

Making Meanings, Meaning Identity: Hmong Adolescent Perceptions and Use of Language and Style as Identity Symbols

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Using qualitative interview data gathered from 28 Hmong adolescents, we examined the meaning ascribed to language and style and how language and style behaviors are used to distinguish identity. We found that the participants used language and style to define their own ethnic group membership and cultural identities. Moreover they inferred meaning from these identity behaviors to discern which peer groups are desirable (those who wear American style clothing and are bilingual) and which are of low social status (“fobby” style clothing and monolingual). The cultural identity symbols used by participants reveal heterogeneity among Hmong adolescent peer groups and evolving definitions of what it means to be Hmong in America.

INTRODUCTION

The attention and energy adolescents devote to cultivating their style of dress and linguistic expression have long piqued the interest of scholars, with particular attention to the ways adolescents use clothing and language to express various forms of identity (e.g., Danesi, 1994; Hebdige, 1979; Labov, 1992). In one such seminal piece, Penelope Eckert (1989) found that American students in one high school differentiated themselves from peers using dress and language as “symbols of category membership.” Using a social constructionist perspective similar to Eckert, Pyke and Dang (2003) more recently explored the ways Asian American adolescents disparage their coethnic peers, partly through the use of identity markers to determine those who were over- or underassimilated. In both these studies, adolescents were

found to endow social meaning upon dress and language for use as distinctive behavioral markers. They did so to simultaneously express their individual identity to others while indicating with what peer group they wished to be identified.

This paper builds upon the conceptual foundation laid by Eckert (1989) and Pyke and Dang (2003) through its examination of the ways one group of Southeast Asian adolescents, the Hmong, perceive and attribute meaning to identity symbols in order to discern which coethnic peers are more or less similar to them. While the study of adolescent subculture as distinguished by dress and language is by no means unique, this paper aims to better understand how adolescents create meaning from these symbols to express both their ethnic and cultural identities. Phinney (1990) describes ethnic identity as a schema by which individuals construct general knowledge, beliefs, and expectations about their ethnic group and membership to that group. The enduring sense of self as an ethnic group member includes the attitudes and feeling associated with that membership. Cultural identity, on the other hand, consists of the way of life that individuals who may or may not belong to an ethnic group enact in their daily values, behaviors, and general existence (Murry, Smith, & Hill, 2001).

Asian American adolescents live in multiple cultures. Values and practices in their home culture, in the dominant American culture, in popular culture, and in their peer culture all have varied influences upon the ways Asian American adolescents view themselves. In negotiating the pantheon of cultural values, both selected and imposed, adolescents can choose to express their identities in multiple ways. Though currently numerically small, the experiences of Asian American adolescents are extremely important to examine as a means of deepening our understanding of other immigrant and ethnic minority groups in America.

Peers and Social Identity Symbols

Adolescents are most likely to form social groups with peers who identify as members of the same ethnic group (coethnic peers; Ennett & Bauman, 1996; Way & Chen, 2000). Among their available coethnic peers, adolescents will seek out friends who most closely reflect their experiences (i.e., with immigration), cultural values, and attitudes (Hamm, 2000; Peshkin, 1991). Membership in a distinct peer group helps adolescents find acceptance and belongingness within the landscape of all available peer groups (Newman & Newman, 2001). This enables adolescents to carve out a social identity, defined as the in-group to which individuals belong (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Adolescents select their peer group based on the extent to which that group reflects characteristics they find favorable.

Just as White, majority group adolescents attempt to seek identification with specific peer groups such as the jocks, preps, or burnouts, Asian American

adolescents seek and create peer groups to establish their identities. However, this search for group membership for Asian American adolescents is further informed by cultural and ethnic group values and expectations. In her examination of Asian youth in California, Lee (1996) found clear distinctions in dress and language use among four self-identified groups of Asian students: Asian-identified students, New Wavers, Asian American-identified students, and Korean-identified students. According to Lee, these subethnic groups were formed partially as an act of resistance against the dominant culture's perception of a panethnic Asian identity.

At the same time individuals strive for belongingness within a subgroup of peers, they also seek to define a personal identity that is unique (Breakwell, 1993; Vignoles, Chryssochoou, & Breakwell, 2000). Lee (1996) found that the development of subethnic groups and the use of behavioral symbols also stemmed from the students' own desire to separate and distinguish themselves from other Asian students.

To differentiate themselves from others while confirming their group solidarity, adolescents commonly use visual and behavioral markers (Cohen, 1964). By attaching cultural meaning to otherwise benign material symbols such as dress and linguistic behaviors, Hmong adolescents can create culturally significant attributes by which they can communicate to others who they are as individuals (personal identity) and with which peer group(s) they identify (social identity).

