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# WHEN YOU LOOK INTO THE MIRROR AND SEE NOTHING: PSYCHIC DISEQUILIBRIUM AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH IMPOSTOR PHENOMENON IN HMONG WOMEN LEADERS IN THE UNITED STATES

by

Mai Nhia Xiong-Chan

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctorate in Education

Hamline University

Saint Paul, Minnesota

2023

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Reader: Pa Der Vang
Reader: Caroline Hilk

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ABSTRACT

Xiong-Chan, M. (2023). *When You Look into the Mirror and See Nothing: Psychic Disequilibrium and its relationship with Impostor Phenomenon in Hmong Women Leaders in the United States.*

Hmong have made considerable educational and socio-economic strides in the United States, post immigration after the Vietnam War. This has been achieved through significant challenges such as language, culture, discrimination, poverty and racism. This phenomenological study focuses specifically on Hmong women leaders in the United States and, through qualitative research, examines how psychic disequilibrium and impostor phenomenon have impacted their journeys. Using thematic analysis this study focused on the following research questions: *How does psychic disequilibrium contribute to impostor phenomenon in Hmong American women's professional ambitions?* Secondary questions for this research include: *What is the relationship between culture and identity within psychic disequilibrium among Hmong women and their leadership experiences in the United States?* Data collection methods included an online in-take form to find participants and semi-structured interviews. There were six participants in the interview process who were geographically located in the Midwest and the Western United States. Findings suggest that cultural identity and gender play a significant role in how Hmong women experience feelings of belonging, failure and success and that Hmong women are better served as leaders by considering psychic disequilibrium to address these feelings than impostor

phenomenon alone. Areas for future research include a study on the Hmong partners and husbands of these women, examining how culture and gender impact their lives as partners of professional Hmong women and expanding the study to include a larger sample of all female identifying Hmong women. (236 words)



DEDICATION

To the Hmong women leaders who were willing to share their stories with me. This research writes a small piece of us into existence and for this experience I will be forever grateful.



I

“Ntau txhais tes ua hauj-lwm sib
Ntau lub tswv-yim ua tau txoj kev qhib.”
- Hmong proverb



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I look forward to the next adventure.



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# CHAPTER ONE

## Introduction

*"When those who have the power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you...when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked in the mirror and saw nothing. It takes some strength of soul--and not just individual strength, but collective understanding--to resist this void, this non-being, into which you are thrust, and to stand up, demanding to be seen and heard."*

*– Adrienne Rich, Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979-1985*

### Chapter Overview

Chapter one provides an introduction to the population of this study, Hmong American female-identified women living in the United States and the research questions. It also includes an examination of my own personal and professional connection and interest in the topic and why I believe this area warrants continued study. This qualitative research dissertation will focus on the following research questions: *How does psychic disequilibrium contribute to impostor phenomenon in Hmong American women's professional ambitions?* Secondary questions for this research include: *What is the relationship between culture and identity within psychic disequilibrium among Hmong women and their leadership experiences in the United States?* This chapter provides an introduction to the Hmong American diaspora and immigration to the United

States, Hmong women's role in today's society and key terms and definitions on impostor phenomenon and psychic disequilibrium.



**Brief History of Hmong in the U.S.**

The Hmong's immigration to the United States, which began in 1970's and after the Fall of Saigon, included the immigration of thousands of Hmong from the mountains of Laos and Thai refugee camps, to suburbs in the Midwest, the coasts of California, the rains of the Pacific Northwest and even the continent of Australia, and many smaller places in between. Pew Research (2022), indicates that in 2021 the majority of Hmong in the U.S.today live primarily in the Twin Cities area of Minnesota, or the city of Fresno, California. Geography also plays an important role in the cultural evolution of Hmong in the U.S.

Traditionally, Hmong practiced an animism culture, a belief that spirits inhabit everything around them; these spirits were called, "*dab*," and would require appeasement in order to ensure good fortunes, (Plaff, 1995, p.21). Their faith also revolved around the wisdom of their past ancestors (Vang, 2010, p.18). According to Owens (2007), "There is a strong desire by Hmong parents to have sons who will offer sacrifices to the ancestral spirits, maintain the family line, and be a sanctuary for parents when parents are not able to live by themselves, (para. 59). This belief further belied a form of patriarchy, believing that sons were the chosen ones to honor ancestors, some day become these honored ancestors themselves, and in the real world create households that would care for aging parents and extended families.

