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A Qualitative Study of the Lao American College Experience

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A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE LAO AMERICAN COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

By

Jerry Sithiphone

A Dissertation Submitted to the

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In Partial Fulfillment of the

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Educational and Organizational Leadership

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2021

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE LAO AMERICAN COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

By

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A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE LAO AMERICAN COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

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By

Jerry Sithiphone

DEDICATION

ຂໍອຸທິດໃຫ້ e-mom ກັບ e-dad. This dissertation is first and foremost dedicated to my parents, Mr. Inpong Paul Sithiphone and Mrs. Saysamone Sithiphone. While my father is no longer physically with us, his mentorship and involvement in my education was not only fundamental but monumental. Without her sacrifices and constant support, this dissertation would not have happened if my mother did not put her children's interests above her own.

Secondly, this dissertation is dedicated to the Lao American community in general and to my sixteen participants, specifically. I am eternally grateful for my participants' willingness to take part in the study and their openness and candor during the interviews. Through their accomplishments, I am confident that the Lao American community will continue to make positive strides to uplift each and every community member.

Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to all of my nieces and nephews and former students. I hope that my educational journey serves as a source of inspiration for you all to continue to pursue your dreams.

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I want to acknowledge my family for giving me the opportunity to pursue my educational goals. This would not have been possible without my parents, Mr. Inpong Paul Sithiphone and Mrs. Saysamone Sithiphone, risking their lives in hopes of seeking refuge in a foreign land away from their friends and families. To my older siblings, Martin, Jenny, and Judy, thank you for putting up with the baby in the family and constantly supporting me throughout. Thank you to my grandmother, Mrs. Patthoumma Sithiphone for your continued love and encouragement. To my aunts, uncles, cousins, and extended family and relatives near and far, thank you for everything you have done and will continue to do for me and my family.

Next, I must acknowledge the Liemthongsamout family. Starting with Mr. Chantha Peter Liemthongsamout and Mrs. Tiangkham Liemthongsamout, even though you both are no longer with us, you two, along with your children, raised me as your own and “adopted” me into your family in the Lao tradition. Thank you to my “euys” (older sisters) and “ais” (older brothers) for the food, trips, mentorship, and lifelong love and support. Specifically, I want to express my love and gratitude to Dr. Emi Liemthongsamout Montances, for her willingness to offer guidance, wisdom, and much needed reassurance throughout my dissertation journey.

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A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE LAO AMERICAN COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

Abstract

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2021

The majority of the Lao American population arrived in the United States after the end of the “American War in Southeast Asia” in 1975 as political refugees. Nevertheless, as Asian Americans, Lao Americans are also stereotyped to be the “model minority” and therefore do not face the same educational and socioeconomical challenges like other communities of color. However, Lao Americans are not the model minority and face numerous obstacles as the community is overlooked and history is forgotten by mainstream America. The lack of scholarly literature on Lao Americans highlights not only the general misunderstanding of the community, but also the community’s struggles in social upward mobility in addition to low higher educational attainment levels. Therefore, the purpose of this research was to learn from the experiences of Lao American college graduates in order to support younger Lao Americans pursue their higher educational goals.

This basic qualitative study provided participants the opportunity to interpret their experiences as Lao American college graduates and make sense out of their lives. Through one-on-one semi-structured interviews, participants reflected upon their educational journeys as Lao American students. Based upon the data analysis of the interview notes and transcripts, five major themes were identified. The first two themes highlight the Lao American students’ stories in K-12 and higher education respectively. Lao American Counternarratives provides an

alternate understanding of the Asian and Lao American experience. Lao American Pathways to Degree Completion details the roadmap utilized by participants to complete their degrees.

Finally, in Words of Wisdom, participants offer guidance to younger Lao Americans interested in pursuing higher education. Stemming from the findings and literature, there are four implications for action. First, Lao American Awareness, to differentiate between the experiences of Asian and Lao Americans. Secondly, the proliferation of Lao American Support Networks, to Lao American support students and family successfully pursue higher education. Thirdly, Economic Development, to provide Lao American students more equitable educational opportunities. Finally, Beyond the Model Minority Myth, to uplift all marginalized minority communities while highlighting the need to disaggregate data. By focusing on Lao Americans who have been able to successfully earn higher educational degrees, the researcher learned from their experiences to better support future Lao Americans pursue their academic and educational goals to uplift the entire Lao American community.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The Lao American experience is not widely known or understood by mainstream America as their story is left out of the history books and scholarly work on Lao Americans is hard to find or nonexistent. Therefore, to begin to comprehend the history of Lao Americans starts by defining and differentiating some key terms. First, “Lao” or “Lowland Lao” refers to the majority ethnic group in Laos (Gordon, 2004, 2010; Manke & Keller, 2006; Ngo, 2009; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Palmer & Maramba, 2015; Shah, 2007; Uy, 2018). As noted in the definition, Laos is a place, a country, while Lao refers to a specific ethnic group. Secondly, “Laotian” denotes all people and things from the country of Laos (Baum & Flores, 2011; Gordon, 2011; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Paik et al., 2017a, 2017b; Palmer & Maramba, 2015; Shah, 2007; Thikey et al., 2015). Thus, since the majority of Lao Americans originate from Laos, they may be referred to Laotian in terms of their nationality but are ethnically Lao. This distinction between Lao and Laotian is critical in this study as it focuses on the specific ethnic Lao American population and not all refugees, ethnic groups, or peoples from Laos. Lastly, as Lao American refugees arrived at different times and ages from Laos, it is important to delineate the groups. “First generation” refers to refugees who arrived in the country as adults, “1.5 generation” are refugees who came under the age of 15, and “second generation” are the children of refugee parents born in the country (Baum & Flores, 2011; Museus, 2013; Museus et al., 2016; Ngo, 2009; Palmer & Maramba, 2015; Shah, 2007; Uy, 2018). For the purposes of this research, participants must be either 1.5 or second generation Lao American to take part in the study. With these definitions, the work to highlight the Lao American experience may begin.

Background

Lao Americans are also Asian Americans; therefore, they are stereotyped as being the “model minority” which presumes they are more successful than other minority populations in the United States. However, the data show that their educational attainment levels are not comparable to their other Asian American counterparts (see Tables 1 and 2; Fong, 2002; Museus, 2013; Museus et al., 2016; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Paik et al., 2017a; Palmer & Maramba, 2015; Uy, 2018). Citing the most recent U.S. Census, Uy (2018) notes that 32% of Lao Americans 25 years and older have less than a high school degree and only 13% of Lao Americans have a Bachelor’s degree or higher. Furthermore, Lao Americans are suffering socioeconomically with reported annual earnings well below the national average (Museus, 2013). The poverty experienced by the Lao American community can be directly connected to their lower educational levels as higher educational attainment typically leads to better employment and economic opportunities. To complicate matters further, Lao Americans have a unique immigration experience as refugees fleeing Laos after the communist takeover (Baum & Flores, 2011; Bozick et al., 2016; Gordon, 2004, 2010, 2011; Shah, 2007; Wing, 2007). Fleeing the country as political refugees, it has been extremely difficult for the vast majority of Lao Americans to rebuild their lives as they literally escaped with nothing except the clothes on their bodies. Lastly, there are generational gaps within the community which may lead to varied educational outcomes between first- and second-generation Lao Americans (Baum & Flores, 2011; Museus, 2013; Museus et al., 2016; Ngo, 2009; Palmer & Maramba, 2015). For many displaced communities, the first and 1.5 generations tend to have better educational and financial outcomes while the second generation struggles as they attempt to balance their families’ culture with the mainstream culture.

Table 1

Note: Adapted from “Education Part of the ‘State of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders’ Series,” by K. Ramakrishnan and F. Z. Ahmad, 2014, Center for American Progress, p. 3 (<https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/AAPI-Education.pdf>). In the public domain.

Educational attainment by race, for ages 25 and older

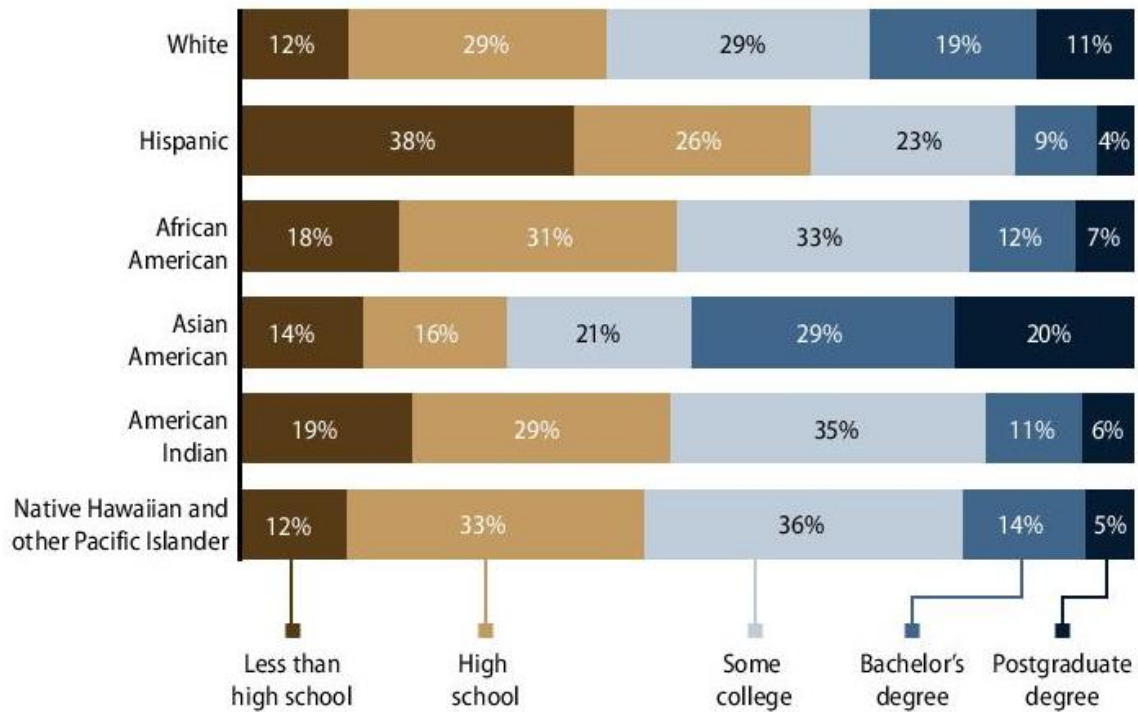
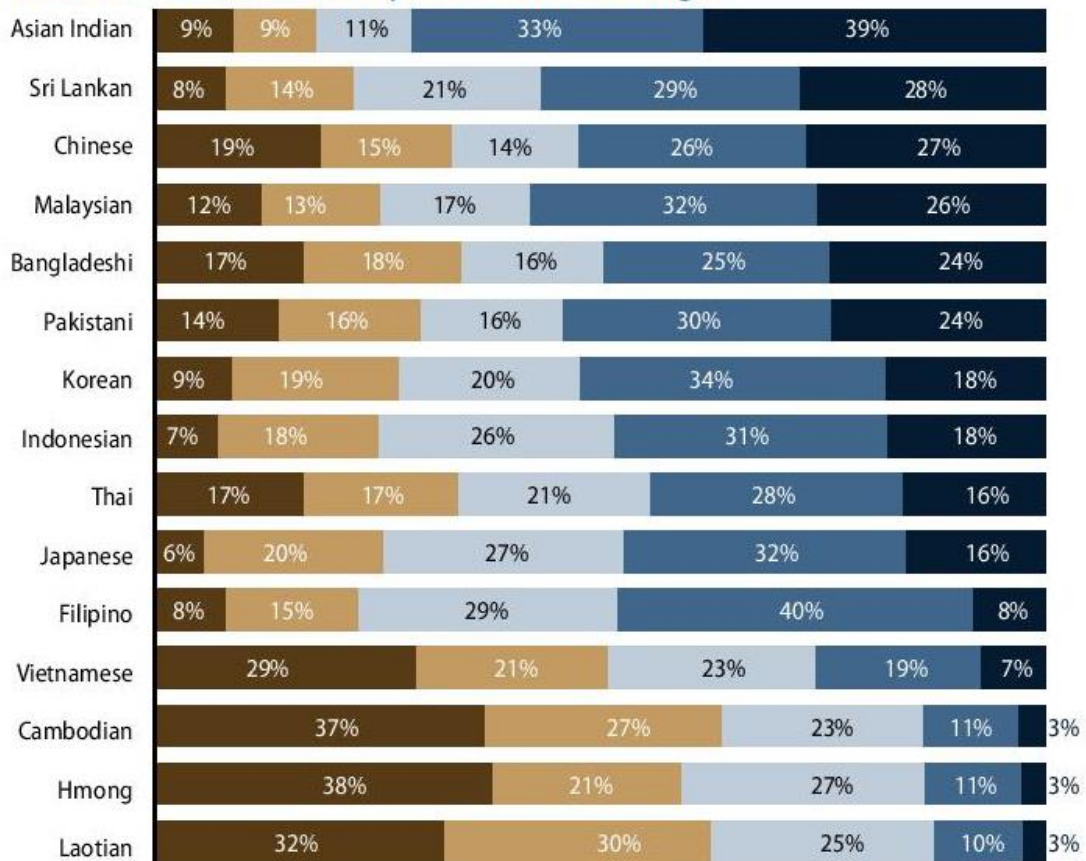


Table 2

Note: Adapted from “Education: Part of the ‘State of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders’ Series,” by K. Ramakrishnan and F. Z. Ahmad, 2014, Center for American Progress, p. 4 (<https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/AAPI-Education.pdf>). In the public domain.

Educational attainment by Asian national origin



The model minority myth assumes that all Asian American communities regardless of generation, immigration status, or history are successful economically and educationally (see Table 3; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Paik et al., 2017a, 2017b; Wing, 2007). However, as Ngo and Lee (2007) state, “...the image of Asian American high educational achievement fails to account for the diversity in the refugee waves and the recency of migration of Southeast Asian ethnic groups” (p. 419). Ngo and Lee highlight not only the heterogeneity of the Asian American

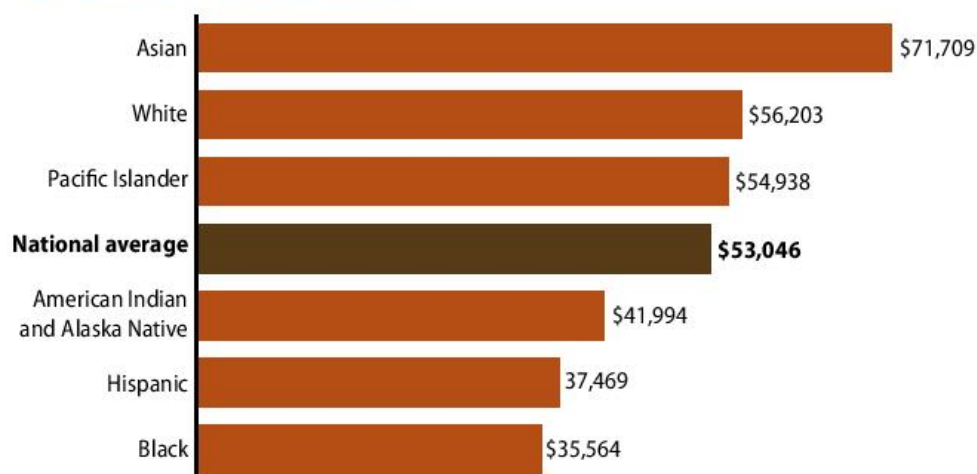
diaspora, but also that of the Southeast Asian Americans as there are numerous Southeast Asian ethnic groups with different languages, customs, and religions. Therefore, this myth is problematic for the Lao community in particular because they are stereotyped to be successful even though they have only been in the country for forty years, fled a war zone, and are just now reestablishing roots in a new homeland. The model minority myth also pits Asians against other people of color, places Asians in a vulnerable position in society, and hides from view those most in need (Wing, 2007). Asian Americans are not a homogenous group, but the model minority myth enables society and then educators to make assumptions about the skills and abilities of students without taking into consideration the individual experiences and histories of those students to meet their needs.

