists on a college campus, and as first-generation Hmong students graduate, understanding how to take on the differences in the world is important knowledge to have. Partnerships “enable those from varied backgrounds and institutions to see horizons that they wouldn’t have otherwise know were there” (Davidson, 2017, p. 231).

Innovate Academic Support for First-Generation Hmong Students

This study demonstrated participants’ insufficient academic support while they were still in college. As described by a participant, he knew a career center existed on his campus, but did not fully grasp the services it offered beyond occasional job postings seen around campus. Therefore, he never took advantage of the services offered by the career center to help him with

his resumes or sharpen his interview skills. Another participant described an instance where she visited her counseling office but was not fully able to receive any guidance beyond the literal questions she asked. As an underemployed graduate, she wished that academic counselors had offered more advice about alternative career paths and had disclosed that her desired field was not only competitive but did not pay competitively. She also described feelings of being unsupported by academic counselors as they sometimes missed appointments, or that they closed during walk-in hours. This participant also expressed that some professors neglected to assist her. Not knowing who to depend on for help or where to seek the help made navigating college more challenging.

Study participants also expressed they could not interact with academic support personnel and services due to cultural obligations at home. As a result, they were more likely to be off campus, not able to take advantage of academic services and interact with their professors. Thus, innovating the academic support services serving first-generation Hmong students may improve their ability to become more prepared prospective job candidates. Naturally, innovating the student orientation is a good starting place.

First-generation Hmong students should have the option to attend a Southeast Asian student orientation before they start college. Existing Asian Pacific Islander and Southeast Asian organizations can sponsor this event, since funding is already generally available for these organizations. Leading this student orientation should be individuals already on campus who understand the diverse challenges Southeast Asian students face as they transition to college. Existing student leaders can communicate and educate new Southeast Asian students about existing on-campus resources. Afterwards, they can provide new students with points of contact should there be any challenges they face on campus. These points of contact should be

knowledgeable enough that they can address the concerns of students or direct them to the appropriate place to get answers. Finally, they could end the orientation with Southeast Asian speakers or alumni who could share their stories and challenges with new students. These should be individuals the students can connect with, people who look like them, speak like them, and share a similar cultural and historical background as they do. A student orientation should be meaningful and make a lasting impression on new students.

First-generation Hmong students value academic advising. In Xiong and Lee's study (2012), more than half the Hmong students they surveyed used academic advising services. However, similar to the previous recommendation about classrooms, academic advising should take a similar approach in going beyond campus borders. This is because the education of first-generation Hmong students intertwines with the needs and demands of their parents and families (Ngo, 2006). Academic advisors should advise the parents and families of first-generation Hmong college students about the challenges of being successful in higher education. Being a successful student takes a lot of dedication, time management, hard work, and good study habits. Parents and families of first-generation Hmong students who are more aware about the needs of their students can take a more proactive approach in helping them succeed, beyond just emotional or financial support.

The career center can also take steps to innovate their services. How they can do so for first-generation Hmong students is by bringing in Hmong professionals from the community who can educate the Hmong students about the necessary skills and knowledge needed to be successful as a job prospect. This gives future first-generation Hmong graduates a chance to connect with someone they can relate to while learning how to be a strong job candidate. Such an event should also be accessible. The career center can give students digital access to attend

these events remotely so they get the chance to learn and interact with the practitioner. The career center should also have these events off campus at community organizations populated by the Hmong community. The college setting is a foreign site for many Hmong parents. Having the event in a space where all Hmong community members feel safe and comfortable makes it beneficial for the first-generation Hmong students and their community.

Promoting Awareness About Underemployment in the Hmong Community

Underemployment is not a new phenomenon in the U.S. However, underemployment is an invisible phenomenon in the Hmong community that has received little to no attention. Many Hmong community members look to Hmong scholars for advice and wisdom on improving the community; yet no Hmong scholar has researched or explained underemployment to the community. Many underemployed first-generation Hmong graduates have a story to share, and the community needs to hear their stories in order to address the problems faced. First-generation Hmong students may avoid making the same mistakes as these participants, if they are able to hear the advice of individuals like the study participants. Awareness in the community also allows other first-generation Hmong graduates to know they are not alone in experiencing underemployment. This may open opportunities for underemployed first-generation Hmong graduates to come together, share their obstacles, and possibly network with non-underemployed Hmong graduates. Being oblivious to underemployment supports the implication for action to reduce first-generation, college graduate underemployment within the Hmong community.

Ignoring underemployment among Hmong college graduates hurts the Hmong community in multiple ways. It makes the Hmong community have a distorted view of the value of higher education without truly understanding why underemployment happens. For example, a

Hmong elder sees that a Hmong college graduate is working a minimum wage job. That elder then goes into the community and talks negatively about the graduate. The negative talk brings shame upon the college graduate and his family. Relative deprivation then occurs as a result.