Most Hmong today, similar to Americans in the U.S., continue to practice a patrilineal culture. Only sons can carry the family legacy and name; because the son's future children will bear his

last name, only he can actually further the family line. Hmong women can and some do



officially keep their maiden names in the U.S., but their children would not carry these names and the children actually belong to the named clan (Owens, 2007). Additionally, traditional Hmong women were expected to marry and bear sons as well as be the primary family caretaker, obedient to their mother-in-law's needs and directions and be omnipresent at all of her husband's family gatherings (Hmong Families, 1997). For deeply religious Hmong, not having sons would mean the end of their ancestral line.

To better understand the challenges of living in the United States as a second-generation Hmong American, knowing about the history of Hmong immigration is imperative. Hmong immigration to the U.S. was largely not one of choice. According to Lee (2008), since 1975, over 180,000 Hmong immigrated from Laos and Thailand after being displaced by the Vietnam War . Part of this mass immigration from Laos was due to Hmong men, women and children being conscripted into fighting in a 'secret' war by the U.S. military. As early as 1961 and with a newly elected President John F. Kennedy, the country of Laos, was the United States' chief concern for Southeast Asia security as its borders could easily support clandestine interactions between neighboring warring regimes (Head, 2017).

According to Head (2017), by 1968, the U.S. military recruited and trained more than 40,000 Hmong soldiers in order to solidify a U.S. stronghold in the mountains. This coupled with the destruction of the land around them, Hmong would lose their self-sufficiency as fully agriculturally sustaining and become more and more dependent on U.S. air drops of resources thusly changing the course of an entire youth population of Hmong knowing first hand how to farm (Vang, 2010).

In 1987, during the height of Hmong immigration to the United States, Alan Simpson, R-WY, the ranking minority leader in the U.S. Senate on the subcommittee on Immigration and Refugee affairs declared the Hmong "the most indigestible group in society," (Hing, 2003, p. 139). Ethnocentrism prevailed in Congress as well as in neighborhoods that Hmong resettled. Hmong who immigrated during this time were fairly unfamiliar with and Western cultures and values, cash, credit, bank accounts and had very limited previous exposure to technology. The physical needs of being an "American" were not the only parts of what made assimilating successfully into life in the U.S. difficult.

Hmong arrived in the U.S. with little to no ability to read and write English and with no money. This created the perfect storm of marginalization and disdain in society. The United States accepted Hmong immigrants with no true understanding of what supports this community would need to be able to be successful in their transition. According to Hing (2003), post-Vietnam, U.S. officials in charge of the immigration of the Hmong would admit mishandling of the situation and the significant challenges posed in an inhospitable America. Due to the large cultural differences and social and emotional needs, Americans largely saw Hmong immigrants as outliers to society.

**Professional and Personal Interest in the Topic**

Fewer peoples have more tenacity to survive than the Hmong. Their recent history is one of war and displacement; but also of survival and rebirth in the U.S. Hmong have had to walk a fine line between holding onto their embedded cultural beliefs and trying to find success in the U.S. that could assure safety and provide livelihoods. In pursuit of survival it is not uncommon

for assimilation to happen, encouraged both by the Hmong themselves and heavily by U.S. society.

Culture loss that happens when assimilation to a new society occurs and the Hmong diaspora in the U.S. was no different. In striving to create lives in the U.S., Hmong encountered a division of issues among them space and understanding for cultural practices and beliefs. For some Hmong this was an erosion, their culture and practices quickly disappearing because their children were not able to practice and learn the customs like before. As noted Hmong scholar and author Gary Yia Lee (2008) observed, "In a rush to assimilate to mainstream Western societies, or in the daily rat race to make a living, many Hmong have no time to learn their own cultural skills, and have become vicarious spectators," (p. 131). Lee, M., also notes the frustration that older generations of Hmong feel, both men and women, that the newer generation in America simply does not see the value in preserving and practicing Hmong cultural beliefs. This divide deepened when Hmong women, whose roles in the U.S. can and did take shape from opportunities distinctly different than from what was available to them, pre-immigration.

My professional and personal interest in the research stems from my own feelings of impostor phenomenon both as a child and as an adult woman living with one foot in Hmong culture and one in American society. I felt that it could not just be about low confidence that impinged upon my ability to fully embrace my identity and wield it as a superpower. Indeed, as I increased the breadth of my knowledge about my own Hmong culture and acknowledged the critical failures of a society that used racism, genderism and poverty to oppress me, I found myself needing to name that oppression directly. This is where the concept of psychic

disequilibrium became a point of deep curiosity. Additionally, I found that Hmong culture today has evolved due to those same oppressions. In my own experience, when speaking to Hmong elders, male and female alike, the trauma of war and displacement is always fresh in their minds. It most certainly is part of how Hmong culture has evolved in the U.S. and likely contributed to at times to the resistance to change, particularly around women's agency outside the nuclear family and clan.