Table 3

Note: Adapted from "Income and Poverty: Part of the 'State of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders' Series," by K. Ramakrishnan and F. Z. Ahmad, 2014, Center for American Progress, p. 2 (<https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/AAPI-IncomePoverty.pdf>). In the public domain.

Median household income by race and ethnicity

Median household income in the past 12 months, 5-year estimates
(in 2012 inflation-adjusted dollars)



Statement of the Problem

Lao Americans have low higher educational attainment levels which negatively impacts their socioeconomic statuses, social upward mobility, and overall quality of life in the United States. The data show that Lao Americans are not achieving academically leading to higher rates of poverty compared to other Asian American communities. Nevertheless, under the racial and social construction in the United States, Lao Americans are Asian Americans, the model minorities. The model minority myth does not take into account the heterogeneity that exists within the Asian American population, but simply recognizes the relative successes of the racial group utilizing two specific data points: academic achievement and median family income. Unfortunately, propagating Asian Americans as the model minorities is beneficial in American mainstream media and politics to the detriment of minority Asian American communities, including Lao Americans.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this research is to identify the strategies implemented by Lao American college graduates to obtain their four-year degrees. Due to the limited number of Lao American college graduates in the United States, it is crucial to gather as much information and insights from this minute segment of the population to build educational pathways for future scholars. Higher educational achievement levels tend to lead to better economic opportunities which will improve the socioeconomic statuses, social upward mobility, and overall quality of life of Lao Americans.

Research Questions

To combat the myths, stereotypes, and misconceptions perpetuated by the model minority myth, this study seeks to understand the higher educational experiences of Lao American college

graduates. Thus, the overarching research question for this study is: How do Lao Americans complete a four-year degree? In addition to this research question are two subsequent questions that will attempt to narrow the focus and highlight the factors that lead to successful educational attainment: (a) How do educational and social institutions impact Lao American students' stories? and (b) How does the Lao American story challenge the racist misconception of the model minority myth? These guiding research questions will support the researcher in framing the study and help participants answer questions regarding their educational journeys through higher education in the United States.

Significance

While Asian American students are well-represented in universities, the number of Asian American faculty members is limited resulting in far fewer studies on the educational gaps within the Asian American communities (Suyemoto et al., 2009; Takaki, 1998; Wu, 2002). Therefore, one major contribution this study will provide to academia is the exposure to the Lao American community specifically and Asian and Southeast Asian American communities generally. By focusing on the Lao American population, the model minority myth will be debunked, and a spotlight shone on the Asian and Southeast Asian American communities and their challenges. Secondly, this study focuses on the academic achievement or lack thereof within the Lao American community, so one interest group would be educators, school administrators and districts. Utilizing the recommendations of the study, schools and staff members may be able to implement the strategies to best work with their Lao American constituencies. Furthermore, education centers and communities with Southeast Asian American populations may also be able to use the findings and recommendations as the experiences and challenges may be similar. Lastly, Lao Americans in general would benefit from this research.

As the subject of the study, Lao Americans will be able to learn from other Lao Americans regarding their educational journeys and success stories. Lao American students and families will benefit from the knowledge they will gain from the experiences of others within their own ethnic enclave.

Theoretical Framework

Critical race theory (CRT) provides a framework for communities of color to critically examine their place in the white and Eurocentric dominated society with the understanding that there is systematic and institutional racial oppression (Assalone & Fann, 2017; Buenavista et al., 2009; Jennings & Marvin, 2005; Kohli, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Lynn & Parker, 2006; Milner, 2008; Poon et al., 2016). In regard to education, CRT challenges the “deficit thinking model” which presumes that students fail due to internal, cultural, or racial deficiencies (Assalone & Fann, 2017; Buenavista et al., 2009; Kohli, 2012; Poon et al., 2016). Additionally, CRT highlights the need to disaggregate data within the Asian American community in order to combat the notions of the model minority myth (Poon et al., 2016). Storytelling is also a major tenet of CRT (Assalone & Fann, 2017; Buenavista et al., 2009; Kohli, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Rodriguez, 2011); therefore, Lao Americans will be able to learn and grow from the stories and experiences of other Lao Americans who have been able to achieve higher levels of education. Furthermore, CRT will be used to understand the academic challenges within the Lao American community through the lens of institutional racism. Community members will reflect on their educational experiences and assess the impact of the white-hegemonic racial and social structures had on their educational experiences.

Delimitations

There are two delimitations or boundaries to this study. First, the recruitment strategy will be a delimitation. The purpose of recruiting participants via social media platforms is to reach as many Lao American college graduates as possible to account for attrition. Secondly, purposeful sampling of Lao Americans is another delimitation. The goal of purposeful sampling is to ensure that potential participants meet the following eligibility criteria to take part in the study: (a) self-identify as Lao or Lao American, (b) must be 1.5- or second-generation Lao or Lao American, (c) between the ages 21-36, (d) completed at least a Bachelor's degree, and (e) currently reside in the United States. By narrowing the pool of potential participants, the research will illuminate the stories of Lao Americans college graduates to inspire other Lao Americans to reach their academic and educational goals.

Summary

In terms of socioeconomic status and higher education attainment levels, Lao Americans as a community are not fairing as well as other Asian American communities (Museus, 2013; Museus et al., 2016; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Paik et al., 2017a; Palmer & Maramba, 2015; Uy, 2018). Nevertheless, due to their ancestral geography, Lao Americans are considered Asian Americans in the United States of America where Asian Americans are also deemed the model minority. Lao Americans do not share the same migration story of all the other Asian Americans as they had to flee their homes in fear of being persecuted by the communist party that had just taken power (Baum & Flores, 2011; Bozick et al., 2016; Gordon, 2011; Shah, 2007; Wing, 2007). This story of heroism and survival is not told or understood by most as Lao Americans have been neglected in academia in general and society in particular. Thus, this research attempts to bring to the light the experiences of Lao Americans to not only mainstream America, but also other

Lao Americans to uplift the community as a whole. Through this research, the researcher hopes to gain a better understanding of the experiences of Lao Americans to help other Lao Americans pursue their academic and educational goals. In the next chapter, the literature review will highlight the lack of scholarly work on the Lao American community and their challenges stemming from the American War in Southeast Asia to resettlement in the United States.

Definition of Terms

1. Critical race theory (CRT) asserts that race is a social construction with aims to oppress communities of color through systematic and institutional racist policies (Buenavista et al., 2009; Jennings & Marvin, 2005; Kohli, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Lynn & Parker, 2006; Milner, 2008; Rodriguez, 2011).
2. “First generation” refers to refugees who arrived in the country as adults, “1.5 generation” are refugees who came under the age of 15, and “second generation” are the children of refugee parents born in the country (Baum & Flores, 2011; Maramba et al., 2018; Museus, 2013; Museus et al., 2016; Ngo, 2009; Palmer & Maramba, 2015; Shah, 2007; Uy, 2018).
3. “Lao” or “Lowland Lao” refers to the majority ethnic group in Laos (Gordon, 2004, 2010; Manke & Keller, 2006; Ngo, 2009; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Palmer & Maramba, 2015; Shah, 2007; Uy, 2018).
4. “Laotian” denotes all people and things from the country of Laos (Baum & Flores, 2011; Gordon, 2011; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Paik et al., 2017a, 2017b; Palmer & Maramba, 2015; Shah, 2007; Thikeo et al., 2015).
5. “Model Minority Myth” is the notion that all Asian Americans, regardless of generation, immigration status, history, language, culture, are all successful economically, educationally, and socially in the United States of America (Museus, 2013; Museus et al., 2016; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Paik et al., 2017a, 2017b; Palmer & Maramba, 2015; Uy, 2018; Wing, 2007).
6. “Southeast Asian Americans” represent a variety of Asian ethnic groups from the countries of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam (Gordon, 2011; Museus, 2013; Museus et al., 2016; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Paik et al., 2017a, 2017b; Palmer & Maramba, 2015).

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

This literature review seeks to better understand the challenges and successes of higher educational achievement levels of Lao American students. Asian Americans are considered the “model minority” as they do not face the same educational and socioeconomical challenges other communities of color endure across the United States. However, Asian Americans are not a homogenous group and have different migration stories which impact not only their arrival in the country but also their community status. Therefore, to assume that Lao Americans are similar to their Asian American counterparts in terms of education and socioeconomic status simply due to their shared geography is unfounded. Lao Americans have not had a smooth transition into American culture and communities. In fact, many Lao Americans live below the poverty level and have not achieved academically. Thus, this literature review will attempt to deconstruct the model minority myth by telling the Lao American story starting in Laos to fleeing Southeast Asia as political refugees and ultimately resettling in communities across the United States.

In reviewing the literature, it is apparent that there is a lack of research that focuses primarily on the educational experiences and outcomes of Lao Americans. For this literature review, there are only six peer-reviewed articles that solely addresses the Lao American community. The other articles reflect experiences of Asian Americans in general and then Southeast Asian Americans in particular. As a result, the themes that have come from the studies take into account the broader Asian and Southeast Asian American communities to make connections to the Lao American community. The three themes that emerged are the following: (a) Challenges of being Asian in America, (b) Impact of family and culture on educational

attainment, and (c) Value of support networks. Within “Challenges of being Asian in America,” there are two subsections: (a) Model minority myth and (b) Ethnic and racial identity development. There are also two subsections in “Impact of family and culture on educational attainment”: (a) The role of family and parents in education and (b) Cultural impact on education. Lastly, there is a section on the “Value of support networks”.

The literature review begins with a section on Southeast Asians in America which provides the background of the Southeast Asian American history, followed by the discussion of emergent themes from existing literature.

Southeast Asians in America

This section begins with a brief history of Southeast Asia, the “American War in Southeast Asia”, followed by the resettlement of Southeast Asian political refugees in the United States.

Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam

The countries of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam reside in mainland Southeast Asia, geographically south of China and east of India. Myanmar and Thailand are also a part of mainland Southeast Asia while the countries of Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore represent maritime Southeast Asia. However, for the purpose of this research, “Southeast Asian Americans” represent a variety of Asian ethnic groups from the countries of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam (Gordon, 2011; Museus, 2013; Museus et al., 2016; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Paik et al., 2017a, 2017b; Palmer & Maramba, 2015). Southeast Asian Americans refer only to people from the three countries as a result of the U.S.’s involvement in the American War in Southeast Asia which resulted in the mass exodus of refugees from these particular countries. Furthermore, as a point of clarification, while the names Cambodia, Laos, and

Vietnam all refer to the nation-states, the terms Cambodian, Laotian, and Vietnamese refer to people from each of those countries respectively, regardless of ethnic affiliation. Much like the ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity that exists within the United States of America, there is also ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity within the three countries as well. This research will focus specifically on the experience of Lao Americans, with “Lao” or “Lowland Lao” referring to the majority ethnic group in Laos (Gordon, 2004, 2010; Manke & Keller, 2006; Ngo, 2009; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Palmer & Maramba, 2015; Shah, 2007; Uy, 2018).

American War in Southeast Asia

Following World War II, the struggle to regain independence from France intensified in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam (Bankston III & Hidalgo, 2007; Takaki, 1998). French colonialism in Southeast Asia began in 1887 and ultimately, in 1954 the French signed the Geneva Agreements which gave Cambodia and Laos complete independence while partitioning Vietnam at the 17th parallel with a Communist-dominated northern region and southern region supported by the United States (Bankston III & Hidalgo, 2007; Takaki, 1998). As the Cold War was raging between the United States countering China and the Soviet Union, mainland Southeast Asia became a geopolitical hotspot to stem the tide of Communism. In 1965, heavy American military involvement in Southeast Asia increased significantly as President Johnson ordered bombing raids in an undeclared war (Bankston III & Hidalgo, 2007; Fong, 2002; Takaki, 1998). The “war” ended in 1975 with Communist regimes taking power in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam setting the stage for a mass exodus of refugees from the region to countries across the globe (Bankston III & Hidalgo, 2007; Fong, 2002; Takaki, 1998).

Southeast Asian Refugee Resettlement in the United States

The American War in Southeast Asia ended in 1975 resulting in the first of three waves of refugees being resettled in the United States of America. The first wave of refugees (1975-79) was educated professionals with connections to the U.S. military (Fong, 2002; Gordon, 2004; Ngo & Lee, 2007). Second wave refugees (1979-82) were mostly family members of the first wave (Fong, 2002; Gordon, 2004; Ngo & Lee, 2007). The third wave of refugees, from 1982 on, were typically uneducated farmers who spent years in refugee camps in Thailand before resettling in America (Fong, 2002; Gordon, 2004, 2010; Ngo & Lee, 2007). While the first and second wave refugees were primarily educated, well-connected, and Vietnamese, the third wave of refugees were not educated nor connected and comprised mostly Lao, Hmong, Mien, Cambodian, and other ethnic minority refugees from the region (Fong, 2002; Gordon, 2004, 2010; Museus, 2013; Ngo & Lee, 2007). Thus, the challenges of assimilation and adaptation to “Western” culture and ways of life were much more difficult for the third wave of refugees due to their past life circumstances stemming from their countries of origin (Gordon, 2004, 2010; Museus, 2013; Ngo & Lee, 2007). Furthermore, the socioeconomic and educational attainment levels of the third wave of refugees are much lower compared to not only other Asian Americans, but also compared to Southeast Asian Americans from the first and second waves (Museus, 2013; Truong & Miller, 2018). Therefore, to fully comprehend the extraordinarily complex Southeast Asian American experience requires the acknowledgement of the communities’ involuntary migration in addition to time of exodus from the war-torn region.

It is within this particular context of the American War in Southeast Asia leading to an exodus of refugees from the countries of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam that explains the current Lao American experience. Unfortunately, utilizing the metrics of educational attainment levels

and socioeconomic statuses, Lao Americans are underperforming compared to other Asian American communities. However, the limited research will provide insights on the challenges of being Lao in America as the community contends with the model minority myth, resettlement, and institutional and structural racism.

Challenges of Being Asian in America

This section begins with an examination of the negative impacts of the model minority myth on Southeast Asian Americans followed by the role ethnic and racial identity development plays for Southeast Asian Americans.

Model Minority Myth

The term “Asian American” is a political term stemming from the 1960s (Omi & Winant, 1994). As previously noted, the vast majority of Southeast Asian Americans did not begin arriving in the United States until after the war ended in 1975. Therefore, to group Southeast Asian Americans with other groups of Asian ancestry is incomprehensible given the simple fact that the community was not even living in the country when the term was first coined. Years later in the mid-1960s, magazines and newspapers began publishing articles and reports highlighting the successes of “Asian Americans” and promoting the “model minority myth” (Fong, 2002; Lee, 2007). Once again, Southeast Asian Americans have yet to arrive in the United States, nonetheless they would be considered both Asian American and the model minority due to geography and country of origin.