Language and linguistics. As perhaps the most important signifier of cultural identity, language can be shaped and altered to construct the "self" and the "other" (Lippi-Green, 1997). Linguistic behaviors (manipulations of language) are used as a device to differentiate peer subgroups, most commonly through variations on speech style or the use of slang. By engaging in these speech acts, youth can fulfill both their individual identity needs and the needs of groups to which membership is pledged (Milroy & Milroy, 1999, p. 58). Within-group members also regulate language behaviors in order to maintain the group's integrity (Lanehart, 1999).

Southeast Asian adolescents in Pyke and Dang's (2003) study assigned labels of *fobby* and *whitewashed* to peers based partially upon language use. Fobby or Fob are colloquial expressions meaning "Fresh Off the Boat." As propagated by adolescents, the terms do not necessarily reflect an individual's actual immigration status or entry method. Rather, it is used to label individuals perceived as "too traditional" and those who retain cultural values or behaviors deemed out of place in American society. On the opposite end of the social spectrum are whitewashed adolescents: those perceived as *too* immersed in American culture.¹

¹ The terms *FOB* and *whitewashed* are viewed by many as derogatory when used by individuals outside one's ethnic group. In-group members who use the terms often do so to denigrate

Clothing and style. Social scientists through centuries have stipulated that clothing is intimately associated with presentation of the self and others' interpretation of the self (James, 1890). In particular, Simmel (1904) found that clothing is used to simultaneously satisfy one's needs to belong and to be distinct. Because clothing and style (including hairstyle and accessories) are visible and impermanent, they are easily manipulated by adolescents to convey values, identity, and group membership (Ryan, 1966). Through these style behaviors, adolescents are able to differentiate "us" from "them" and confirm the existence of differences between various peer and cultural groups (Hodder, 1982). For instance, Eckert's (1989) *burnouts* were distinguished by their dark clothes, whereas the *jocks* were distinguished by their pale colored polo shirts. Similarly, Pyke and Dang found that adolescents identified as fobs were described by their peers as those who dressed in styles associated with their native homelands or with the ethnic enclave with whom they primarily socialized. Those who were identified as whitewashed were those who behaved and dressed in ways associated with White students.

Because of the importance of language and style, this paper examines how these identity symbols are culturally and socially meaningful to Hmong adolescents. We examine what meaning is ascribed to language and style by Hmong adolescents and how language and style act as symbols to distinguish identity. Specifically, how do the cultural meanings attributed to language and style assist adolescents in making social group distinctions and how do these symbols reflect their personal identities, including ethnic, cultural, and social identities?

METHOD

Participants

Data for this paper are drawn from individual and focus group interviews conducted with participants in a broader study examining cultural identity development in Hmong youth. Participants are Hmong adolescents age 12–18 recruited through after-school programs at two neighborhood community centers in a midsized Midwestern city. The two sites, Northern Hills and Lakeside Community Centers (pseudonyms) are both located in neighborhood developments that provide housing for families of no to low incomes (no-income families include the elderly or adolescents over age 18 who live with their parents but have no personal source of income). Of the total

immigrant peers, arguably exhibiting internalized racism against their own ethnic group (Pyke & Dang, 2003). The use of these terms by the adolescents within this paper is integral to our understanding of the ways they label peers and the ideologies underlying these characterizations, though we have chosen to resist the acceptance of these terms by placing them in quotation marks or italics throughout.

population at Northern Hills ($N = 353$), 70% are Hmong. Nearly half of the families residing in Lakeside are Hmong. The after-school programs at each site offer academic and recreational activities for youth residents of the neighborhood developments; the programs are open to all residents and attendance varies between 10 and 30 participants on a given day.

Throughout the recruitment and data collection period, the first author and Hmong undergraduate research assistants attended these after-school programs on a regular basis, assisting with program activities where needed to develop rapport with the participants. Youth within the target age range were individually approached during these programs, told about the study, and given consent and assent forms if they indicated interest in participating. Participants were also recruited through door-to-door visits in the housing developments in which each community center was located.

There were a total of 25 participants in this study. Twelve participants (7 female, 5 male; $M_{\text{age}} = 14.3$) consented to both individual and group interviews. At the conclusion of the individual interview, the focus group interview was scheduled. Participants were asked to invite two or three of their close friends to join them for the interview. We decided to hold interviews with groups of friends for several reasons. First, enlisting adolescents to invite friends helped us locate participants who may not otherwise have been contacted by the research team. Second, the friendship group provided a comfortable environment in which participants could freely express a potentially very personal process of cultural identity formation to others. Moreover, the interactions exhibited during the interview were likely to reflect their day-to-day interactions, as they share and cocreate perspectives on "other" peers, ethnicity, and expression of culture. Because the focus group interviews followed the individual interviews, some of the respondents were more comfortable with the interview process and able to help establish a comfortable interview environment.