Another way ignoring the problem harms the community is it creates division within the Hmong community. The Hmong community is a prideful one. When there is success, everyone wants to swarm to it. When there is failure, no one comes near it. The mentality of the Hmong community should not be like that, particularly when dealing with underemployment among first-generation Hmong graduates. Those Hmong graduates are the future generations of the Hmong people, and there should be a proactive, rather than reactive, approach to dealing with the underemployment phenomenon. The Hmong community needs to become more aware about how underemployment is affecting the graduates in the community and develop solutions and partnerships to address it. Even if some consider underemployment a failure, the community must understand that failure is nothing more than a step to something greater. Some of the most successful companies and people in the country are successful because they experienced failure. Therefore, changing the mentality of the Hmong community to create positive solutions for first-generation Hmong graduates starts with creating more awareness.

Implications for Research and Theory

This study helped to illuminate the experiences of underemployed, first-generation Hmong graduates. However, there should be more research on this subject. A significant limitation of this study is that it was focused strictly on first-generation Hmong graduates. Understanding whether differences exist among different Hmong graduate populations can bring more light to understanding the underemployment phenomenon among the Hmong.

Additionally, the generic qualitative approach of this study only provided a bottom-up exploratory process (Liu, 2016). However, a deductive research approach may provide greater insight to understand underemployed, first-generation Hmong graduates' experiences through a different lens. Future research employing deductive approaches may find important intersections or findings between variables unidentified in this study.

Recommendations for Future Research

1. Conduct future research on understanding underemployed, first-generation Hmong graduates using a larger sample size. Having a larger sample size allows the researcher to validate new or similar themes in this study through saturation. With saturation, a researcher will stop collecting data when gathering data no longer generates new insights (Creswell, 2014). This study did not achieve saturation due to the limited number of participants.
2. Research other underemployed non-first-generation Hmong graduates. This study focused solely on first-generation Hmong graduates. It is unknown whether underemployed, non-first-generation Hmong graduates experience similar effects.
3. Explore how Hmong student-dominated university faculty and academic support personnel experience and understand the first-generation Hmong students they serve. The participants in this study reflected on their college experience as a major factor of their underemployment; however, the researcher believes that is only half of the phenomenological equation. There is limited research investigating how professors and academic support personnel experience and understand first-generation Hmong students. Further research can yield themes to compare and contrast with the findings in this study to develop a framework for comprehending this understudied phenomenon.

Conclusion

This study utilized a generic qualitative approach to form descriptive themes. The researcher interviewed four first-generation Hmong graduates who self-identified as underemployed. The first participant in the study was an acquaintance of the researcher, whereas the other participants were selected using snowball sampling. The in-depth face-to-face interview with students provided rich data.

The researcher's findings revealed four themes relating to the experiences of underemployed, first-generation Hmong graduates: (1) the practical disconnection between college and workforce application; (2) social capital inequalities; (3) upbringing and the underemployment connection; and (4) the realities of being underemployed. This study provided the researcher deep insights into how first-generation Hmong graduates understand their underemployment. The underemployed participants in this study voiced powerful, and at times, emotional, perspectives into the phenomenon. Their stories demonstrated that underemployment resulted from interactions between themselves, their personal lives, and academics. Evidence in this study suggests that those three umbrella topics influence the experiences of underemployed, first-generation Hmong graduates. This study is the first step to better understanding the experiences of underemployed, first-generation Hmong graduates.

Implications for practice evolving from this study extend to academic institutions; college counselors; professors; first-generation Hmong students; and the Hmong community.

Recommendations for further research include: (1) conducting future research studies with a larger sample size of underemployed, first-generation Hmong graduates; (2) researching underemployed, non-first-generation Hmong graduates; and (3) exploring how university faculty and academic support personnel experience and understand the first-generation students they serve.

Prior to this study, there were no previous studies about underemployed, first-generation Hmong graduates. As a previous underemployed, first-generation Hmong college graduate himself, the researcher wanted to bridge the gap in knowledge of this phenomenon in the Hmong and academic communities. Addressing the scholarly void in the literature for this topic was often times frustrating, and at times, emotionally challenging. Stories shared by the participants

recalled many difficult memories the researcher lived as an underemployed graduate. Although this study sought to understand the experiences of underemployed, first-generation Hmong college graduates and the factors that contributed to their underemployment, this study was only the beginning. This phenomenon is so much bigger than the small dent the researcher believes he made. However, the researcher knows he was the trailblazer who etched his Hmong brothers and sisters' voices in writing, so that future generations of first-generation Hmong graduates impacted by this study can do better for themselves, their community, and loved ones.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Introduction: Hello, once again my name is Mong Vang. We are meeting here today so that I can interview you to better understand your experiences as an underemployed first-generation Hmong graduate. In my research, I define underemployed as having met at least 2 of these 3 conditions: (a) being employed at a job below one's education and/or skills, (b) involuntarily working at a job, or (c) working a lower paying job (making less than \$18.58) even though you graduated from college. This interview should not take more than one hour of your time to complete. As a participant in this research, you have the right to ask questions at any time, decide if you prefer not to answer some questions, receive a copy of the findings, and to withdraw from the research at any time. Please note, I will not include any specific information in my research that would allow anyone, other than me, to identify your responses. Before we start, do you have any questions?