One myth perpetuated by the model minority myth is that Asian Americans are doing well economically by examining their median family incomes. However, while the median family income of Asian Americans is higher than Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics, it is due in part to Asian families having more income earners within the same household (Fong, 2002; Takaki,

1998; Wu, 2002). For many Asian American families and households, it is typical to have multiple generations living together resulting in more than just one or two working adults in the home. Furthermore, Asian Americans tend to live in the states of California, Hawaii, and New York which all have higher incomes and costs of living, further skewing the data (Takaki, 1998; Wu, 2002). Digging into the data further, Fong (2002) notes, “At the same time, all Southeast Asian refugee groups suffered extremely high rates of poverty” (p. 68). By failing to analyze and disaggregate the data, the assumption is made that all Asian Americans are doing well given their substantial incomes, but that is not the case, especially for Southeast Asian Americans. The second myth perpetrated by the model minority myth is that all Asian Americans are “smart” and “well-educated”. However, the data show that Southeast Asian Americans in general and Lao Americans specifically constantly underperforming and underachieving compared to other Asian Americans (see Tables 1 and 2; Fong, 2002; Museus, 2013; Museus et al., 2016; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Paik et al., 2017a; Palmer & Maramba, 2015; Uy, 2018). The model minority myth continues to falsify the Asian American experience resulting in the erasing of the challenges and difficulties minority communities within the Asian American diaspora endure daily.

Educational impact of the model minority myth. As a result of the model minority myth, data on Asian Americans continue to be aggregated and there is a false binary. The aggregation of data on Asian American communities perpetuates the model minority myth (Museus & Kiang, 2009; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Poon et al., 2016; Teranishi, 2002). There is a considerable lack of scholarship on the Asian American educational experience given their inherent status as the model minority (Suyemoto et al., 2009; Takaki, 1998; Wu, 2002). Subsequently, Asian Americans are not considered underrepresented and do not require additional educational funding from the federal government (Museus & Kiang, 2009). Asian

Americans are also being excluded from the development of educational services and programs while simultaneously omitted from policies regarding equity and social justice reforms (Teranishi & Kim, 2017). Furthermore, educational structural challenges like adequate funding, culturally competent educators and curriculum, in addition to ineffective tracking policies are not being addressed (Ngo & Lee, 2007). Secondly, the model minority myth creates a false binary in which Asian Americans are stereotyped to be “all successful or all in gangs” (Ngo & Lee, 2007; Teranishi, 2002; Uy, 2018). The model minority myth assumes that all Asian Americans are academically superior leading to exceedingly high expectations from instructors, counselors, and classmates (Museus, 2008; Teranishi, 2002). Students internalized the model minority myth leading to self-imposed pressures and conforming behaviors (Museus, 2008; Teranishi, 2002). Conversely, while a subset of the Asian American population is stereotyped to be high achieving, the rest of the community is negatively associated with being involved with gangs (Ngo & Lee 2007; Teranishi, 2002; Uy, 2018). For Asian Americans racialized as “gang members”, students reported lower teacher expectations and less support compared to other Asian Americans (Teranishi, 2002; Uy, 2018). Consequently, students were not placed in college preparatory courses, instead, they were assigned to vocational courses limiting their future educational opportunities (Teranishi, 2002). Should data regarding the Asian American community remain aggregated, marginalized subgroups will suffer without necessary institutional and structural educational supports as they simultaneously battle the false binary that has led to unequitable educational outcomes.

Moreover, the model minority myth also pits subjugated communities against one another. In examining the Southeast Asian community in the United States, Ngo and Lee (2007) observed the Vietnamese community with higher standardized test scores, college attendance

rates, and professional success relative to the Cambodian and Lao communities, who were struggling as a group. The researchers also noted that the relative success of the Vietnamese community may be partly due to their earlier arrival in the United States and ability to establish community and support networks. As a result of the Vietnamese community's assimilation and transition into mainstream America, it is then assumed that other communities fleeing the American War in Southeast Asia would fair just as well. However, that has not been the case for all communities in general and the Lao community specifically and it only perpetuates the model minority myth. To meet the challenges of all Asian Americans generally, and Southeast Asian Americans specifically, the model minority must be debunked to ensure that community members are viewed as individuals with unique experiences and histories with specific needs and wants.

Racial discrimination and prejudice. Asian Americans continue to face racial discrimination and prejudice. Historically, Asian Americans have had to contend with exclusive laws and policies such as the Chinese Exclusion Act, Alien Land Laws, and Japanese internment as the communities continue to combat the model minority myth and the “perpetual foreigner” perception today. Due to their physical appearance, Asian Americans are not considered Americans; instead, they are constantly viewed as perpetual foreigners regardless of citizenship or immigration status (Fong, 2002; Wu, 2002). Thus, Asian Americans are subjected to the follow-up question of “Where are you REALLY from?” after they have already answered “Where are you from?” As evidenced by the current worldwide global pandemic in response to COVID-19, the discrimination and prejudice against Asian Americans persist. In addition to the derogatory catchphrases of “Chinese flu” or “Kung flu”, there have been countless reports of physical altercations and attacks against Asian Americans in the United States. Therefore, the

dominant narratives of both the model minority and perpetual foreigner are equally damaging and damning for Asian Americans as they attempt to counter these misconceived perceptions of the entire community.

Ethnic and Racial Identity Development

Positive ethnic and racial identity development are important factors in the educational attainment of Southeast Asian American students (Museus et al., 2016; Ngo, 2009; Uy, 2018). Educators, whether they know it or not, play a crucial role in the identity development of their students (Uy, 2018). Teachers' perceptions and understanding of students' ethnic and racial identity may positively or negatively affect the student-teacher relationship. In addition, students' self-image may be impacted as they are choosing their ethnic identities and self-identifying as "hyphenated" ethnic Americans (Uy, 2018). Moreover, Uy (2018) states, "Southeast Asian-American students made conscious choices about their ethnic identity, despite the fact that their teachers' were normally blind to the ethnic distinctions" (p. 412). This hybrid identity allows them to maintain their families' cultural heritage while also embracing the American culture and values simultaneously.

However, these identities are neither consistent nor finite (Ngo, 2009). Students may struggle to find the balance between their families' identity and the "American" way of life. To complicate matters further, Uy (2018) found that the Lao students in her study were perceived as either "all smart" or "all in gangs". As Lao Americans, these students are racialized to be Asian American which means they are the model minority and high achieving students. However, within the community where the research was conducted, Asian Americans were often stereotyped as "gang members" (Uy, 2018). Therefore, to move beyond the distinct binaries of

good/bad, black/white, modern/traditional, there needs to be an examination of what happens in between (Ngo, 2009).

Though ethnic and racial identity and identification may be complex, positive physical, epistemological, and transformational cultural connections prove to be important in college success (Museus et al., 2016). Physical cultural connections provide space for students to interact with members of their own cultural communities on campus. Epistemological cultural connections allow students the opportunity to acquire and share knowledge about their cultural communities. Transformational cultural connections occur when students are able to engage in community activism and service-learning programs related to their cultural heritage. These spaces for community and cultural connections appear to significant indicators of college success for southeast Asian American students (Museus et al., 2016). While identity formation is complicated and multifaceted in this pluralistic society, positive self-identification for Southeast Asian American students proves to be an asset in their educational success (Museus et al., 2016; Ngo, 2009; Uy, 2018).

Impact of Family and Culture on Educational Attainment

This section starts with the role of family and parents in education and concludes with the cultural impact on education.

The Role of Family and Parents in Education

Parents view education as a foundational path towards upward economic and social mobility (Manke & Keller, 2006; Museus, 2013; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Paik et al., 2017a). Parents emphasize the value and importance of education and expect their children to not only go to college, but graduate as well (Museus, 2013). Thus, the family unit in addition to parents are crucial resources to the success of children within the family (Manke & Keller, 2006; Ngo,

2009). Within the household, parents provide the economic support and stability while also providing emotional support and encouragement when needed. Furthermore, as Museus (2013) found in his study, students understand the sacrifices that their parents have made and feel indebted towards them to succeed academically. Siblings also serve an important role in the family as role models and motivators to younger siblings as they transfer knowledge regarding their journeys through the American educational systems (Palmer & Maramba, 2015). However, while family and parents are important to the educational successes of children, they may also serve as roadblocks.

Parents can negatively influence the educational trajectories of their children in the following ways: (a) Parental educational background and (b) Extreme parental pressure. As first-generation Americans, many refugees came to the United States without any formal education in Southeast Asia and have received little to no additional education upon arrival (Keller & Manke, 2006; Palmer & Maramba, 2015; Shah, 2007; Uy, 2018; Wing, 2007). Thus, as parents to 1.5- and second-generation Americans, parents are unable to help their children navigate through the educational system successfully as they have not gone through the process themselves (Palmer & Maramba, 2015; Uy, 2018). Extreme parental pressure is also detrimental to students. In his study, Museus (2013) made the following findings regarding parental pressure: (a) excessive parental pressures, (b) lower expectations for women than for men, and (c) students pressured by parents into certain majors. Parents may expect too much from their children and place undue burden on them. On the other hand, parents may succumb to gendered stereotypes and preclude their daughters from pursuing certain fields while encouraging their sons to take on whatever challenges that may arise. Knowing that a “good” education may lead to a stable job and career, parents may also consider “advising” their children to take-on specific

major and degree paths over other “lesser” endeavors. As a result of these extreme parental pressures, some students had negative educational experiences, which shows that family and parents can have both positive and negative educational influences.

Cultural Impact on Education

Lao cultural values of hard work, patience, and family may also lead to greater student academic success in schools (Manke & Keller, 2006; Ngo & Lee, 2007; Shah, 2007). In their 2006 case study of Lao newcomers in Bluff Creek, Minnesota, Manke and Keller determined that Lao culture and families emphasized personal needs, respect, and hospitality. These values enabled the Lao community to successfully adapt to their new environment and interact well with others. As a result, Lao families in Bluff Creek were able to raise their children with their cultural values while journeying through the local educational systems. The consistency of home and school life proved beneficial with the data showing Lao students in Bluff Creek with high school graduation rates comparable to the natives and making 15% of the honor roll (Manke & Keller, 2006). Additionally, Shah (2007) states, “...for this group of second-generation Laotian girls, ethnicity... serve as a distinct form of social capital that can facilitate access to resources and educational achievement” (p. 36). By embracing their ethnicity and cultural background, the girls in this study were able to gain access to resources that would help them achieve academically. Therefore, there appears to be a positive correlation between positive cultural values and ethnic identity with educational achievement within the Lao American community.

Value of Support Networks

Support networks for any community are invaluable, but these networks are even more important to immigrant and refugee populations in relation to their educational endeavors (Baum & Flores, 2011; Manke & Keller, 2006; Paik et al., 2017a; Palmer & Maramba, 2015; Shah,

2007; Uy, 2018; Wing, 2007). School-based supportive relationships between administrators, guidance counselors, teachers, and students in addition to supportive organizations and student services all lead to greater student academic performance (Baum & Flores, 2011; Palmer & Maramba, 2015; Uy, 2018). Thus, Wing (2007) argues that "...it is more urgent to understand the factors influencing low-achieving Asian students, because they are the ones most in need of educational intervention and support" (p. 457). Lao students are not achieving compared their Asian American counterparts and as a result are not doing well socioeconomically, which means they would benefit from all of the support networks available to them. One support could be identifying community leaders to serve as aides and parent liaisons at the local school sites as Manke and Keller (2006) found in their study. Furthermore, the research appears to suggest that women are more likely to not only seek support, but also participate in various programs, so they may potentially serve as conduits in families to transfer knowledge from those resources to other family members and relatives (Shah, 2007; Thikeo et al., 2015). Should students succeed and extend their education beyond high school, it becomes paramount to identify supportive organizations and student services at their institution of higher learning. Supportive organizations and student services offer students academic and social services and supports needed to thrive on campus (Palmer & Maramba, 2015). To support students academically require a myriad of support networks especially for Lao American students with their unique backgrounds and histories.

Summary

Upon reviewing the literature, Lao American higher educational achievement levels can be understood by reexamining the model minority myth, ethnic and racial identity formation, family and culture, and support networks. First of all, Lao American higher educational

achievement levels challenge the model minority myth as the community is not performing nor attaining the success of other Asian American communities. Secondly, the model minority myth also has a negative impact on ethnic and identity formation within the community as members are stigmatized as either high-achieving or on the opposite spectrum as low-performing and detrimental to society. Family and culture appear to have positive impacts on educational journeys; however, families, and in particular parents, may be impediments to achievement and success due to unwarranted pressures. Lastly, support networks and an array of resources seem to be the most beneficial and useful to students in navigating the educational systems. Moving forward with the literature review leads to a qualitative study. A basic qualitative research will provide participants with the foundation to reflect upon their educational experiences as Lao American college graduates retroactively and critically.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Lao Americans are not the model minorities, yet their trials and tribulations are not known because society has deemed them to be Asian Americans and therefore do not need the educational, social, and health resources and support services. The history of Lao Americans in the United States begins with the American War in Southeast Asia followed by the mass exodus of refugees resulting in resettlement in communities across the world including the United States. Unfortunately, for Lao Americans, the transition into main American culture and society has not been smooth or seamless. The Lao American community continues to face challenges in adapting to the American way of life resulting in high levels of poverty, incarceration, and incomplete schooling. Only 13% of the Lao American population have obtained a Bachelor's degree or higher. Thus, this study sought to learn from the small number of Lao Americans who hold a higher educational degree to pave the way for younger Lao Americans to find their path towards higher levels of educational attainment. By utilizing a qualitative approach, participants were able to share their stories, challenges and successes, to showcase the Lao American college experience. Based upon the foundations of critical race theory, participants were also able to frame their experiences within systematic and institutional racism to combat the falsehoods of the model minority myth.

Research Design

Approach

To conduct the study, the researcher chose to take a qualitative approach. Qualitative research deals with people's lived experiences and their own interpretations (Creswell, 2012;

Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Roberts, 2016). In other words, participants had the opportunity to not only reflect upon their lives, but also make meaning out of their experiences. Thus, by focusing on Lao Americans who have been able to successfully earn higher educational degrees, the researcher learned from their experiences to better support future Lao Americans pursue their academic and educational goals. Conversely, quantitative research attempts to explain a specific problem or trend by gathering and analyzing data (Creswell, 2012; Roberts, 2016). While the “problem or trend” could be defined as the relatively low higher educational attainment levels of Lao Americans, an analysis of the current data may not be fruitful in understanding how or why some Lao Americans have been able to obtain four-year degrees. Furthermore, as Roberts (2016) explains, “Rather than numbers, the data are words that describe people’s knowledge, opinions, perceptions, and feelings” (p. 143). The researcher wanted to hear from participants regarding their particular experiences in their own words and not simply in the form of datasets and survey responses. Additionally, the varying experiences and responses provided even more rich information as each individual explained their journey and unique path toward completing their studies. Given the goal of the study, it was more appropriate to conduct a qualitative study versus a quantitative study. More specifically, a basic qualitative study was conducted to address the research questions most effectively.