Eight focus group interviews were conducted with 16 female and 12 male participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 14.8$). Two of the individual interviewees held a joint focus group because of the large overlap in close friends. Two of the focus groups were mixed sex; the remaining were same-sex groups. Three participants were unable to complete the focus group portion of the study due to scheduling conflicts. All interviews were conducted at the community centers through which each participant was recruited. English was the primary language of the participants, who had all been either born in the United States ($n = 18$) or came to the United States under age 6 ($n = 10$, average age of immigration is 4). Therefore, the interviews were conducted in English. Upon completion of both the individual and group interviews, participants received a US\$15 gift certificate. A US\$5 cash incentive for each friend who participated in the group interview was also offered.

The semistructured interviews were conducted with a protocol to ensure that five primary areas of focus were discussed across interviews: *ethnic/*

cultural identity conceptualization/definition, ethnic identity attitudes, cultural identity expression and behaviors, cultural identity and peers, and other group orientation. The questions within each focus area were open-ended, so the interview flow and direction were dependent on the answers given by participants. This interview methodology is based upon the voice-centered relational interviewing technique developed by Brown and Gilligan (1992) in which the course and content of the interview is primarily determined by participants. For instance, when asked "What does it mean to be Hmong to you?" participant answers were deeply personal and variable. Follow-up questions helped explore participant responses in depth, and the interview was adapted to the unique stories and perspectives of the participants. This technique allows participants to speak to those experiences that are most salient to their lives. The protocol ensures that all pertinent questions found on the protocol were asked within the duration of the interview.

Data Analysis

All interviews were tape-recorded and fully transcribed. Participants selected a pseudonym before the start of the interview to ensure confidentiality. Pseudonyms for names of peers and identifiable information were assigned during transcription.

Interview transcripts were first read and selectively coded for the five major themes that directly paralleled the focus areas of the interview protocol. For this paper, we focus on the themes *Cultural identity expression and behaviors* and *Cultural identity and peers*. Three trained undergraduate coders identified portions within each individual transcript for which these themes were discussed by participants.

The second stage of data analysis was a modified open coding process to identify categories within each theme. Three readers examined the transcripts multiple times in search of recurrent motifs, images, words, metaphors, and contradictions in each participant's narrative (Ryan & Bernard, 2000) and to verify interpretive validity. In this phase of coding, interview segments identified under the theme *Cultural identity expressions/behaviors* were examined. Each type of behavior discussed by participants was coded, then grouped into categories. Category codes were assessed across interviews to determine whether they were different enough to form a distinct category or whether the codes overlapped sufficiently to be collapsed into a shared category. It should be noted that the codes assigned to each narrative excerpt are not exclusive. One piece of narrative might fit into multiple categories. The patterns of overlapping codes are as important to the analysis as are the individual codes.

Categories formed within the theme *Cultural identity expressions/behaviors* revealed much emphasis upon language-related behaviors and style-related. Codes under this theme also included practicing cultural customs,

participating in Hmong organizations/activities, and talking to people about being Hmong or about Hmong culture.

The categories were further refined into subcategories in the third stage of data analysis, if necessary. For instance, within the category *Language-related behaviors*, patterns of responses within and across participants were identified with a unique code. Subcategory codes included slang, speaking Hmong, speaking English, storytelling, and written language. In the fourth stage of analysis, motifs of meaning within each subcategory were identified where recurrent or central themes emerge from the narratives. For instance, within the subcategory *Speaking Hmong*, participants often discussed the various perceptions they held of peers who speak Hmong. Patterns within the narratives were identified, and the underlying motivation and reasoning of participant responses were examined closely by the primary investigator and coders. It is this fourth stage of analysis that yields insight into the meaning participants attribute to the use of linguistic and style behaviors in cultural and group identity formation. The results and discussion explicate upon these patterns of meaning to understand their role in participants' lives.

RESULTS

Behaviors related to language/linguistic acts and style emerged as the dominant themes across all individual and focus group interviews. Style and linguistic behaviors were discussed across all 21 interviews, particularly in response to the questions: "What kinds of things do you do to show you are Hmong?" and "What makes you proud of being Hmong?" The reports of linguistic and style behaviors emerged organically from the interviews, with little prompting from the interviewer.

Linguistic Behaviors

The motif analysis reveals participant attributions of symbolic meaning in constructing identity with the following linguistic behaviors: language preference, loudness and silence, and slang in constructing identity. The results include behaviors enacted by participants as well as those observed by them to be meaningful in their peer relationships.