Interview Date:

Interview Time:

Interview Location:

Questions:

1. What did you study in college?
2. What is your age?
3. What is/are your degree(s) earned?
4. When did you graduate?
5. What did you know about landing a good job after graduating?
6. What were challenges you experienced in trying to find a good job?
7. Do you believe college could have better prepared to find a good job? How so?
8. As a first-generation Hmong graduate, how do you think your experience differed from someone who is not a first-generation graduate in their family?
9. How has underemployment affected you personally?
10. How do you think the way you grew up affected you being underemployed?

APPENDIX B: INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH STUDY

Invitation to Participate in Research Study (e-mail)

Dear _____,

I was recommended and provided your contact information by _____ to contact you as a potential participant in my research. Therefore, I am reaching out to you today in my role as a doctoral student at the University of Pacific to potentially participate in my research study titled, "Understanding the Experiences of Underemployed First-Generation Hmong Graduates." The purpose of this study is to better understand the experiences of underemployed first-generation Hmong graduates. In my study, I define underemployed as meeting at least two of these three conditions:

- (a) Being employed at a job below your education and/or skills.
- (b) Involuntarily working a job because you had a difficult time finding a job that matches your education level, experience, and/or the field of study you went to college for.
- (c) Working a lower paying job even though you graduated from college. Lower paying in my research means that you make less than the national average pay of \$18.58/ hour or \$38,646/ year.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please answer the questions below to see if you meet the qualifications.

Do you identify with at least 2 of these 3 conditions above? If yes, please check/state one.

- A and B
- B and C
- A and C
- All of the above
- I don't identify with any of the three
-

Did your parents go to college and graduate?

- Yes
- No
-

Did you graduate with a bachelor's degree or higher?

- Yes
- No
-

Thank you for your response. Once I review your response to see if you are a qualifying participant for my research, I will send you a consent form to complete and will be in touch with you. Once again, thank you.

APPENDIX C: RESEARCH CONSENT FORM

Research Consent Form

Research Title: Understanding the Experiences of Underemployed First-Generation Hmong Graduates

Lead Researcher: Mong Vang

RESEARCH DESCRIPTION: In partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Doctor of Education degree, I am conducting a study focused on the experiences of being underemployed. I define underemployed as meeting at least two of these three conditions:

- (a) being employed at a job below one's education and/or skills
- b) involuntarily working at a job
- (c) working a lower paying (less than \$18.58/hour) job even though you graduated from college

******If you self-identified in at least two of the three conditions, it is known as being underemployed in my study******

The purpose of this study is to better understand the experiences of underemployed first-generation Hmong graduates. Because first-generation Hmong graduate underemployment has not been studied before, I believe this research will bring more understanding and awareness about it.

TIME INVOLVEMENT: Your participation is a one-hour interview that will take place at a location we agree to meet. The questions that will be asked during the interview are questions that will allow me to try to understand your experiences.

RISKS AND BENEFITS: There are minimal risks in this study. The risks associated with this study are discussing a topic that may make you react emotionally, and concerns about protecting the confidentiality of your identity and third parties you may talk about. The benefits which may reasonably be expected to result from this study are having a better understanding about underemployed first-generation Hmong graduates, inspiring others to pursue more research regarding this topic, and helping communities with a high amount of Hmong college students. However, I cannot and do not guarantee or promise that you will receive any benefits from this study.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Should you agree to participate, your name or anything that may identify who you are will not be used in order to keep your identity unknown as a study participant. Information from the interview will be maintained securely during the research period, and audio recordings of the interview destroyed following the completion of the study.

PARTICIPANT'S RIGHTS: If you have read this form and have decided to participate in this research project, you understand that your participation is entirely voluntary and your decision whether or not to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions.

CONTACT INFORMATION:

Questions: If you have any concerns or questions, feel free to contact me at m_vang5@u.pacific.edu or [REDACTED]

Independent Contact: If you are not satisfied with how this study is being conducted, or if you have any concerns, complaints, or general questions about the research or your rights as a participant, you may contact Laura Hallberg, Dissertation Chair, at (916) 739-7332 or e-mail lhallberg@pacific.edu, or the IRB at the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs to speak to someone independent of the research team at (209)-946-3903 or e-mail IRB@pacific.edu.

I hereby consent: (Indicate *Yes* or *No*)

- To be audio recorded during this study.
 Yes No

- For such audio records resulting from this study to be used for analysis.
 Yes No

The extra copy of this signed and dated consent form is for you to keep.

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the information provided above, that you have been afforded the opportunity to ask, and have answered, any questions that you may have, that your participation is completely voluntary, that you understand that you may withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled, that you will receive a copy of this form, and that you are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies.

SIGNATURE _____ **DATE** _____

Research Study Participant (Print Name): _____