Critical Race Theory

CRT highlights the racial inequities that exist within all of the institutions and systems in the United States in attempts to continually subjugate communities of color. CRT stems from critical legal studies (CLS) when legal scholars of color contended that the social inequities experienced by communities of color were a direct result of overtly racist laws, policies, and governmental and social structures with aims to maintain white superiority and privilege

(Buenavista et al., 2009; Jennings & Marvin, 2005; Kohli, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Lynn & Parker, 2006; Milner, 2008). Thus, CRT not only denounces the notion of a colorblind society, but elevates the fact that society is racialized and inherently racist (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lynn & Parker, 2006). Furthermore, within CRT is the concept of “interest convergence” whereby institutional and systemic changes only occur when it benefits, or is in the interest of, the people in power (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Milner, 2008). As a result, CRT provided a theoretical framework to better understand the Lao American experience in a racialized and racist system that seeks to keep communities of color fighting for limited resources.

CRT in education offers a distinct lens to understand the experiences of Lao Americans and to combat institutional racism. First, CRT in education embraces storytelling as a medium for communities of color to provide a counternarrative to the white hegemonic powers (Buenavista et al., 2009; Kohli, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Rodriguez, 2011). In order to avoid invisibility, it is crucial for communities of color to share their experiences to bring to light their complex histories and challenges in this country. For Lao Americans in particular, storytelling gave this group of individuals the unique opportunity to share their stories which have mostly gone unheard of since their arrival in the United States. Secondly, CRT in education also notes the intersectionality of race and racism with socioeconomic statuses, gender identity, sexual orientation, and other forms of subordination (Buenavista et al., 2009; Kohli, 2012). Therefore, to understand the Lao American experience means to not only talk about race and ethnicity, but also class, location/region, gender, education, immigration status, and the intersectionalities of all those factors. Promoting social justice is also a tenet of CRT in education as advocates continually strive to fight the power structures and uplift communities of

color (Buenavista et al., 2009; Kohli, 2012). In pursuit of social justice, Lao Americans need to be able to first identify the oppressive power structures to be able to take steps towards dismantling those systems. Utilizing the lens of CRT in education, Lao Americans were able to (a) validate their experiences through storytelling, (b) examine the intersectionalities that exist within their lives, and (c) engage in social justice reforms.

Basic Qualitative Research

Basic qualitative researchers seek to understand: “(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 24). The researcher wanted to learn “how people interpreted their experiences” as Lao Americans with a college education. There are a limited number of Lao American college graduates, hence every experience and voice were important in this study. Lao Americans as Asian Americans are misrepresented model minorities, so understanding how this minority Lao American population “constructed their worlds” provided invaluable insights. In addition to their interpretations and construction of worldview, the researcher wanted to investigate “what meaning they attributed to their experiences” as participants reflected upon their educational journeys. “Meaning making” is essential in qualitative research, therefore, it was vital that participants were given the opportunity to move from interpreting their experiences to making meaning out of them. Over the course of this research, participants were able to “tell their stories” by interpreting their experiences, constructing their worlds, and making meaning of their experiences. This process of “storytelling” is not only aligned with basic qualitative research but is also one of the major tenets of critical race theory, the guiding theoretical framework of this study. Both CRT and basic qualitative research provided participants a platform to reflect upon their specific

educational journeys critically and retrospectively with the hope that participants gained a deeper understanding of their own experiences in addition to providing future Lao American scholars a pathway towards success.

Participants

The population in this study was Lao Americans. From this population, the researcher selected a sample of Lao Americans who had earned a Bachelor's degree or higher. Therefore, the participants met the following requirements to take part in the study: (a) self-identified as Lao or Lao American, (b) was 1.5- or second-generation Lao or Lao American, (c) was between the ages 21-36, (d) completed at least a Bachelor's degree, and (e) resided in the United States of America at the time of the study. While interviewing Lao Americans who did not have a Bachelor's degree may have provided additional context of the overall Lao American experience, the researcher wanted to learn from Lao Americans who had completed their studies to determine best practices for the community to continue pursuing higher education.

Selection Procedures

Purposeful sampling was used to identify the participants that met the requirements of the study. Specifically, a unique group of participants was selected due to their atypical attributes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this case, the atypical attribute was a higher education degree because only 13% of Lao Americans have a Bachelor's degree or higher (Uy, 2018). The goal of the study was to understand the educational experience of recent Lao American college graduates, so participants fell within the 21-36 age range. In addition to meeting the age requirement, self-identifying as either Lao or Lao American, being 1.5- or second-generation Lao or Lao American, and holding at least a Bachelor's degree, participants must have resided in the United States of American to take part in the interviews. Gender identity was not a factor in

selecting participants, however, every effort was made to have a representative sample of genders in the research.

Participants were recruited utilizing social media platforms, specifically Facebook groups. Lao Americans are becoming more visible online, so there was an opportunity to outreach to Lao Americans to participate in the study. Due to the overwhelming response rates, purposeful sampling was utilized to select a unique sample.

Data Collection

Interviews and the initial intake survey were the primary tools for collecting data in this study. Participants participated in one one-on-one semi-structured interview that lasted between half-an-hour to one hour in length. Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to have both pre-written questions (see Appendix B) in addition to asking questions based upon the responses from participants during the interviews (Creswell, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Moreover, the semi-structured interview offered the researcher some flexibility in writing the questions and adjusting as needed during the interviews. In addition to interviews, participants also completed an initial intake survey (see Appendix A). Participants completed the survey prior to the interview to ensure they met the eligibility requirements of the study. The survey had three sections: (a) general information, (b) background information, and (c) education.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) state that the purpose of basic qualitative research is “to understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences” (p. 24). Given the purpose of basic qualitative research, it was more than appropriate to utilize interviews to learn directly from participants regarding their life and experiences. Therefore, the validity and reliability of the instruments was determined by the responses from the participants. The answers did not vary drastically; therefore, the questions were not adjusted, ensuring reliability

across multiple interviews. While the interviews were semi-structured, there were indeed some similarities and commonalities between the responses participants provided throughout the interviews.

Data Collection Procedure

Upon receiving confirmation of interest, potential participants were directed to complete the initial intake survey. Based upon the survey responses, prospective participants were emailed a letter with a full description of the study which acknowledged that they have met the eligibility requirements and requested their participation. Participants were directed to digitally sign and remit the informed consent form (see Appendix C). Due to the overwhelming response rate and interest to take part in the study, an amendment was submitted to the researcher's IRB administrator seeking approval to expand the number of participants. Once 25 participants were identified, 16 participants were contacted to sign and remit the informed consent forms digitally. After each signed consent was received, participants were contacted to schedule a one-on-one semi-structured interview via Zoom. The 16 interviews were conducted over a three-week period in March 2021 and lasted between half-an-hour to one hour in length. Throughout the one-on-one interviews, the researcher took copious notes in addition to having all sessions audio/video recorded with prior consent from the interviewees.

Data Analysis

The main component of data analysis is coding the data to determine categories or themes (Creswell, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Roberts, 2010). Data analysis occurred over seven different stages: (a) reviewing fieldnotes, (b) open coding transcripts, (c) preliminary exploratory analysis, (d) analytical or axial coding, (e) saturation, (f) layering the analysis, and (g) initial findings. Data analysis began with the very first interview. During the interviews, the researcher

took copious notes to not only highlight responses, but also asked follow-up questions and requested participants to “dive-deeper” to particular statements. Thus, the first step in the data analysis process was to review the fieldnotes and comb over them to find any potential codes that may have stood out. In the second stage, open coding was used to review all of the transcripts from the interviews. Open coding offered the researcher the flexibility and possibility to make any reactions or codes on the transcripts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The next step was to complete a preliminary exploratory analysis, which provided a general sense of the data and determined whether or not more data is needed (Creswell, 2012). Upon completing the preliminary exploratory analysis, the researcher determined that there was enough data and no need to schedule follow-up interviews with participants to gather more data. Analytical or axial coding is when the codes can be grouped or categorized (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Utilizing the fieldnotes, open coding, and preliminary exploratory analysis, the researcher started to develop themes and truly made sense of the data. “Saturation is the point where you have identified the major themes and no new information can add to your list of themes or to the detail of existing themes” (Creswell, 2012, p. 251). At this point of saturation in the data analysis process, the researched presented these themes to the participants through the process of member checking to ensure that the researcher has correctly interpreted their responses. The next to last step was layering the analysis by combining the themes into more sophisticated or broader themes (Creswell, 2012). By layering the themes into broader themes, the researcher was able to organize them and draft initial findings with multiple themes supporting the more sophisticated ones in the last step of the data analysis process.

During the data analysis process, the researcher used the following to help make sense of the data: (a) in vivo coding, (b) research questions, and (c) critical race theory. As the researcher

took fieldnotes, conducted open coding, and completed the preliminary exploratory analysis, the researcher used in vivo coding to “state codes in the participant’s actual words” (Creswell, 2012, p. 244). Instead of trying to interpret or reinterpret statements from participants, the researcher simply used their “actual words” as codes which later evolved into themes. Secondly, instead of “getting lost in the weeds” in reviewing the fieldnotes and transcripts, the researcher constantly referred back to the research questions. By doing so, the researched coded any responses that spoke directly to completing a four-year degree, impact of social and educational institutions, and the model minority myth. Lastly, as critical race theory grounded this research, the researched also coded statements that highlighted challenges against systems of oppression and institutional and structural racism. Utilizing these three strategies over the course of the data analysis process supported the researcher in remaining consistent and focused during the seven stages of data analysis.

Trustworthiness

Member checking and triangulation was used to ensure trustworthiness of the data. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) state that “Triangulation using multiple sources of data means comparing and cross-checking data collected through observations at different times or in different places, or interview data collected from people with different perspectives or from follow-up interviews with the same people” (p. 245). Therefore, by interviewing multiple people, the data will be triangulated and thus inherently more credible. Furthermore, member checking was offered to all participants to ensure the accuracy of their testimonials (Creswell, 2012). The research was based upon the lived experiences of Lao Americans, so it was important for each participant to check the completeness of the data and findings. The findings

will not have merit nor be informative should the participants not agree with them as they would not be representative of their lived experiences.

Limitations

Two limitations merit discussion. First, the focus of this research was only on the higher educational experiences of Lao Americans, not Laotian Americans, Southeast Asian Americans, or Asian Americans. While the experiences of other descendants of refugees from Southeast Asia are important as well as Asian Americans in general, this research attempted to fill in the gap in research on Lao Americans in particular. This study, then, focused on a small population within a small population group. Due to the nature of qualitative research, the findings represent the perspectives of those who participated in the study and may not necessarily represent the views of all Lao Americans. However, due to the data collection methods, this study can lead to the development of policies and programs aimed to support the educational aspirations of Lao Americans in other regions in the U.S. Secondly, time was a limitation in this study. Participants only participated in one one-on-one interviews. The time constraints within the interviews may not have offered participants the time and space to fully reflect upon their educational experiences. Given these two limitations, the findings may not be generalizable, but will add to the gap in literature on Lao Americans and provide some insights on the Lao American experience.

Summary

Lao Americans are not the model minority, yet as a subgroup of the Asian American population, they are still considered to be the model minority in the United States of America. This label proves to be problematic because it has obscured the fact that this community is not achieving academically which is leading to the poverty experienced by far too many Lao

Americans. Thus, in order to rectify the current conditions of Lao Americans and to dispel the model minority myth, this research attempted to extract from Lao American college graduates their “road to success”. By learning from Lao Americans who have been able to successfully earn a higher education degree, the researched aimed to transfer that knowledge and success to other Lao Americans. Furthermore, through the research and conversations with these particular Lao Americans, the process can begin to build a support network to help the Lao American community across the United States. As a Lao American, the researched aspired to be a part of the change to be able to change the statistics and uplift an entire community for the betterment of all Lao Americans and their communities.

CRT provides a framework to understand the Lao American experience within a racialized and socialized worldview that propagates white hegemonic superiority. In addition to analyzing the community from a racialized perspective, CRT presented Lao Americans with the opportunity to counter the dominant narratives. This counternarrative began with Lao Americans telling their stories to confirm their existence to be able to see the intersectionalities that are present in their lives to seek and achieve social justice. Thus, CRT was the necessary theoretical framework to utilize to begin the process of bringing to light what was formerly invisible.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Introduction

Only 13% of Lao Americans have a Bachelor's degree or higher Uy (2018). With that statistic in mind, the purpose of this research was to identify the strategies implemented by Lao American college graduates to obtain their four-year degree. To meet the study's purpose, the following research question was utilized: How do Lao Americans complete a four-year degree? Subsequent to the overarching research question are two additional questions: (a) How do educational and social institutions impact Lao American students' stories? and (b) How does the Lao American story challenge the racist misconception of the model minority myth? In addressing both the purpose and research questions, a basic qualitative research was conducted whereby participants volunteered and consented to participate in one-on-one semi-structured interviews via Zoom. Through data analysis that occurred over seven different stages and utilizing Critical Race Theory as a framework to analyze the interview notes and transcripts, the findings are presented in this chapter.

Participants

This section includes background information regarding the participants, an explanation of the pseudonyms, and table with participant information.

Pseudonyms

Participants were asked to identify a favorite Lao dish. A list of favorite Lao dishes was compiled and participants were randomly assigned a dish as their pseudonym. "Pad Kee Mou" or "drunken noodles" is a stir-fried wide rice noodles dish. "Mok Gai" is marinated chicken with lemon grass, kaffir lime leaves, green onions, cilantro, and vermicelli noodles steamed in banana

leaves. “Sai Gawk” is Lao sausage. “Sagoo Yutsai” is a savory pork filled tapioca balls dish. “Thum Maakhoong” is Lao papaya salad. “Peeng Gai” is grilled chicken. “Thom Khem” is a sweet and caramelized pork and boiled eggs dish. “Khaopoon” is red curry noodle soup. “Khaopiek Senh” is Lao noodle soup. “Kai Dow Naam See Ewe” is fried eggs with soy sauce. “Seenh Hangh” is Lao beef jerky. “Thum Maakthaang” is Lao cucumber salad. “Peeng Seenh Moo” is grilled pork. “Nam Khao” is red curry and coconut fried rice. “Khaopiek Khao” is Lao rice porridge soup. “Laab” is a minced meat salad.

Background Information

There was a total of 16 participants who participated in semi-structured Zoom interviews. The interviews ranged from 30 minutes to over an hour long. All participants self-identified as second-generation American. 11 of the 16 participants self-identified as Lao American, four self-identified as both Lao and Lao American, and one participant self-identified as Lao. Four participants were in the 21-24 age group, five in the 25-28 group, three in the 29-32 group, and four in the 33-36 age group. Five participants were from the West US, three Southwest US, five Midwest US, and three Southeast US. Seven participants earned their Bachelors of Arts and nine obtained their Bachelors of Science. Table 4 shows the demographic breakdown of each participant.

Table 4

Participant Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Self-Identify	Age Group	Generation	Region	Degree
Pad Kee Mou	Lao American	21-24	Second	Midwest	BS
Mok Gai	Lao American	21-24	Second	Southwest	BS
Sai Gawk	Lao American	29-32	Second	Southeast	BS
Sagoo Yutsai	Lao American	25-28	Second	West	BS
Thum Maakhoong	Lao and Lao American	21-24	Second	Southwest	BA
Peeng Gai	Lao American	29-32	Second	West	BS
Thom Khem	Lao American	33-36	Second	West	BS
Khaopoon	Lao American	25-28	Second	West	BA
Khaopiek Senh	Lao American	33-36	Second	West	BA
Kai Dow Naam See Ewe	Lao American	29-32	Second	Midwest	BS
Seenh Hangh	Lao American	25-28	Second	Southeast	BA
Thum Maakthaang	Lao and Lao American	25-28	Second	Midwest	BA
Peeng Seenh Moo	Lao American	33-36	Second	Southeast	BA
Nam Khao	Lao and Lao American	21-24	Second	Southwest	BA
Khaopiek Khao	Lao	25-28	Second	Midwest	BS
Laab	Lao and Lao American	33-36	Second	Midwest	BS

Findings

As a result of the data analysis, five main themes were identified: (a) Lao American Students' Stories in K-12, (b) Lao American Students' Stories in Higher Education, (c) Lao American Counternarratives, (d) Lao American Pathways to Degree Completion, and (e) Words of Wisdom. Each theme is also supported by subthemes. These themes and subthemes will be discussed in the following sections and subsections.