Language preference. Participants regarded the choice to speak Hmong or English as a conscious decision laden with meaning regarding one's ethnic group attitudes. For example, speaking Hmong was interpreted by participants as a means of identifying with Hmong culture, with coethnic peers, and to distinguish oneself and Hmong peers from the dominant culture and English-speaking peer groups. Participants universally cited

language as a cultural behavior essential to their identity as an ethnic group member. In this excerpt, Khou, a 17-year-old female, felt that speaking Hmong defined the very essence of her identity:

I am Hmong and I am proud of it. I didn't used to speak Hmong that much because I was always with the Caucasians and I was speaking English. And then I don't know why, but I just started talking Hmong a lot. When I realized it, I was like "Wow! That's me!"

A preference for speaking Hmong is a means to demonstrate one's ethnic group membership. It is also a means to distinguish that group from the dominant, English-speaking society. A number of participants echoed David's assertion: "You can speak your own language so that no one would know what you're saying." This act is a comfort to participants, who feel it validates both their ethnic and social group membership. As described by Kandi, a 14-year-old female, it is an immense source of identity pride:

I just think it's really really stupid to be a Hmong person and not know anything about your own culture. I would just want to go slap somebody who's Hmong and doesn't even know how to speak Hmong. I would just want to go smack them and yell at them. 'Cuz if you're Hmong and you're not proud of yourself, who's gonna be proud of you?

While many participants seek peers who prefer to speak Hmong, participants such as Kandi and Terry, the 15-year-old male in the excerpt below, expressly dislike and avoid peers who elect to speak English given a choice between languages:

(Some people) might try not to speak in Hmong. I don't like it when they do that. They act like they don't talk Hmong, I just got a problem with that. (Interviewer: . . . What do you do when you meet someone who does that?) I just ignore them, I just go. (Interviewer: You wouldn't hang out with them?) No . . . 'Cuz they're acting like they're too good, that's it.

Terry's opinion clearly emphasizes the significance of language as a social identity marker. The description of peers who elect to not speak Hmong elicited similar reactions from other participants, many of whom reported selectively allowing peers into their social group on the basis of Hmong language use.

On the other hand, while the youth in this study tout the importance of speaking Hmong and demonstrating a preference for their home language, they also discuss the importance of speaking English. In particular, electing to speak English, or tempering one's speaking of Hmong, is discussed as an

indication that one is not over-identified with Hmong culture and that one is able to integrate into mainstream, American culture. Lee (female, 15) describes this need within her own identity construction when interacting with White American peers:

I think I need to get proper, my language . . . 'Cuz you go to school and everyone speaks slang—it makes me feel more like with everyone else. If I speak slang and English, then they understand. So when I do speak English, it makes me feel more like I'm with them in school and with them in society.

Participants also reported that they and their peers moderate the extent of Hmong language use, asking peers to alter this behavior and speak English instead. Participants in the following focus group discuss their experiences as the targets of English-preference monitoring:

Kandi: A lot of people aren't proud of being Hmong and if you speak Hmong with them they'll be like, "Why are you speaking Hmong, that's stupid, speak English. Hello, you're in America, speak English." Eve: I just hate when they tell you that. Like, I can speak as much as I want.

In contrast, members of this focus group discuss the ways Hmong language use is monitored:

Isabel: When somebody's acting really Hmong . . . like if you're at lunch or whatever and somebody was like really speaking in Hmong like really loud or something, you'd be like, oh my god. You wouldn't say you're acting really Hmong, it would just be like, you're acting like an old person. Eva: O.G.² Isabel: O.G. . . . you just kind of stop for a moment and say, we're not at home, we're at school! (laughter) . . . Steve: They don't really say, "You're acting really Hmong." They say, "You're acting really old." Isabel: Like you're acting like an O.G. or something! Eve: Fob.

Adolescents clearly associate "types" of Hmong youth based upon forms of language use and grant their peers labels accordingly. Such labels are likely avoided by Hmong youth, as being called fob or O.G. ensures one lower social status among peers:

Katie: . . . To the cool people they'll be the really fobby people, they'll be the low class people. People who are really Hmong, they know the language real well, they know the proverbs and the sayings and

²"Old Generation" or "Old Guy"; used to refer to Hmong elders or individuals behaving like elders.

stuff. They understand the traditions and how it goes. And to the popular people that's the low class people.

Loudness/silence. In addition to language use preference, the participants describe a relationship between group membership and linguistic acts. Below, Isabel, Eva, and Steve discuss loudness as a linguistic act that is both a product of peer group interactions and a consciously enacted behavior:

Eva: . . . it's like in all your classes you don't really have any of your culture friends you feel kind of left out. It just isn't the same and nice as lunchtime. Isabel: What is it about being with your friends that's the best part? Steve: You can express yourself and you feel more open to them than to other kids. Isabel: Be loud.