Hmong women live today in two worlds that are both unique and important. Neither reflect nor fully embrace the evolution of Hmong women's identities in the U.S. It is a daily struggle between finding place within your Hmong community and within the American society from which you derive your livelihood. Essentially as a Hmong woman living and working in the U.S., you become an "other of others." In examining the experience of being an 'other' in American society as a Hmong woman, there are specific needs and expectations from your own familial culture that can be in direct opposition to what American culture teaches and values. This is what I believe to be one of the main contributors to the impostor phenomenon among Hmong women leaders today, which is fueled by psychic disequilibrium occurring in both cultures.

In Senge's (2006) book *The fifth discipline,* he talks about leaders needing to achieve 'personal mastery,' where the leader themselves can create a harmony in which their desires and priorities are able to be blended together and create the world the leader seeks. Personal mastery does not mean accruing new information such as Hmong women attaining higher education for example, but goes beyond to growing their ability to produce the reality they want in life. As G.

Y. Lee (2007) stated, “Their [Hmong women] ideas of cultural transformation are often at odds with those of their elders, who emphasize the importance of a strict gender hierarchy in which men are on top” (p. 809). As Hmong women’s ambitions grow beyond the Hmong American origin story of forced repatriation to the United States from Laos and Thailand, they find an even bigger chasm between what Hmong culture expects of them, and how American society views them.

In examining how psychic disequilibrium reinforced feelings of impostor syndrome I reflect on my own experiences of reaching for an unobtainable standard, namely whiteness. Writer Morris’ (2016) description of White normativity states, “White normativity operates not to position Whites as the best everything–the ideal–but as the most human.” (p. 950). This standard is visible across the spectrum in American culture, from beauty, academia, available opportunities to learn, to the ways medicine treats people who are non-White. It is a pervasive and normalized way of being in the U.S and it begins immediately in childhood. Indeed, “the messages, images, and stereotypes...act as ‘social mirrors’ guiding this identity process by reflecting to youth who and what they should be" (Rogers, 2018, p. 131). Using proximity to Whiteness as a measure of humanity, means the further away one is from it, the less human they are, which upholds White superiority. Even if one were to aquiesce to this standard of normal, it creates a disingenuous sense of self: that to become who you want, you must let go of or deny a portion of your embedded identity.



This kind of indoctrination begins as soon Hmong children enter the U.S. school system through standardized testing, curriculum and lack of culturally responsive teaching. As Hayes

and Juarez (2011) stated,

> This happens as others [oftentimes, though not in every instance, White people] enact processes of White racial domination by drawing on and applying White institutional authority to act and make decisions in ways that support the continuing and systemic privileging of Whiteness in teacher education and other important public institutions (p. 3).

As adults are able to selectively acculturate or refuse to do so, children have less agency and are more likely to as, "...children are more likely to acculturate across most life domains, as they are influenced not only by family but also by peers, school, media, and the larger society as a whole" (Lee et al., 2008, para. 3). Indeed in Rich's (2006) piece on psychic disequilibrium, she intentionally calls out teachers as the example, acknowledging that for children teachers are the source of truth. And when teaching styles do not evolve to reflect and embrace the multitude of differences in their students, students can and do grow up already believing that they must strive to assimilate to White U.S. culture.

As the children of Hmong refugees, my parents fled their agrarian homeland in Laos at the close of the Vietnam War to start a completely alien new life in the Midwest in 1978. It was impossible with that kind of beginning in the U.S. to not have our upbringing as children be impacted starkly by U.S. beliefs and standards. As Ahmed et.al. (2020) states,



> It is plausible to expect the impact of parenting style to affect a child's perception of themselves compared to another to such a large extent because children often carry on the experiences and the implications of the environment they were raised in as they grow up. (p.13).

Having been born in the United States myself, that made some of my siblings and me second-generation Americans. Second-generation American as defined by the U.S. Census as children who have at least one parent who was not born in the U.S. This is different from first-generation college students, which I also was. That is defined as students pursuing a college degree from parents with no degree. As a child, I was deeply impacted at a young age and keenly aware that there was no 'fit' for the authentic me in American society. Assimilation was actively encouraged and part of the journey to becoming "Americanized." There is a significant chasm between being non-existent in the dominant culture and being seen in one's own culture as chiefly as a family caregiver and mother. Important roles to be sure, but what if that was not what Hmong women wanted? Even in today's standards, being a Hmong woman without a husband or without children is looked down upon or pitied in Hmong communities.

In examining my otherness in my Hmong community, I saw firsthand the collision of my Hmong identity and my professional ambition, my "Americanness" in my role as a member of a Board of Directors of a Hmong organization in 2006. At that time, I had been serving as a member of the Board of Directors of Hmong American Partnership (HAP) for three years. HAP's goals were to provide resources and support to members of the Hmong community in Minnesota as well as other newly immigrated Southeast Asian communities. As a nonprofit



organization that acquired much of its operating revenue through federal and state grants serving low-income individuals and families, the compliance and assessment needs were great and the Board took this role very seriously.