Lao American Students' Stories in K-12

The interview questions provided participants the opportunity to reflect upon their K-12 educational experiences as Lao American students. Based upon their responses and further analysis of the researcher's interview notes and transcripts, three subthemes were identified to

support the theme Lao American Students' Stories in K-12. Each subtheme will be discussed further in the following subsections.

Do I speak English? All 16 of the of the participants were born in the United States and self-identified as second-generation, yet there were questions regarding their English language abilities early-on in their education. As a result, participants recalled their challenges with being designated as English Language Learners (ELLs) and consequently placed in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. Two participants felt that they were misplaced in ESL classes simply because they were quiet and shy in class, not due to the fact that they did not speak nor understand English. Sai Gawk said, "Most of the time I was very quiet. And so quiet that they thought I didn't know English." This sentiment was also shared by Peeng Seenh Moo, who said, "I didn't speak a lot, because you know, I was kind of shy." In addition to educators and administrators misperceiving quiet and shy students as non-English speakers, one participant felt stereotyped. Thum Maakhoong reflected, "I thought that I spoke English, but I guess there was this perception that because I was brown... that I wasn't able to speak English." Pad Kee Mou also felt that being placed in ESL was a mistake, "I remember that they mistaken my lisp for just needing to be in ESL because I would pronounce father as flower." While some participants expressed frustration with their ELL status and subsequent placement in ESL classes, two participants shared their challenges with the English language.

Thom Khem shared, "I guess my English wasn't very strong because we spoke Lao a lot, um, to the point where I guess my teacher put me in, like, ESL, because she felt my English wasn't on par." Similarly, Khaopiek Senh said, "I would say that I struggled mostly with English because again I learned how to speak Lao." Khaopiek Senh also shared taking English classes in conjunction with ESL classes to further develop and support her English language

skills. The experiences from these participants highlight both the misperceptions of Asian Americans and subsequently, Lao Americans as non-English speakers in addition to the very real challenges students encounter in navigating educational systems that are primarily taught in English.

Parents did not know how to help me. The participants self-identified as second-generation which means, by definition, they are the children of refugees for the purposes of this research. Therefore, with refugee parents, participants shared the lack of education their parents received in Laos in addition to receiving little to no formal education upon arriving in the United States of America. As a result, for the participants, their parents did not know how to help them when it came to supporting them educationally because they did not have the luxury of experiencing the American education system for themselves. Aside from providing motivation and encouragement in addition to basic necessities, refugee parents did not have the resources, experiences, or social networks to be able to support their children to navigate through the complexities of American education. In addition to English being a barrier, content knowledge was also a limiting factor, as well as time as many parents were working multiple jobs.

For parents who were able to support their children, there came a point in which they were no longer able to help due to the unfamiliar content. This experience of children outgrowing their parents educationally was shared by six participants explicitly. Khaopiek Khao emphasized, “That’s where they got to the point of like, I don’t know if I can help anymore, like, you’re kind of on your own after, after eighth grade.” Similarly, Laab recalled, “Then after ninth grade, it just became, I think a bit more advanced and they were very, very hands off after that.” Mok Gai said, “I transitioned more into outgrowing what they could have taught me and what they understood” in reflecting upon her parents’ role in her education. Thum Maakhoong

remembered, “They did not have a real understanding of really what I was learning.” Pad Kee Mou added, “I think my parents can help me until they got to the harder stuff.” Seenh Hangh stated, “When it got to like, the older grades, where she wasn’t, you know, able to help as much.” While their parents would have supported them more, these participants in particular all experienced a cutoff point in which their parents were unable to help because they did not have the education or content expertise to assist.

The English language, time, and lack of any formal educational experience were also factors that prevented parents from supporting their children. Thum Maakthaang stated, “I don’t think that was even something they could do, just because they were never in my shoes like that” in referencing his parents’ role in his education. Sagoo Yutsai also pointed out that her “education wasn’t necessarily prioritized” growing up given her family dynamics and parents’ level of education. Furthermore, Kai Dow Naam See Ewe recalled “I lacked like a lot of guidance on the resources” and how “a lot of people would like give suggestions, but they wouldn’t mentor me on how to get going.” Finally, Peeng Seenh Moo summarized his parents’ role in his education by stating, “They didn’t because my parents only have a certain limited amount of education, you know, especially because our curriculum is taught in English.” He also emphasized that “my mom and dad had to work and so, my education was almost like independent.” Although the individual experiences of these participants varied, they all experienced major parental voids in their childhood education leading them to navigate the schooling systems independently without the appropriate supports and structures in place to optimize success. Without the English language skills, specific content knowledge, time, and resources, these refugee parents were unable to support their children all the way through their schooling experience.

Know history, know self; no history, no self. During the interviews, participants were asked about Lao American history and whether or not it was taught in the classrooms. Their responses highlighted the importance of inclusion, family, impact of war and the model minority myth, and the lack of Lao American awareness within mainstream American media and consciousness. Participants recalled that if Lao American history was taught, it was lectured within the context of the “Vietnam War”. Khaopiek Senh explained, “They did not teach any, anything about like what happened in Laos, Vietnam War, and if they did talk about the Vietnam War, it was just about Vietnam only and their people.” Peeng Seenh Moo added, “You’re never told about the Secret War in Laos... you’re not taught about the migration of millions of Lao and Cambodian people to the United States.” Sai Gawk wished, “I would like to learn more about Laos myself, of how the US was involved in, in Laos.” As a result of Lao American history only being covered in conjunction with the Vietnam War, participants felt excluded versus included with their peers and local community.

With Lao American history being left out of the curriculum, participants felt disconnected with their families. Khaopoon emphasized, “If I had learned more about Lao American or Lao history, I would have been a lot more curious about learning the history of my, my family.” Seenh Hangh stressed, “I think that that’s something that’s important to know, like, who you are, where you came from, and like all of that.” By not learning about Lao American history, Thum Maakthaang felt that he lost his chance to connect with his dad, “If I were to have had that experience in K through 12, um, you know, it definitely would have, you know, allowed me to be much closer to my dad.” Nam Khao encapsulated the responses from both Seenh Hangh and Thum Maakthaang by stating, “It would have definitely benefited myself by allowing me to know my origin and understanding what our people had gone through.” No history, no

self as Khaopiek Khao mentioned, “I think a lot of kids don’t really, even my age, I don’t think they fully understand, like how their parents came here, like how did they get here, what city they came to.” These participants were unable to explore their Lao American history and identities in school resulting in lost educational opportunities and connections within their own families.

The impact of war and the model minority myth were also underscored by participants in the absence of the inclusion of comprehensive Lao American history. Pad Kee Mou stated, “They don’t really teach that how, when America bombs a country, like how it affects people.” In addition to the mass exodus of people, war also negatively impacts the educational, economical, physiological, and psychological outcomes of people, not to mention the severing of families, communities, and countries. Due to the lack of educating the public on Lao American history feeds into the misperception of Lao Americans as model minorities. Thom Khem challenged the false narrative by stating, “I fit into this little picture of like model minority, like, oh, this Asian person, she’s doing just fine, she doesn’t need any help because she’s doing just great.” However, she did need support as she explained, “When in actuality, it was very difficult, very, very difficult, like I was put into ESL because my parents didn’t know how to speak English correctly and I was having a very hard time.” Without robust discussions on the impact of war and the model minority myth, these two participants felt that their individual needs were not met.

Lao Americans remain largely invisible and unknown in mainstream American media and within the general population. However, if Lao Americans are known, it can be attributed to the lasting impact of social media and popular culture within the arts and entertainment. Peeng Gai explained, “If I had to think about Lao people in media, the, the biggest, the biggest one

would be King of the Hill.” Apart from King of the Hill, the popular refrain is, “When you talk about Lao Americans, it’s like people don’t know much about them” as Kai Dow Naam See Ewe stated. Should Lao American history been taught and existence penetrated mainstream America, Mok Gai felt, “I do think it would have helped greatly if the other people could put my experiences into that perspective.” Sagoo Yutsai agreed, “There probably would have been a lot of like, saved time, you know, when you just have casual conversations with people.” For Lao Americans to learn Lao American history would lead to Lao Americans learning about their own identities and feel empowered and included to dismantle the harmful misperceptions created by the model minority myth.

Lao American Students’ Stories in Higher Education

The Lao American student college experience has the following subthemes: (a) Where are my Lao people? (b) Where are my resources? and (c) What happened to my grades? The first subtheme summarizes how participants felt being the only Lao American college student on campus. Secondly, without other Lao American college students to turn to and lack of preparation, participants did not have the resources or guidance to easily navigate the institutions, structures, and systems within higher education. Lastly, as the one or only one of a handful of Lao American college students, participants did not feel prepared for college and did not have the resources, resulting in their grades dropping dramatically.

Where are my Lao people? From the moment the participants stepped onto their respective college campuses, they immediately noticed two things: (a) there were no other Lao students and (b) there were mostly white students and faculty members on campus. Seenh Hangh pointed out, “There also wasn’t like a lot of Lao people or even people from similar backgrounds.” Khaopiek Senh also noted, “The challenge for me, there was, I didn’t feel like I

fit in, because, again, they're mostly Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese, very little Laotian or Thai." Khaopiek Khao summed up the preceding sentiments by stating, "Oh, culture shock, it was a big culture shock. It was the number of minorities that weren't there." By pointing out the "number of minorities that weren't there", Khaopiek Khao highlighted the whiteness of the campuses, which other participants corroborated. Khaopoon reflected, "And when I went to college, I saw a lot of just white people." Seenh Hangh had a similar experience, "Like the population was so different, it was like, mainly white students." Thum Maakthaang also discussed the impact of "being Asian American on a predominantly white campus." For Mok Gai, Khaopiek Khao, and Laab, the whiteness and maleness were even more prevalent for them as women in the sciences. Khaopiek Khao highlighted, "Like all the courses are just very white and very male, especially in courses I was in." As her coursework became more focused on the sciences, Laab realized, "I had more white students, more white professors because it just became not as generalized." Finally, Mok Gai emphasized the need for diversity within Physics, "These white males, to start thinking about why Physics is so white and male and trying to change that, um, but part of that is professors don't retire." Without other Lao American college students to seek out for mentorship in addition to overwhelming white faculty members, these Lao American students faced numerous challenges and obstacles during their college years.

Where are my resources? Stemming from their parents' arrival as refugees in the United States, participants felt that they were at a major disadvantage compared to their peers on college campuses. First, participants' parents did not have "institutional knowledge" of the systems of higher education since they did not get to experience that for themselves. Secondly, without the education, families also encountered economical and financial challenges as students attempted to navigate higher education for the very first time. Thom Khem, Peeng Seenh Moo,

and Kai Dow Naam See Ewe all highlighted how their parents' lack of institutional knowledge put them at a disadvantage. Thom Khem specifically remembered her parents saying, "We don't know the school system, we don't know how to succeed, so you have to figure it out for you, yourself and your sister." Likewise, Peeng Seenh Moo explained, "The biggest challenge that I had when I started was my mom and dad knew I needed to go to school, but they didn't know where to direct me." Kai Dow Naam See Ewe stated, "Like my parents wanted us to be successful, but at the same time, they didn't provide us, like a roadmap." For these participants in particular, their parents would have loved to have been able to support their students educationally, but they did not have the education nor the experience to help their children.

The lack of education was a direct result of their immigration status as they fled Southeast Asia as political refugees. "When Lao people immigrated here, most of them came from villages, so they don't have a higher education," explained Peeng Gai. Consequently, due to not having generations of college graduates, there were no Lao American college graduates to serve as mentors. Mok Gai stressed that point, "I was, you know, new to college, new to everything and I felt like I really had no one to talk to." Upon reflecting further, Khaopoon realized, "I think one thing that was missing, now I think about it, when it comes to Lao Americans, is that I never really kind of visualized an adult Lao person as a professor or a doctor." Without the generational college experiences to fall back upon also meant that many families suffered economically and financially, forcing their students to work that much harder to survive in college. Pad Kee Mou, Thom Khem, and Khaopoon all alluded to the fact that Lao Americans had a much different socioeconomic status compared to other Americans in general and Asian Americans specifically. "Lao American people, when they came, like their economic wealth is a lot different than if you're a Chinese, if you're Japanese and Korean," said Pad Kee

Mou. Thom Khem agreed, “I feel like a lot of the other people came from more affluent backgrounds or maybe had a lot more resources to succeed.” Khaopoon summarized it all when he stated, “When you come over here after being like a refugee, you’re not coming into a wealthy family, you’re already in last place kind of thing.” Starting in last place led to financial hardships for participants.

For Nam Khao, reality struck during his second year, “It was in my second year, where I got this bill, like you got to pay 10,000 bucks at the end of the month.” Like Nam Khao, Peeng Seenh Moo and Thom Khem also discussed the need to work while in college to support themselves. “Yeah, I can take out a student loan, but who’s going to pay for my apartment, right? So, I had to work, I was working like 30 hours a week,” explained Peeng Seenh Moo. Thom Khem said, “I had to work all the way through college, like it was not easy.” In addition to not having parents with the educational experiences to share with their children, participants’ parents also lacked the financial resources to support their children, forcing students to work during their college years to survive.

What happened to my grades? In the absence of Lao American representation on campus, combined with the lack of generational college experience leading to financial hardships, participants saw their grades drop almost immediately. Sagoo Yutsai encapsulated the confluence of factors when she described her experience, “My first two years of college, there was a lot of transitioning to like providing for myself, just for survival. And so, that’s where I feel like I sacrificed academically a lot.” Thum Maakhoong, Khaopiek Khao, and Khaopoon also experienced academic challenges. “My grades started slipping and I got C’s and D’s and is something that was not very, like common, that I’d ever experienced in my K-12 education experience,” recalled Thum Maakhoong. Similarly, Khaopiek Khao said, “I think that’s because,

being so, you know, such a good student, getting really, really good grades in high school, going into college was a huge academic shock.” Khaopoon remembered, “I felt like when I went to college, I was not as prepared academically. When I first started my freshman year, it was a pretty rough stretch.” The transition to college was difficult for numerous reasons and consequently, the challenges resulted in poor academic performance and slumping grades. As a result, participants had to reconsider their majors and take a more circuitous route to completing their four-year degrees.

Lao American Counternarratives

The Asian American experience is often misinterpreted and misrepresented as one without trials and tribulations. In reality, the Asian American experience and history vary drastically given the tremendous diversity within the community. By highlighting the experiences of Lao Americans, participants offered a counternarrative to challenge the existing misperceptions of both Asian and Lao Americans. This section on Lao American Counternarratives contains three subthemes: (a) Asian American Discrimination and Racism, (b) Economic Hardships, and (c) First-Generation College Student. In the section on Asian American Discrimination and Racism, there are also three subsections: (a) Negative Impact of the Model Minority Myth, (b) Perpetual Foreigners, and (c) Inferior and Uneducated.