Peers with whom one can be "loud" are sought by these participants. Here, Katie discusses the contexts in which her performance of loudness occurs and helps shape her ethnic group membership:

I felt more comfortable with my fellow Asian students. I could talk, be loud, act crazy, be retarded and all kinds of things around them . . . When I'm with the Americans and everything I feel like, oh no they're so smart, can't do nothing stupid, try to be myself. And when I know an answer, I don't know, I never participate in class. But when I'm in my ESL [*English as a Second Language*] classes I always participate in those because I feel more comfortable. Because they're minorities just like me. Around other people I feel that I'm really low class.

To Katie, being loud is an action that demonstrates fitting into a peer group—it makes her feel she has a niche and lessens her feelings of marginalization by the dominant culture. Because social status is attributed to the linguistic act of loudness, higher social status is granted not only to those able to be loud, but especially to those who exhibit this behavior among mixed ethnic group peers. The boys in the focus group below describe the ways their actions may help elevate their social status among peers:

Interviewer: Okay. Do you guys have ways of showing off your culture at all? Are there things that you do to let other people know that you're Hmong? Juntao: We speak Hmong. Lee: And we're really loud! Juntao: It seems like only me and Ricky Tan . . . it seems like we're the only two who ever talk to other ethnicities. Ricky Tan: Just different races. Juntao: Yeah, it just seems like it. We always say "hi" to everybody and when we do it just seems like other Hmong people just stay low.

Peers who are able to speak freely and loudly among mixed ethnic peers are perceived as transcendent of linguistic boundaries and are able to integrate into the dominant society and, more importantly, to integrate with mainstream American peers. Other adolescents are described as remaining “low” to these boys.

Slang. Finally, the construction and use of slang, such as the popularizing of terms such as fobby and O.G., are the very pinnacle of linguistic acts used to differentiate among peer groups. These colloquial terms were found throughout all participant interview transcripts, used by participants themselves to describe their peers and in description of the ways their peers propagate the terms. These particular terms are used to clearly label “other” group members among Hmong peers, as described by Steve: “When I talk to my Hmong friends, sometimes I act like I’m an old person when I talk to them . . . They don’t say ‘Why are you so Hmong?’ but they say ‘Why are you such an O.G.’”

Interactions such as these are reported to affect adolescents’ identification, and expression, of their ethnic identity in order to not be classified in an undesirable peer group.

Style Behaviors

Clothing and other forms of style are also reported to signify ethnic and cultural identity and used to differentiate among types of peers. In particular, participants reported on the ways that clothing and style edify “types” of peer groups. Unlike the participants’ discussion of linguistic preference, the significance of clothing to one’s ethnic identity is not derived from wearing traditional Hmong clothes for the participants. Rather, ethnic identity expression is based upon the type of American clothing worn. This is because unlike speaking Hmong, wearing traditional Hmong clothes is not practiced on a daily basis and some adolescents believe it is an indication of complete lack of acculturation. The participants instead describe associations of style behaviors with three peer group archetypes: Fobby, Americanized, and Gangster.

Fobby dress. Fobby adolescents are described as those who are under- or unacculturated, and style is a primary marker of “fobbiness.” Members of this focus group interview identify individuals whom they term “good girls” (used interchangeably with fobby throughout the interviews) by dress and, in doing so, also implicitly differentiate themselves from these types of adolescents:

Pa: My cousins are all like goody girls . . . Interviewer: What kinds of things do they do that make them goody girls? Pa: Well, no offense but sometimes they dress like it. (laughter) Interviewer: Okay, well

tell me what that looks like. . . . Kandi: Wear super tight pants . . . they're the kind of jeans that have really small teeny legs. Wear shoes that are flat, like sandals and stuff like that. And they wouldn't put on any make-up and their hair would be nice and combed . . . And they would have it in nice little braids and they would get straight A's. All: They don't go out with boys. They help with all the right stuff. Live by really strict rules. Eve: Their mom trusts them with all the boys and stuff because their mom knows that they won't do nothing. But our parents, our parents know that the new generation, they're gonna be doing stuff.

In this excerpt, the participants first define fobby adolescents by dress and appearance, then continue in their narrative to associate academic and familial orientations with this type of adolescent. Kandi's group and adolescents such as Katie (below) delineate a social hierarchy that utilizes style, combined with language and other behaviors, as signifiers:

. . . People who are "really Hmong" to me, they know the language real well, they know the proverbs and the sayings and stuff. They understand the traditions and how it goes. And to the popular (Hmong) people that's the low class people. (Interviewer: What would be cool to them?) People who are dressing really cute. They are Americanized. Stuff like that.

Americanized. On the extreme from peers labeled fobby are those deemed "Americanized" or "preppy." After describing the American style of dress worn by one particular group of Hmong peers, Katie reports that these adolescents have higher social status than other peers. Here, she elaborates on the behaviors of this group, their effect upon peers, and upon her own sense of self and behaviors:

Sometimes I want to fit in with them, the popular Hmong students. When I want to get in with them I do whatever they say (even) when I think the opposite. They affect me. (Interviewer: What are the popular Hmong like?) They make a lot of friends with the Hmong people, they know each other. They'll be like, "She dresses cute, she doesn't dress fobby." They're loud and they make everybody feel like everything they do is cool.

While peers who are labeled Americanized hold higher social status in the eyes of some Hmong peers, youth such as Lee (female) perceive them to lack a connection to Hmong culture and their ethnic group membership:

Like, my cousins, they're really Americanized. The way they dress is really . . . you know how you have preppy? They're really American

Eagle, Abercrombie. And you go wow, okay, they're really American because they dress all in expensive name brands. (Interviewer: So being Americanized is like wearing expensive clothes and stuff?) Well their English is really really good too. (Interviewer: What do you think about all that?) I don't really think anything of . . . well I've said, "Oh you're really preppy," but like in a joking manner. (Interviewer: Are they still into Hmong culture too . . .?) I think they still have it in them but it's just deep. They do, but the way they look and the way they speak is different.

Youth deemed to be Americanized not only wear clothing symbolic of their acculturation level, but also behaviorally demonstrate acculturation or assimilation to the dominant culture. It is precisely because they are perceived as fitting into the mainstream culture that these adolescents are granted higher status among Hmong peers, despite the perception that they are disconnected from Hmong culture. On the other hand, adolescents considered to neither fit into Hmong nor American culture and peer groups are sometimes those wearing clothing described as "gangster" by peers.

Gangster style. Hmong adolescents identified under this label are those who stylize themselves in popular "hip hop" fashion. As Kandi states, "If a Hmong guy wears super baggy or a Hmong girl wears super baggy stuff then they'd be . . . or if somebody had yellow hair or they dyed their hair red or blonde or they highlighted it . . . they'd be considered bad." Similarly, Eve reports, "I wanted to dye my hair and like highlight it brown or blonde and my dad wouldn't let me, he said that's like gangster style."

In discussing peers who dress in this style, the participants often mentioned the role that parents have in defining the boundaries of this group. They reported that the perceptions of parents and elders in the Hmong community often influenced the ways this group was regarded in the community and the style behaviors that differentiate this group. Style behaviors that are forbidden or disparaged by Hmong adults were those reported by participants as those that define the gangster peer group:

Eve: My mom wants me to get like 4.0 (GPA). Kandi: They want us to be like straight-A students who are like bookworms and school nerds and something. That's what they want us to be! If we wear flares, they won't even let us wear flares! Pa: They like, never adjusted. (agreement from others) Eve: Yeah, like I was wearing these jeans and my parents were like "No, those were made for gangs."

The report of their parents' comments indicates a struggle between abiding by their parents' desires for their identity and with fitting into their peer group. Whereas the youth disagree with some styles deemed as "gangster"

by parents, other respondents also reported feeling that expression of these style behaviors in the absence of expressing behaviors associated with Hmong culture is an undesirable expression of ethnic group membership. They attempt to distance themselves from these peers. Ricky Tan goes so far as to confront the behavior of peers in this group by telling them:

You know, you're always telling me to act Asian, yet Gap is an American brand name. And American Eagle is an American brand name. And Tommy Hilfiger definitely doesn't have any Hmong in him. Yet you guys make it such a big fashion . . . [My friends are] like, "You're stupid." I'm like, Yeah, I'm stupid, yeah right. At least I'm not ashamed to wear my own traditional clothing.

DISCUSSION

This paper seeks to examine the meanings ascribed to language and clothing by Hmong adolescents. Like Eckert's (1989) jocks and burnouts, the participants in this study use these behavioral markers as forms of identity expression. However, these symbols are used by Hmong youth to demonstrate the extent of their connection to their home ethnic group or American culture, rather than to a specific peer group. The participants act to define the "endpoints" of peer group identities and to search for an identity safely resting within these boundary-defining endpoints. Rather than illustrating identification with a specific peer group (such as jock or prep), stylistic and linguistic symbols were used to delineate identity archetypes for the adolescents to use in formulating their own identities. This is reminiscent of Fordham's (1996) ethnography in which "internal policing for group solidarity" (p. 236) leads to the construction of *otherness* among African American high school students. These students attributed cultural and social meaning to academic success and defined an archetype of a student who is "acting White." This archetype of the *other* leads students to adjust their behavior to meet peer group approval.