Asian American discrimination and racism. The model minority myth suggests that all Asian Americans are successful economically and educationally; however, the experiences of these participants showcased a Lao American story that challenged the racist stereotype. Participants, as Asian and Lao Americans, experienced and faced discrimination and racism as a direct result of the model minority myth. Additionally, participants had to also contend with

discrimination and racism as a result of the perception of Asian Americans as “perpetual foreigners” and Asian Americans being stereotyped as “inferior and uneducated”.

Negative impact of the model minority myth. The model minority myth suggests that all Asian American communities, regardless of immigration status or generation, are successful both economically and educationally. While the myth may appear harmless, participants encountered undue pressure as a direct result of the myth. Sagoo Yutsai and Sai Gawk experienced first-hand the negative impacts of the model minority myth. Sai Gawk explained, “I will get this all the time, where people will assume that I’m automatically good at math because I’m Asian.” Asian Americans succeed academically, especially in math and science is a common stereotype. In recalling her own experiences, Sagoo Yutsai said, “They’re going to assume that, you know, being Asian, you have that upbringing of money, of, you know, people who see you successful, like in your education.” Due to the perceived academic success of Asian Americans, the community is perceived to be wealthy, yet another widespread misperception. Consequently, Mok Gai felt the pressure to perform academically, “I was someone who is supposed to, you know, because of the stereotype, supposed to be doing better for whatever reason.” Furthermore, Peeng Gai faced institution and systemic forms of discrimination and racism that disqualified her from receiving certain scholarships:

There are some scholarships I got denied because of my race. Because you’re Lao American, they go by the US Census Bureau and in the US Census Bureau, they clump you as just Asian and technically Asians aren’t a minority in higher education, so they couldn’t call me a minority to qualify me to even pursue getting an interview.

Once again, Asian Americans are the model minorities, hence they are not considered marginalized or underrepresented based upon aggregated data. The discrimination and racism experienced by these participants highlight that Lao and Asian American communities are not immune to discrimination and racism in spite of their perceived model minority status.

Perpetual foreigners. Lao Americans, like other Asian Americans must also contend with the stereotype that Asian Americans are “perpetual foreigners” and not “really” American. Despite the fact that all participants self-identified as second-generation, meaning they were born in the United States, many still experienced the “othering” and not being fully accepted due to their phenotype. Thum Maakhoong, Laab, Khaopiek Khao, and Nam Khao all experienced discrimination and racism. After class in college, Thum Maakhoong remembered the incident, “One of my classmates said, ‘Oh, by the way, you, your English is really good’ and I said, okay, thanks, it’s my, you know, first language, I was born in the United States.” The assumption being that Asian Americans are all foreigners and therefore do not have strong English language skills. Khaopiek Khao also recalled an incident during a college class, “This girl comments, ‘There’s too many Asians here’, I turn around, I looked at her, like do you really understand what you’re saying?” Stemming from the model minority myth is the assumption that there is an overrepresentation of Asian Americans on college campuses; therefore, Asian Americans should not be taking space away from other marginalized and underrepresented communities. Laab also shared an experience from college, but the discrimination and racism came from the instructor:

I remember when the instructor was talking about like different fruits. She was like, oh my gosh, have you ever had tamarind? And I was like, oh, I know what that is and I was like, I’ve had it before, and she says, you don’t count.

In addition to Asian Americans not speaking English well and an overrepresentation of Asian Americans, Asian Americans must also remain invisible and have their experiences invalidated. Nam Khao recalled racist incidents growing up as well, “I definitely faced a lot of racism from kids, they would call me Jackie Chan or they’ll say things like Ching Chong and like do the things with your eyes.” All Asian Americans are of Chinese descent, have a “funny” way of talking, and have slanted eyes continue to be commonplace to demonize an entire group of

people. The model minority myth offers a utopian image of the Asian American community while ignoring the challenges members face amid the ongoing xenophobia.

Inferior and uneducated. Insidiously, Lao and Asian Americans face both the pressure to do well academically, but also the shame of educational achievements stemming from existing misrepresentations. Thum Maakthaang reflected upon the “Lao” stereotype and said:

The first thing you hear about Lao people, like not a lot of them go to college. They’re very ghetto or you know, they’re from the hood, they’re tatted up, a lot of drug use, a lot of gambling, like those very stereotypical things.

Peeng Gai also experienced the negative impacts of low expectations and not belonging. She vividly recalled the discrimination and racism she experienced in high school, “Are you trying to be something you’re not? Because there’s no, you know, Lao people don’t go to honors class, Lao people aren’t in AP classes.” Thus, Lao Americans and Asian Americans must grapple with the model minority myth that suggests economical and educational achievements, the stigma of being perpetual foreigners and not belonging, in addition to the perception that the communities are uneducated, impoverished, gangsters, and drug addicts. Furthermore, this dichotomy between “haves and have not” and “educated and uneducated” also manifests itself within the psyche of the community. Khaopiek Khao pointed out, “It’s a fairly split community where you have your one side of community, college is not a thing, it’s not happening, then you have your other ones, like yeah, college is the thing they did, you’re creating the legacy.” For Seenh Hangh, this led to internalized racism, “I had this like, internalized, like hatred of being Lao because I looked at it like, how come there’s not more Lao doctors? How come there’s not more Lao people in college?” Consequently, the misrepresentation of all Asian Americans as model minorities and success stories lead to Asian Americans negatively coping with the challenges of

achieving those high standards while also not becoming the stereotypical inferior and uneducated gangster.

Economic hardships. Even though the model minority myth asserts that all Asian Americans are doing well financially, that was not the participants' experience. Peeng Gai stated bluntly, "We were straight up poor, straight up poor. For the most part, we were just straight up poor." She went on to explain, "I know we lived in like, a low socioeconomic area, and the reason I know that is because we had a lot of gates." Khaopiek Senh also described her childhood neighborhood similarly, "The socioeconomic was low because we did live in apartments and there were other Laotian people who lived in the apartments as well, and we all were poor." Likewise, Sagoo Yutsai reflected upon her challenges, "We were also like only on a single provider income, and so we were getting like free lunch and all that stuff." In assessing their family's financial troubles, Khaapoon and Seenh Hangh made direct connections to their parents' arrival as refugees. "First of all, they're coming to a foreign country, they're coming here, they don't know a lot of people, they don't have money; so you're coming here and you're poor and you're trying to figure things out," explained Khaapoon. Seenh Hangh also saw the connection between refugee status and economic instability:

And then coming to the US is that expectation of the model minority, um, I think kind of made it difficult for Lao American communities to like, have these type of successes, like being able to go to school, being rich.

As a result of their family's financial situation, Nam Khao and Mok Gai made sure to emphasize that their parents would not be able to support them financially in college. Nam Khao stated, "My family, we didn't have a lot of money, send me through college." Even more succinctly, Mok Gai stressed, "My parents weren't going to pay for my college." The model minority myth does not allow for these stories to be told, but for many Lao Americans, the financial burden of

attending and completing a four-year university remain as an ever-present barrier and obstacle for Lao Americans hoping to pursue higher education.

First-generation college student. The battle continues for Lao American students once they reach college as they become the first in their family to attend a four-year university. When asked to discuss her parents' education, Peeng Gai said, "They don't have any kind of college education or anything like that." Kai Dow Naam See Ewe also stated his parents "didn't have any college experience." Additionally, Thum Maakthaang explained that his parents "coming to the United States, both of them don't have anything in terms of an education in the US". Mok Gai, Khaopiek Senh, and Peeng Seenh Moo also shared that their parents did not receive formal education beyond high school. As the oldest in her family and with parents who did not attend college, Thom Khem felt "a lot of pressure for me to kind of like lead the pack." Seenh Hangh also did not receive support from her parents because they could not relate, "There wasn't really anybody who understood that experience, and so I felt like, you know, I was going through it alone." Fortunately for Laab, there were bridging programs she was able to participate in and support her in transitioning from high school to college. Laab remembered, "I was a TRIO student, I did a lot of bridging programs as a first-generation college student." The model minority myth renders the educational stories of Lao Americans invisible as mainstream society presumes that Asian and Lao Americans do not face any obstacles in pursuing economic and higher education opportunities like other marginalized minority communities.

Lao American Pathways to Degree Completion

The focus of this research was to determine how Lao Americans completed a four-year degree. Upon reviewing the interview notes and transcripts, four key findings were identified: (a) Parental Expectations, (b) Educational Institutions, (c) Beneficial Support Networks, and

(d) Self-Motivation. These findings will be discussed in the subsequent subsections to provide a viable roadmap for younger Lao Americans to follow to obtain their higher education degrees.

Parental expectations. Even though participants' parents were unable to support them academically, the expectations set forth by their parents were instrumental to their educational achievements. Participants reflected upon the fact that their parents expected them to do well in school to get into college to have a successful career and life. Pad Kee Mou said, "I think it was always expected that like, our parents always wanted us to go to college, like, you're supposed to get good grades, go to college, and then you're supposed to get a great job." Likewise, Khaopiek Senh recalled her parents' expectations, "They always reminded us, go get good grades, go to college." Mok Gai's parents also prioritized education, "They're very, heavily dedicated to like, you should, you know learn well, this is how you'll have the success, successful life." For Khaopoon and Thom Khem, the expectations came from their fathers. Khaopoon stated:

My father was really big on school, so his message to his kids were always about, you know, just whatever you do in life, just make sure school is like number one, that should be your main area of focus. Don't like mess around in school, just listen to your teachers and study very hard.

Similarly, Thom Khem's father set the expectations, "All I know is you need to get a diploma anywhere in life, so it was really drilled into me, my sisters' heads that basically, like you just need to get that degree." On the other hand, it was Peeng Gai's mother who stressed the importance of education, "She pushed it a lot on me, like, when I was growing up, my mom's like, you're going to college, this is what's going to happen." Without the support and expectations from their parents, participants may have had considerably different educational outcomes.

Educational institutions. In addition to parental expectations, participants also highlighted the positive impact certain educational institutions had on their overall education.

Specifically, participants identified programs and educational opportunities they took advantage of during their K-12 years as well as in college.

K-12 programming and opportunities. During their formative years, Thum Maakhoong, Peeng Gai, and Thom Khem all mentioned that they were enrolled in their school's respective Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) Programs. Once they got to high school, all three participants also took Honors and Advanced Placement (AP) Classes leading to positive educational outcomes. In addition to the in-school educational opportunities, participants also participated in school clubs, sports, and after school enrichment programs that all positively impacted their schooling. Pad Kee Mou recalled, "I was in Key Club, we do a lot of volunteering within the group, but also exposed the meeting of groups outside of my school district and individuals." Likewise, Mok Gai was also active in high school, "I was part of the science club and national honor society, I would say they helped me have a place to like, maintain interest in things." Sagoo Yutsai, Laab, Sai Gawk, and Thum Maakthaang also played sports during high school. Laab remembered:

I did track, I was not great at it, I still enjoyed it, it was, there was a social aspect of it. I did soccer for a very short period of time, which I was not great at, but I was very fond of it.

Similarly, Sagoo Yutsai also had a positive experience, "I felt like I had a good connection with my volleyball team." Additionally, Thum Maakhoong and Peeng Gai also mentioned that they participated in their school's choir and theater programs. Lastly, Khaopoon and Khaopiek Senh both emphasized the importance of college outreach programs. Khaopoon reflected, "In high school, there was a program called College Access Now and they help you with filling out your application, so your personal statements, they'll read over it and provide you feedback." Khaopiek Senh also remembered an impactful program, "There was one after school program, it

was a program dedicated to Asian Americans and that one after school program did motivate me to go to college.” Participants benefited from both in-school educational programs and school clubs, sports, and enrichment opportunities.

College resources. Participants identified specific programs, organizations, mentors, and volunteer opportunities as instrumental during their collegiate journeys. Thum Maakthaang recalled:

There was a new office or department called APARC, they gave a lot of students opportunities to do a lot of things on and off campus, so I really enjoyed that and I was very involved in all of the opportunities that came to me during undergrad.

Khaopiek Khao and Peeng Seenh Moo reflected on the benefits of being involved in on-campus student organizations that were ethnic-based. Khaopiek Khao said, “Another huge backbone was actually the Lao and Cambodian student association. When I first went there, it was actually separated, I took the initiative, saying hey, we’re going to combine this.” Peeng Seenh Moo also expressed positive benefits of ethnic clubs, “Finding clubs that are like me was really, really helpful because, you know, when I was having problems with my parents or with finances, they understood and they can give me a suggestion.” For Sagoo Yutsai and Peeng Gai, they were supported by their respective Honor Society and EOP program. Sagoo Yutsai stated, “I was a part of an honor society and so, at that point, you’re kind of like, narrowing down like, who you’re talking to every day, and so I feel like that kind of helped me get by.” Meanwhile, Peeng Gai emphasized the perks of EOP Programs, “I was part of the EOP Program, so like that was a huge thing, they help you with a book stipend, they help you with like the parking permits and things like that.” Khaopiek Senh had the opportunity to join her university’s model United Nations, “I joined a club called model United Nations and we went to different universities to compete. We even got the chance to go to Europe, to Scotland, so that was a really cool

experience.” Finally, Seenh Hangh discussed how she connected with a volunteer opportunity while Mok Gai drew inspiration from a mentor. Seenh Hangh remembered:

I volunteered for this organization and I would go and I would tutor the students, like, actually go to their homes and like meet their families and tutor them after school. It just kind of like, made me feel a little bit like at home.

Mok Gai recalled her undergraduate mentor, “I remember the graduate student who oversaw me, she really inspired me and helped me, like, go through like, being in physics.” As a result of the support participants received from student organizations, college programs, and mentors, students were able to successfully navigate the complexities of higher education.

Beneficial support networks. Participants acknowledged the benefits support networks had on their educational accomplishments. The beneficial support networks ranged from family and friends to mentors, teachers, and professors. For Sai Gawk, her support network was all encompassing, “It was actually friends and family and advisors, so the support system was very strong.” Sagoo Yutsai, Nam Khao, and Kai Dow Naam See Ewe all found mentorship in different places. Sagoo Yutsai highlighted, “I found mentorship from like upperclassmen and from professors, and then eventually in my junior year, I became a mentor.” Kai Dow Naam See Ewe said, “Another key thing that attribute to like, my success for completing a four-year, is like finding, like, an unofficial mentor outside of your career counselor at the college, and that counselor was for me, was my brother-in-law.” Nam Khao remembered a mentor from high school, “Every time there was a strong mentor that cared about me, I would just kill it, like in whatever field.” Thum Maakthaang, Peeng Gai, and Khaopiek Senh built their support networks through their teachers, colleagues, and friends. Thum Maakthaang said:

I didn’t really have anyone in my immediate family to look up to, so I kind of surrounded myself with my teachers instead. Just asking more questions on like, you know, the college process, you know, being able to navigate and all of that.

Peeng Gai reflected, “I was just like influenced by my co-workers who decided to pursue their Masters. When I was in my Bachelor’s program, my professors, you know, were like, hey, you should probably think about getting your Masters.” Finally, Khaopiek Senh explained, “For people I hung out with, it was about grades and assignments, and where you’re going, they did help influence me to want to go to university.” Throughout their educational journeys, participants were the beneficiaries of support networks that offered guidance and mentorship that propelled them to push forward to overcome any and all obstacles.

Self-motivation. Even with their parents’ expectations, supports from educational institutions, and beneficial support networks, participants had to find their own inner strength and resilience to persevere. Kai Dow Naam See Ewe summed it up perfectly, “I put that pressure on myself, that like, I want to succeed because I don’t want them sacrificing what they had over in Laos to come over here and be wasted.” For Khaopiek Khao, Pad Kee Mou, Mok Gai, and Khaopoon, the self-motivation started early in life. Khaopoon explained, “I always knew that, you want to go to college, you gotta get some A’s kind of thing.” Pad Kee Mou also stressed the importance of earning high marks, “I’m motivated by, my, like for success, when a test came to me, like, oh like, I want an A, I don’t want, like, a C.” Likewise, Khaopiek Khao stated, “I was that, I was that kid, I was that kid who was a super achiever.” Mok Gai also expressed internal pressure, “I also had more opportunities and I felt like I pushed myself more.” The motivation for Sagoo Yutsai and Peeng Gai were both internal and external. As a Lao nurse, Peeng Gai emphasized:

I want to serve the community. Why aren’t I doing this to make an example for people that may want to look at me and think, okay, here’s a minority that we don’t see often, that, you know, is going for her Master’s, is deciding to, you know, be a health care provider for the people.

Similarly, Sagoo Yutsai is also pursuing a career in the medical field, “I found like a passion for health science and my concentration was health promotion and disease prevention.” Without their own determination and motivation to overcome and succeed, participants would not have been able to complete their education.

Words of Wisdom

Despite the challenges and obstacles the participants confronted as they pursued and persevered to obtain their degrees, they remained hopeful and offered advice for younger Lao Americans looking to attend a four-year university. First, whether the pressure comes from their parents, family, or mainstream society, Lao American students should not feel obligated to pursue careers as a doctor, lawyer, or engineer if that is not what they want for themselves. Secondly, community college is a viable option for students looking to not only save money, but also complete their general education requirements before focusing in on their majors at the university level. Lastly, no matter their educational or career paths, finding, developing, and maintaining support networks will benefit young people immensely as they embrace their identities and move forward in their lives.

Doctor! Lawyer! Engineer! Participants felt the burden to pursue careers as doctors, lawyers, and engineers, but would like to let younger Lao Americans know that they do not have to succumb to the pressure. Thum Maakhoong recalled her grandparents “always wanted me to succeed and be a doctor because being a doctor earns a lot of money and a lot of money means that you can support our family.” Peeng Gai also felt pressured from her mom to become a doctor when she decided to become a nurse and described her mother’s crude reaction, “When I decided to pursue nursing, my mother was very upset, she thought it was a job for ass wipers.” Peeng Gai went on to explain what she saw as the root of the problem, “The media also doesn’t

go a good job or showing what nurses actually do and on TV, it's all doctors that do everything, so I know there was a lack of education of what is a nurse.” Likewise, Khaopiek Senh felt that her parents simply could not comprehend nor understand careers or jobs other than doctors or lawyers, “When I told my dad I was doing marketing or sales, they just didn’t understand them, but they understood doctor, they understood lawyer.” In light of the pressure and misunderstanding participants encountered, they all advocate for the younger generation to explore other career fields to show their parents and families that there are multiple paths to success and economic stability and independence.

Specifically, Sai Gawk, Peeng Seenh Moo, Laab, and Khaopiek Khao all offered their encouragement to younger Lao Americans to be able to decide their own careers and futures. Sai Gawk advised, “Don’t try to be a doctor or a lawyer, you know, do what you think is important to you and go that route and study that field.” Peeng Seenh Moo echoed those sentiments and suggested, “Don’t major in what your parents wanted you to major in, just major in whatever you want to major in, because, you know, success is, comes with the experience.” Additionally, Khaopiek Khao said, “You don’t have to stick with your degree, you don’t have to go into STEM, into doctor, lawyer, you know, only ones that they give you, you don’t have to.” Lastly, Laab offered, “It’s not about pressuring people to study STEM or science, like things, things can change, like, I just really wish kids knew things can change.” To move the Lao American community forward and inspire younger Lao Americans, these participants wanted to inform parents and students that there are more options and possibilities aside from the popularized and stereotypical career fields. Furthermore, in addition to not sticking to careers as doctors, lawyers, or engineers, the participants also recognized that “things can change” and both students and parents should be open to change and new educational and career opportunities.

Community college. Much like acknowledging to students that there are alternative career paths aside from becoming doctors, lawyers, or engineers, the participants sought to uplift the community college as a viable pathway to enter higher education. Thum Maakthaang, Peeng Gai, and Kai Dow Naam See Ewe all attended community college prior to transferring to a four-year university. Thum Maakthaang stated the benefits, “I actually went to a community college first just because it was a lot cheaper and it was down the road from my house.” While community college was not in her initial college plans, Peeng Gai did attend a community college and took part in EOP programs as a first-generation college student and wound up as president of her honor society before transferring. Kai Dow Naam See Ewe also went to a community college part time for six-years before transferring and “once I got to a four-year school that’s when I decided to, you know, refocus my efforts.” Pad Kee Mou, Khaopiek Khao, and Khaopiek Senh also specifically advocated for community colleges. Pad Kee Mou explained, “Community college is fine, it’s perfectly fine and I think that you can save a lot of money with that.” Khaopiek Khao agreed and said, “Community college is completely fine, getting an associate’s degree is completely fine, there’s nothing wrong with it.” Finally, Khaopiek Senh suggested, “Community college, go to community college and then go somewhere else or go get a trade.” Vocational schools should also be an option for students as Khaopiek Senh pointed out aside from the traditional four-year university route that is imposed upon students. While these participants all completed their degrees, they also wanted to affirm that there are multiple paths to pursue and Lao American families and students should consider all of their options before making a life-changing decision.

Seek support networks. The last piece of advice participants wanted to convey is for younger Lao Americans to seek and maintain support networks. Support networks will support

students and family in navigating the systems and structures within higher education to complete their degrees. Peeng Seenh Moo emphasized how he benefited from his network, “Finding a support group that, with other Lao or other Asian people who understood those struggles, especially Southeast Asians really, really helped me.” Thum Maakthaang also spoke to the advantages of a diverse support network, “Not only were there faculty members that look like me and spoke the same language, but my peers next to me were Lao too. I think that’s, you know, that was very beneficial for me.” Unfortunately, mentors and role models are lacking according to Peeng Gai and Sagoo Yutsai. Therefore, Peeng Gai has chosen to become that mentor and role model for younger Lao Americans, “I am a Lao registered nurse and I’m going to become a Lao nurse practitioner and I’m proud of it because I don’t get to see people like me, I don’t get to have, you know, a mentor.” Likewise, Sagoo Yutsai also wants to be a role model, “I feel like it’s super important as well to just become a Lao doctor. I feel like, you know, that’s an important path for me to pave, to be a female physician who’s Lao.” Thum Maakhoong also hoped for more Lao American representation, “It’d help to see someone like me, like in a teaching position as a professor, it would motivate me as a student because, like, look at this person who looks like me and who shares my Lao American story.” Khaopiek Khao sympathized when she said, “I did wish I had a mentor, I had somebody to look up to, I think that was the hardest thing to find, specifically, a Lao woman in engineering.” Lastly, Seenh Hangh suggested, “If there’s somebody that you know who went to higher education, definitely reach out and connect with them, that’s somebody who can be a resource for you.” Through their experiences, participants stressed both the importance of support networks in addition to the lack of current support networks for Lao American students. Thus, to increase the success rates

of Lao American students, there must an investment and development of support networks to benefit students and parents.

Summary

Upon analyzing the interview notes and transcripts, five major themes were identified that addressed both the purpose and research questions for this study. Additionally, the participants' experiences and direct quotes served as counternarratives to the harmful model minority myth. Through their own words, participants were able to share their Lao American story to highlight both the heterogeneity that exists within the Asian American community and the unique challenges and history of the Lao American population. In the next chapter, the themes, participants' experiences, and direct quotes will be discussed in relation to the relevant literature. Chapter 5 will also include a section that focuses on the implications for action followed by recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, IMPLICATION, AND CONCLUSION

Summary of the Study

This chapter starts with a summary of the study followed by the implication for actions and conclusion. The Summary of the Study is divided into four sections: (a) Overview of the Problem, (b) Purpose Statement and Research Questions, (c) Review of the Methodology, and (d) Major Findings. Within the Major Findings section is a subsection that will connect the findings to current literature.

Overview of the Problem

According to the model minority myth, Asian Americans in the United States of America are faring exceedingly well economically and educationally. However, this myth fails to recognize the diversity and heterogeneity that exists within the Asian American community and diaspora. Unfortunately, due to the racialization and socialization within mainstream American consciousness, media, and politics, Lao Americans have been stereotyped to be the model minority and thus do not have the same challenges and needs in comparison to the other marginalized minority communities. The data tell a vastly different story. Compared to roughly 49% of the entire Asian American population with a Bachelor's degree or higher, only 13% of Lao Americans have a Bachelor's degree or higher (Ramakrishnan & Ahmad, 2014a; Uy, 2018). Additionally, the median household income for Laotian Americans is \$66,117 compared to \$93,759 for all Asian Americans (USA Facts, 2021). Given the vast disparity between the educational attainment levels and household incomes for Lao and Asian Americans, Lao American communities are not the model minorities and face academic and economic challenges despite the prevalent misperceptions.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

To address the falsehoods perpetuated by the model minority myth, the purpose of this research was to identify the strategies implemented by Lao American college students to obtain their four-year degrees. The study's overarching research question: How do Lao Americans complete a four-year degree? was developed to guide the researcher to focus on the purpose. Furthermore, two subsequent questions were constructed to combat the model minority myth as well as elicit stories from the participants, one of the major tenets of Critical Race Theory:

- (a) How do educational and social institutions impact Lao American students' stories? and
- (b) How does the Lao American story challenge the racist misconception of the model minority myth?

The research's purpose and research questions led to the study's methodology: basic qualitative research.

Review of the Methodology

Qualitative research deals with people's lived experiences and their own interpretations (Creswell, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Roberts, 2016). As a result, basic qualitative research provided the optimal approach to gain insights from participants through their own words. Utilizing semi-structured interviews with pre-written questions in addition to allowing for follow-ups when needed provided the research more rich data compared to survey results taken from a more quantitative methodology. Furthermore, Critical Race Theory was utilized as the framework for the study where counternarratives are fundamental. To gather the counternarratives from participants, a qualitative approach had to be implemented to give participants the opportunity to reflect and respond to questions orally based upon their lived experiences.

Major Findings

There were five major themes from this study: (a) Lao American Students' Stories in K-12, (b) Lao American Students' Stories in Higher Education, (c) Lao American Counternarratives, (d) Lao American Pathways to Degree Completion, and (e) Words of Wisdom. The findings that most directly relate to the existing literature will be discussed and presented in the following subsection.

Findings related to the literature. The literature review addressed the Educational Impact of the Model Minority Myth, Racial Discrimination and Prejudice, Ethnic and Racial Identity Development, The Role of Family and Parents in Education, and Value of Support Networks. These sections in particular were validated by the findings and themes that were identified from the analysis of the interview notes and transcripts. The following subsections make direct connections between the findings and literature.

Misrepresentation of Asian Americans. Museus and Kang (2009) noted that Asian Americans are not considered underrepresented and do not require additional educational funding from the federal government. Furthermore, Teranishi and Kim (2017) found that Asian Americans are being excluded from the development of educational services and programs while simultaneously omitted from policies regarding equity and social justice reforms. One participant explicitly recalled being denied a scholarship opportunity as an Asian American since Asian Americans are not considered underrepresented. On the other hand, while Asian Americans are stigmatized to be high achieving, they are also stereotyped to be involved with gangs (Ngo & Lee, 2007; Teranishi, 2002; Uy, 2018). Another participant also pointed out the negative misperception of Lao Americans and their involvement in gangs, use of drugs, and gambling addictions. Furthermore, Asian Americans must also contend with the perpetual

foreigner perception (Fong, 2002; Wu, 2002). Participants experienced the negative effects of Asian Americans being viewed and stereotyped as foreigners. One participant's English was commended even though she was born and raised in the United States and another was called Jackie Chan and Ching Chong. Participants also had to deal with disrespectful classmates and even a college instructor made a participant feel invisible while invalidating their life experiences. Thus, Lao Americans and Asian Americans must simultaneously navigate the problematic model minority myth while not falling into the stereotype of academic failures who are impoverished gang members and drug dealers.

Uplifting Asian American identities and stories. To counter the negative effects of the model minority myth, low expectations, and notions of perpetual foreigners, scholars emphasize the significance of positive ethnic and racial identity development as important factors in the educational attainment of Southeast Asian American students (Museus et al., 2016; Ngo, 2009; Uy, 2018). Participants emphasized the importance of inclusion and positive ethnic and racial identity development due to being excluded when Lao American history was “taught” in the classrooms within the context was the “Vietnam War”. The participants recalled that the Secret War in Laos, the role the US had in that war, and the mass exodus of refugees were not covered in great detail. As a result from this exclusion, participants felt disconnected with their families, and thus their individual, cultural, ethnic, and racial identities. Participants stressed the importance of learning about Lao American history to know their families’ stories to be able to fully understand and appreciate the trials and tribulations of their ancestors. In the absence of Lao Americans learning their families’ stories in addition to mainstream America not understanding the Lao American experience, both of the harmful stereotypes of the Lao American community as either the model minority or Lao Americans as impoverished and

gangsters will continue to dominate the consciousness of Americans to the detriment of Lao Americans.

Parental involvement. The literature stressed both the positive and negative influences parents and families can have on the educational attainment levels of students within the household. As Manke and Keller (2006) and Ngo (2009) noted, both the family unit and parents are crucial resources to the success of children within the family. However, due to their refugee status and lack of education, refugee parents were unable to support their children navigate the educational system (Palmer & Maramba, 2015; Uy, 2018). Participants underscored the fact that while their parents were supportive and encouraging, parents simply did not have the experience, know-how, resources, or networks to assist them effectively. While some participants experienced hands-on parental involvement in their education, there came a point in time, typically high school, where their parents could simple no longer support them. Additional impeding factors of the English language, time, and no formal education whatsoever were also emphasized by participants. Even though some parents attempted to be involved in their children's education, there came a point when they could no longer help; and for other parents, no time, English language skills, or formal education of any kind prevented them from supporting their young scholars.

Impact of support networks. To aid students academically require effective support networks, especially for immigrant and refugee populations (Baum & Flores, 2011; Manke & Keller, 2006; Paik et al., 2017a; Palmer & Maramba, 2015; Shah, 2007; Uy, 2018; Wing, 2007). Furthermore, Palmer and Maramba (2015) underscored how supportive organizations and student services offer students academic and social services and supports needed to thrive on campus. As Lao American college graduates, the participants acknowledged the crucial role

support networks played in their educational journey. Participants mentioned the importance of support groups both on and off campus in addition to highlighting the benefits of mentors and mentorship in education. More specifically, the lack of Lao American college graduates has left Lao American college students without role models or mentors to seek out for advice and best practices. Consequently, some participants recognized their roles as future mentors and the significance of representation especially for marginalized minority communities and women in the sciences. With the appropriate representation and support networks, students could have the experience of learning from faculty members and peers that reflect their similar ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds.