Similarly, Hmong adolescents in this study utilize language and style behaviors to create cultural boundaries, which are then used to define their peer group and social identities. Together, language and style are used to categorize peers into the following categories: (1) those overly embedded in Hmong culture (fobby), (2) those overly adherent to American culture (Americanized), and (3) those who balance both Hmong and American culture. The participants in this study describe efforts to enact behaviors that place them safely between the extremes of fobby and Americanized. These are universally agreed upon category labels that shape the individual and social identities of Hmong youth without necessitating their actual identification with a particular group. Like the youth in Fordham's ethnography,

the boundaries of identity archetypes created by Hmong adolescents are policed by the youth themselves, relegating those who violate these boundaries to lower social status among peers.

By cultivating meaning ascribed to language and style, adolescents are agents in constructing their own identity. Ethnic identity formation is often examined through socialization practices of parents and the community (e.g., Bernal & Knight, 1993; Quintana, Castaneda English, & Ybarra, 1999). This study calls attention to the ways youth reconstruct and redefine typical markers of ethnic identity, particularly when they are motivated by the need to define their social identities or mark their social status. For instance, ethnic language preference is frequently associated with cultural maintenance (e.g., Phinney, Romero, Nava, & Huang, 2001). However, it is necessary to consider the varied meanings that language preference signifies to ethnic minority and immigrant adolescents. Adolescents may choose to not speak their home language exclusively because of the implications for their social standing among peers. Other adolescents may speak their home language in order to maintain cultural maintenance, but express their bicultural identities and ability to fit into American or the dominant culture by altering their style behaviors. The meaning granted to these two identity symbols is essential to our understanding of adolescent identity construction.

In this study, there are key differences in the ways linguistic and style behaviors are used to shape the identities of Hmong adolescents. Language is viewed as imperative to cultural maintenance. The degree to which one speaks Hmong can be tempered, but a Hmong adolescent is expected to be able to have some (ambiguously defined) fluency in Hmong. Clothing, however, is not intertwined with ethnic group identity to the participants. Individuals are perceived to have personal agency in making style choices rather than exhibiting style behaviors out of cultural or ethnic group obligation. Therefore, style is better regarded as social identity marker and used as such by the adolescents to delineate popularity and peer group types. If clothing is a representation of the self (Simmel, 1904), language appears to be a representation of the ethnic self for Hmong adolescents. The use of these two identity symbols across other immigrant and ethnic minority groups may lend insight into the ways adolescents from other cultural groups construct their identities.

The identity choices made by adolescents are imperative to psychosocial outcomes they may experience (Goodenow & Espin, 1993). The adolescents in this study demonstrate a complex acculturation process in which they are agents in defining what aspects of Hmong and American culture are important to retain and import into their identities. Adolescents who are bicultural in their acculturation orientation have been found to experience more positive psychosocial outcomes, including higher self-esteem, academic performance, and family relationships (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993). There is no existing link between biculturalism and higher peer status. However, the results of this study indicate that

adolescents who demonstrate their ethnic group membership while also exhibiting their ability to fit into mainstream American culture are regarded most highly by their peers.

Brewer's (1991) theory of optimal distinctiveness stipulates that social identity is derived from the tension between an individual's need for validation and similarity to others with the need for uniqueness. The adolescents in this study demonstrate a threefold tension in achieving a social identity. They must seek an identity that adheres to Hmong culture and the expectations of their ethnic group members. Yet, this identity must demonstrate a distinct personal identity that sets themselves apart from peers deemed fobby or Americanized.

Ethnic minority and immigrant adolescents must additionally develop an identity that is viewed by others as acceptably acculturated in order to fit in with the dominant culture. It is also necessary to understand the ways in which identity may be imposed upon Hmong or other ethnic minority and immigrant adolescents. Deyhle (1998) posits that the dominant culture is only marginally available to adolescents who are members of ethnic minority groups in America. Because of structural and systemic inequalities, ethnic minority adolescents such as the Hmong youth in this study have difficulty gaining acceptance as members of the dominant culture. They must negotiate their constructed identities as immigrants and as perpetual foreigners (Said, 1979).

Language and style give adolescents tools to negotiate these identities. Much like African American adolescents (Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, 2003) and adolescents from other immigrant backgrounds who practice code switching or develop a hybridization of languages (Hinnenkamp, 2003), Hmong youth who demonstrate bilingualism and who additionally dress in mainstream American styles are perceived to have fluid identities that are adaptable to multiple social spheres. The ways in which immigrant and ethnic minority adolescents interpret and use language and style give us insight into how they negotiate these boundaries of identity and how adolescents live in multiple worlds (Davidson, 1996).

Limitations

The intent of this study is to examine the ways in which adolescents perceive the meaning of linguistic and stylistic behaviors. Their narratives reveal a complex understanding of the value and status that various behavioral symbols hold. This said, it would be fascinating to observe and identify individuals who personify the archetypes described by adolescents in this study and to examine the peer interactions of these individuals or groups of individuals. Field observations of the clothing the adolescents were wearing or the linguistic behavior they were using would promote better understanding of the dynamic nature of these cultural and social identity symbols and provide the opportunity to triangulate the data.

Participants in this study represent a geographically and demographically select group of Hmong adolescents with fairly similar perspectives regarding use of style and language behaviors. In urban cities or other areas with a larger Hmong population, Hmong adolescents may be much more heterogeneous and the symbols of social group membership might be perceived and used differently. Nevertheless, their personal narratives underscore the complexity of immigrant adolescents' identity formation processes.

Closer examination of the intersections between the family, peer, and school context may also help inform understanding of Hmong adolescent construction of social identities. While many of the adolescents mentioned experiences with the school system in their narratives, there is a great need to understand the ways in which educational values and institutions of education may affect Hmong adolescents' cultural sense of self. Also to be examined in future studies are the influence of generational status, socioeconomic status, ethnic neighborhood density, geographic location, parental and familial influence, personal experiences (e.g., experiences with racism or discrimination), and other contextual factors upon Hmong adolescent expressions of cultural identities.

There may also be some researcher effects that influenced the path of the interviews with participants. Because of the primary author's ethnic identity as a Southeast Asian woman and what they may see as similar lived experiences, many of the adolescents were willing to speak with her. However, given that she is not Hmong and does not speak Hmong, there may exist undisclosed information. For instance, there were occasional instances when participants felt unable to translate the meaning of a Hmong practice or value. When told they could speak in Hmong if they felt more comfortable doing so, they declined. It is our belief that the primary ideas of the statements were still communicated, but it is likely some cultural meanings that may have added richness and meaning to the participants' statements were not conveyed. Nonetheless, Hmong undergraduates who assisted in the transcription and coding of the interviews found the participants' statements to resonate with their own experiences and identity development processes. Three undergraduates who worked on this study provided feedback regarding any biases or cultural misrepresentation or misinformation.

Finally, the typologies discussed in this paper are those created and maintained by same-ethnic group peers rather than imposed by the dominant culture. However, the perceptions that non-Hmong Americans have of Hmong adolescents do indeed play a role in what they deem to be culturally desirable. Ethnic minority groups often experience a double-consciousness to their existence in American society (DuBois, 1905) in which their identities are shaped not only internally, but also externally, through awareness of how the dominant culture views them. The marginalization that Hmong adolescents and other ethnic minority youth experience within their schools and peer groups has very

tangible effects upon their identity formation (Chan, 1994; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Lee, 2002). Future research studies must take into consideration the role that non-Hmong group members play in affecting Hmong adolescents' use of language and style to demarcate their various identities.

CONCLUSION

Geertz (1973) stated that "culture is public because meaning is" (p. 12) and that "it is through the flow of behavior—or more precisely, social action—that cultural forms find articulation" (p. 17). Indeed, it is via the stylistic and linguistic behaviors made public by Hmong adolescents that their distinct cultural identities and social group affiliations are constructed, expressed, and transformed. In utilizing these behavioral symbols, Hmong adolescents set social and cultural boundaries for identity formation. They also use their identities and identity symbols in order to negotiate status within the dominant culture, particularly by socializing peers toward appropriate and desirable behaviors. And it is through their invention and reification of the social and cultural significance underlying these stylistic and linguistic symbols that the adolescents delineate the parameters of their peer group behaviors, identify subethnic groups, and situate themselves within varying social and cultural milieu.

Social identity acts are a product of the ethnic and cultural identities of Hmong adolescents. In a struggle to retain a commitment to some Hmong traditions, adolescents create new ways of expressing their ethnic group membership and simultaneously adapt to mainstream, American culture through healthy acculturation. Hmong adolescents' enactment of social identity behaviors is significant to our understanding of within-group cultural heterogeneity as well as individual cultural and social identity formation.

In a diversifying world, the struggles for identity are dynamic and shaped by the interactions ethnic minority adolescents have with the dominant culture as well as within their own peer groups and ethnic groups. Understanding the ways that Hmong adolescents form and manipulate behaviors to make meaning for their own identities and those of their peers is essential to our overall understanding of adolescent peer groups and identity formation. It is also clear that we must examine these group and personal identity development processes as situated in cultural and social contexts.

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