Implications for Action

Based upon the literature and findings from the research, there are four major implications for action for parents, students, educators, administrators, and advocates: (a) Lao American Awareness, (b) Lao American Support Networks, (c) Economic Development, and (d) Beyond the Model Minority Myth.

Lao American Awareness

The importance of Lao American awareness is paramount for all individuals involved in the education of Lao American students. Participants acknowledged both the importance of learning Lao American history and also being accepted within mainstream America. Specifically, participants felt excluded in class as Lao American history was not taught. If Lao American history was in the curriculum, it was included within the context of the “Vietnam War”, focusing on the Vietnamese American experience and excluding the Lao American experience. Furthermore, participants felt a part of them was missing since they did not learn about themselves and their history. In addition to being left out of the history books, Lao

Americans like other marginalized minority communities also face discrimination and racism. Therefore, to increase the success rate of Lao American students, parents, educators, administrators, and advocates must all work in coordination with students to ensure that not only is Lao American history taught in the classrooms, but also build a culture of tolerance and acceptance of people from different cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The literature supports the benefits of positive self-identification of Southeast Asian students in relation to their educational success (Museus et al., 2016; Ngo, 2009; Uy, 2018).

Lao American Support Networks

Secondly, the expansion of Lao American support networks will greatly benefit Lao American scholars. Due to their parents' refugee status and subsequent lack of formal education in the United States, participants were at a disadvantage compared to their peers in regards to resources and social networks to support them through the institutions of higher education. Participants acknowledged how supportive their parents were in their educational pursuits, but also clearly lacked the educational experience and resources to assist them through college. Thus, to make-up for their lack of resources and family networks, participants sought their own support networks to guide them successfully through the four-year university process. One major component of the support network is mentorship. Participants emphasized the crucial role mentors played in their educational journeys and underscored how impactful Lao American role models and mentors would be for younger Lao Americans. Much like increasing Lao American awareness will require students, parents, educators, administrators, and advocates working together, so will growing the Lao American Support Networks. The effectiveness of support networks is supported by researchers as they note that school-based supportive relationships between administrators, guidance counselors, teachers, and students in addition to supportive

organizations and student services all lead to greater student academic performance (Baum & Flores, 2011; Palmer & Maramba, 2015; Uy, 2018).

Existing organizations. Lao Buddhist temples, Lao churches, and Lao American non-profit organizations and businesses are existing community entities that educational institutions can leverage to support Lao Americans in general and Lao American students in particular. While participants did not directly connect their educational achievements to any particular community organization, they did acknowledge their existence and varying levels of involvement. Thus, with existing Lao American organizations established, there is a tremendous opportunity to expand the Lao American support networks by utilizing these community associations. The research shows that support networks are effective, therefore, educational institutions can tap into the resources within the Lao American community to better communicate the opportunities and services available to students. Instead of outreach and social service programs taking place on educational sites, they could take place in the community spaces where members feel safe and may be more receptive to the information and resources that are available.

Economic Development

Increasing Lao American awareness and support networks cannot occur without the appropriate economic development and investment within the Lao American communities. Lao Americans also face economic challenges as participants explained the negative socioeconomic impact for Lao American families as a result of arriving in the United States as political refugees. The lack of formal education for Lao American parents not only inhibited them from relating to their students' challenges in college, but also forced Lao American students to work during college to survive. Some participants emphasized how they all had to work during their college

years due to their parents' financial hardships. The model minority myth does not convey this message of poverty that Lao Americans experience. Instead, the model minority myth suggests that all Asian American families are faring quite well economically. While the median family income of Asian Americans is higher than Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics, it is due in part to Asian families having more income earners within the same household (Fong, 2002; Takaki, 1998; Wu, 2002). However, while Asian Americans have a higher median income collectively, Southeast Asian American refugee groups suffer extremely high rates of poverty (Fong, 2002). Thus, it is crucial for students, parents, educators, administrators, and advocates to recognize the economic challenges of Lao American families in order to identify the appropriate resources to provide equitable educational opportunities for Lao American students.

Financial aid. Given their families' socioeconomic status and lack of institutional knowledge, participants acknowledged not fully understanding the financial aid process and the implications of accepting educational loans. Participants knew that their parents would not be able to support them financially in college, so they did not know whether or not they could afford to go to college. Without the appropriate and accurate financial literacy information, participants had to take on student loans to continue their education. In addition to resources regarding financial aid with an emphasis on the potential long-term impact of student loans, policymakers can further support students by making college free. As community colleges become tuition free, so should the four-year universities to provide even more educational opportunities for historically marginalized minority communities, so students and families do not have to endure the financial burden to pay for an education. Meanwhile, until the four-year universities become tuition free, students and their families' should receive the education and information regarding financial aid packages to make informed decisions regarding their education and finances.

Beyond the Model Minority Myth

To support historically disadvantaged and marginalized minority communities starts with the dismantling and elimination of phrases like “model minority”. By erasing such depictions and perceptions from society will result in the learning and understanding of the experiences and histories of each individual community. Thus, the disaggregation of data is vital to the cause leading to the social justice that will benefit all of humanity.

Disaggregating the data. The Asian American community is not homogeneous and the heterogeneity within the community must be represented accurately in the data that is collected. As evidenced by one participant’s denial of a scholarship opportunity due to Asian Americans not being considered a marginalized minority community, given the perception of Asian Americans as the model minority, the need for disaggregated data is vital. By disaggregating the data, the experiences of each and every individual Asian American community will be visible. No longer will Lao Americans be considered the “model minority” as the data will show lower median household incomes and educational attainment levels. Furthermore, by disaggregating the data, Asian Americans will no longer be considered the model minority with the vast differences in wealth and education in the community. Additionally, with accurate and up-to-date data, policymakers can make more informed policy decisions that will better support all marginalized minority communities, including Lao Americans. The need for disaggregated data is crucial for families and individuals to receive the supports and services they require in order to prosper for the betterment of themselves, their families, and their communities.

Social justice. Finally, advocating for social justice will lead to greater economic and educational outcomes not only for Lao Americans, but also other marginalized minority communities. With Critical Race Theory serving as the foundational theoretical framework for

the study, participants were able to engage in storytelling while promoting social justice.

Participants stressed the whiteness and lack of representation in students and faculty members on their college campuses. To address the challenges with diversity, equity, and inclusion, CRT not only denounces the notion of a colorblind society, but elevates the fact that society is racialized and inherently racist (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lynn & Parker, 2006). Furthermore, within CRT is the concept of “interest convergence” whereby institutional and systemic changes only occur when it benefits, or is in the interest of, the people in power (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Milner, 2008). Thus, students, parents, educators, administrators, and advocates in addition to government and society must recognize the benefit of uplifting all community members will have for the people of the world. Investing in historically disadvantaged and marginalized communities will lead to advancements and developments in all fields that will improve the globe.

Recommendations for Future Research

Due to the limitations of the study, there are recommendations for future research. Given the nature of qualitative research and relatively small sample size of participants, the findings cannot be generalizable to all Lao Americans. A future study may seek to include more participants to have a more representative sample of the Lao American population. The population pool could be expanded by omitting the age and generation requirements. For this study, participants were limited to those between the ages 21-36 in addition to self-identifying as 1.5 or second-generation Lao American. Additionally, while this study focused specifically on the Lao American population and individuals self-identifying as Lao Americans, a future study could research on the general Laotian American population and Southeast Asian American populations to add to the sparse existing literature base. Lastly, the data from this study derived

from a single one-on-one semi-structured participant interview and initial intake survey. Future studies could take on a more mixed-methods approach with the development and use of a more in-depth survey for data collection followed by two or three participant interviews. With more data, additional findings and context could be added to provide a more rich and detailed depiction of the Lao, Laotian, and Southeast Asian American experience.

Concluding Remarks

Lao Americans are not the model minorities. Lao Americans have faced and continue to encounter economic and educational challenges as residents of the United States of America. Lao Americans arrived in the country as political refugees with little to no formal education and lacking the economic and social resources and networks to thrive in a foreign country. Given their precarious arrival and living circumstances, the children of Lao American refugee families did not have the same advantages to prosper within educational institutions. During their foundational years, participants felt excluded both due to their perceived lack of English fluency and invisible because Lao American history was not addressed or discussed in the classrooms. Moreover, with refugee parents with no formal education from Laos and no education in the United States, parents did not have the resources or know-how to support their students with their academic development. The struggles would continue for Lao Americans who were able to graduate from high school and pursue a four-year degree. In college, participants experienced culture shock with the appalling lack of representation, glaring lack of resources and support networks leading to a major drop in grades and questions of belonging. However, through their personal educational journeys, these participants challenged the model minority myth by telling their stories to provide a more accurate portrayal of the Lao and Asian American experience. While the model minority myth praises the Asian American population, the participants

experienced discrimination and racism, poverty, and distinct challenges as first-generation college students. Fortunately, the participants were able to overcome many of those obstacles and complete their four-year degrees and provide a roadmap for younger Lao Americans seeking to obtain higher education degrees of their own. The pathway includes not automatically pursuing careers in medicine, law, or engineering unless self-desired; utilizing the community colleges as a steppingstone to completing a four-year degree and expanding support networks to have the resources and communities as instrumental advocates. By highlighting the Lao American experience, their stories provide a counternarrative to the misperceptions that exist while also acknowledging the success stories that exist to offer hope to Lao Americans seeking role models and mentors to turn to for guidance and inspiration.

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APPENDIX A: LAO AMERICAN SURVEY QUESTIONS

General Information

1. What is your first and last name? _____
2. How do you identify?
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
 - c. Non-binary
 - d. Other _____
3. What is your age group?
 - a. 21-24
 - b. 25-28
 - c. 29-32
 - d. 33-36
4. What city and state do you currently live in? _____
5. Do you consider yourself to be Lao or Lao American?
 - a. Yes, I self-identify as Lao.
 - b. Yes, I self-identify as Lao American.
 - c. No, I self-identify as _____

Background Information

1. Are your parents refugees from Laos?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
2. Were you born in Laos?
 - a. Yes, I was born in (city/province/region) _____
 - b. No, I was born in (city/state/country) _____
3. Do you identify as first, 1.5, or second generation?
 - a. First generation (refugee who arrived in the U.S. as an adult)
 - b. 1.5 generation (refugee who arrived in the U.S. under the age of 15)
 - c. Second generation (child of refugee parents born in the U.S.)
4. Do you speak Lao?
 - a. I speak Lao fluently
 - b. I speak Lao conversationally
 - c. I do not speak Lao
5. Do you read and write in Lao?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Other, please explain _____

Education

1. Did you complete high school in the United States?
 - a. Yes, I completed high school in (city/state) _____
 - b. No, I completed high school in (city/country/region) _____
2. Do you have a Bachelor's degree?
 - a. Yes, I have a Bachelor's degree in/from _____
 - b. No
3. Do you have a Master's degree?
 - a. Yes, I have Master's degree in/from _____
 - b. No
4. Do you have a Doctoral degree?
 - a. Yes, I have a Doctoral degree in/from _____
 - b. No

APPENDIX B: LAO AMERICAN INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Background

1. Tell me about yourself:
 - a. Occupation?
 - b. Likes/dislikes?
 - c. Hobbies?
2. Tell me about your family:
 - a. Parents?
 - b. Siblings?
 - c. Memories?
3. Where did you grow up?
 - a. What was your neighborhood like?
 - b. Any cultural or religious community centers?

Education

1. Describe your educational experience (K-12, College):
 - a. What were your accomplishments/successes?
 - b. What were your challenges/obstacles?
 - c. What role did your parents and/or family members have in your education?
 - i. Was there someone outside of your family who played a vital role in your education?
 - d. Were you a part of any organizations/groups that supported your education?

Community

1. What are the challenges/obstacles for Lao Americans in pursuing and completing a four-year degree?
 - a. What can be done to better support Lao Americans in their pursuit of completing a four-year degree?
2. What is your message to younger Lao Americans seeking to complete higher education?

Counternarrative

1. Did you experience or witness any instances of discrimination or racism as a Lao American student?
 - a. The model minority myth suggests that all Asian Americans are successful both academically and economically. Lao Americans are racialized as Asian Americans, so did you experience any pressure as an Asian American?
2. How is your Lao American story different from other Asian Americans?
 - a. How would you have benefited from learning about Lao American history in school?

APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT FORM



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RESEARCH SUBJECT'S CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

A Qualitative Study of the Lao American College Experience

Name of Lead Researcher: Jerry Sithiphone
Name of Faculty Advisors: Dr. Rod Githens & Dr. Laura Hallberg

You are being invited to participate in a research study, and your participation is entirely voluntary.

A. Purpose of Research The purpose of this research is:

To learn from the experiences of Lao American college graduates in order to support younger Lao Americans pursue their higher educational goals.

B. Duration of Participation The expected duration of participation in this study will be 1-2 one-on-one interviews lasting between 30 minutes and one hour in length.

C. Research Procedures If you decide to participate, you will be asked to complete an initial intake survey and participate in one-on-one interview(s).

D. Foreseeable Risks There are some possible risks involved for participants. The possible risks are:

Participants may experience anxiety and discomfort while reflecting upon and responding to questions regarding their educational experiences.

E. Benefits There are some benefits to this research, and in particular the benefits may include:

Participants may benefit from critically reflecting upon their personal educational journeys in addition to providing a roadmap for younger Lao Americans to follow to pursue their higher educational goals.

F. Alternative Procedures There are no alternative research procedures for this study.

I. CONFIDENTIALITY

We will take reasonable steps to keep confidential any information that is obtained in connection with this research study and that can be identified with you.



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Measures to protect your confidentiality are: All participants will be given pseudonyms and your names will not be in any reports. All records will be kept in a secured location and the researcher will only have access.

Upon conclusion of the research study, the data obtained will be maintained in a safe, locked or otherwise secured location and will be destroyed after a period of three years after the research is completed.

II. PARTICIPATION

You were selected as a possible participant in this study because:

1. You self-identify as Lao or Lao American
2. You are 1.5 or second generation Lao or Lao American
3. You are between the ages 21-36
4. You have obtained at least a Bachelor's degree or higher
5. You live in the United States of America

We expect to have 6 participants take part in this study. Please feel free to ask any questions you may have.

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.

III. EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURES

None

IV. COLLECTION OF INFORMATION OR BIOSPECIMENS

No identifiable private information or identifiable biospecimens will be collected.

V. UNIVERSITY CONTACT INFORMATION

I am the lead researcher in this study and I am a doctoral candidate in Benerd College at the University of the Pacific.

If you have any questions about the research at any time, please contact me at 916-320-3025 or by email at j_sithiphone@u.pacific.edu, or Dr. Rod Githens by email at githens@pacific.edu

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in a research project or wish to speak with an independent contact, please contact the Office of Research & Sponsored Programs, University of the Pacific at (209) 946-3903 or by email at IRB@pacific.edu.



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VI. NO COMPENSATION & NO COMMERCIAL PROFIT

No compensation is being offered for participation in this study

VII. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND SIGNATURE

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

- To be audio/video recorded during this study.
___Yes___No
- For such audio/video records resulting from this study to be used for transcription and data analysis.
___Yes___No
- For my identity to be disclosed in written materials/oral presentations resulting from this study:
___Yes___No

You will be given a copy of this form 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.

Signed: _____ Date: _____

Research Study Participant (Print Name): _____

Researcher Who Obtained Consent (Print Name): _____