In 2006 the Board voted and agreed to remove the long serving Executive Director from his role and reimagine a new future for HAP with new leadership. At that time, the board mostly

consisted of Hmong women and a few non-Hmong board members. A certain percentage of Hmong board members were required by charter and we had met that requirement as a board.

Our decision to relieve the current Executive Director of his duties was met with intense criticism and near violence. As evidenced by Laura Yuen's 2015 piece "Activists demand return of ousted Hmong agency chief" for the *Twin Cities Pioneer Press* "A petition signed by more than 1,110 people demanded the agency reinstate Yang and replace the board of directors who fired him," (para. 7). The Board hosted a well-intentioned community conversation based on the discontent heard within the community. While it was not fully visible to me at the time, I see now that the ire from the community was nearly more for the idea that Hmong women could make a decision that impacted Hmong at large (not just Hmong women) and that to remove a Hmong man from a position of power was an affront to cultural values and to the role of women in Hmong society.

The author Chia Youyee Vang wrote about this historic event in her 2010 book, *Hmong America: Reconstructing Community in Diaspora*. While the evolution of a Hmong woman's role had allowed for Hmong women to work outside the home, seek education and lead Hmong women based organizations, Hmong women as a board choosing to remove a male Hmong



leader from an organization that served all Hmong people, was perceived as simply abhorrent. As board members, we sat in chairs surrounded by at least 150 angry Hmong community members being bombarded with questions of, "Who is your clan? You are not Hmong enough," and chants of "Hais lus hmoob!" which translates to "speak Hmong!" Our inability to adequately convey our words in Hmong became a proxy for how Hmong we were, thus how unqualified we were to lead this organization. Our fidelity to our "Hmongness" was at the crux of the protests.

Even after the debacle that was the community conversation ended and after a nation-wide search was conducted to bring on a new Executive Director, who also happened to be a Hmong woman, gunshots were fired at and into the HAP building in Saint Paul (Moua, 2007). We had done something that was so egregious, complete strangers within our own community would take violent action. This intersection in my life demonstrated to me in a very raw and real way what happens when being a Hmong woman, and being a Hmong woman who pursued leadership roles could do both negatively and positively.

The intention of this research study is not to critique or discuss Hmong cultural norms anymore than it is to do so to American culture and norms; it is to uncover psychic disequilibrium as one of the root causes of impostor phenomenon in Hmong women who seek leadership roles in American society. Societal pressures present in the dual lives of Hmong women must be explored in order to help contextualize impostor phenomenon as a struggle that is not simply personal and internal such as low self esteem or self loathing, but is the consequence of the environmental factors which reinforces their internal doubts and impinges their professional trajectory.



**Context and Importance of the Research Topic to the Field**

The writer and poet Adrienne Rich (1994) coined the term “psychic disequilibrium” to describe the alienation that occurs when a person does not see their own identity reflected in the communities and societies in which they live. She compares this to looking into a mirror and seeing no reflection at all. For immigrants to the United States and second even third generation children, this can most certainly be their experience. New Hmong refugees to the United States during the first wave of immigration in the mid-1970’s faced many obstacles to integration in

their new homeland including opposition by Americans from the U.S. government down to neighborhoods that did not want Hmong people among their residents. Hmong women who had mostly been revered as caregivers, wives and “nyabs” (daughter-in-laws) wanted and needed to forge a new identity in the U.S. that allowed them to support their families and grow as individuals. A crisis of connection prevented Hmong women who were thrust into communities already marginalized to reach their full leadership potential (Way et al., 2018). This was a juxtaposition playing out in real time.

It is important to note that research in just the last decade has also demystified that Hmong women even in Laos, had no agency over their lives or were victims totally to the patriarchy of their culture. Indeed the lens in which Hmong history has been written by Western historians was one which normalized Western feminism as the goal for which all women globally should be benchmarked. The further away from this ideal Hmong women's perceived life was, the more rescuing or rehabilitation was needed to correct a fundamental wrong. As writer Mai Na M. Lee (2016) wrote,



> The importance of Hmong women’s complex roles and the multiplicity of their contributions to society must be considered within the context that while men mostly serve the interest of their paternal clans, women promote their paternal clans as well as the clans of their husbands, thereby holding together Hmong people as a society (p. 87).

This concept is largely discarded in favor of naming patriarchy as a singular culprit in Hmong women’s barriers to progress in the U.S. It also highly discounts the agency that Hmong women already have in a culture that has been poorly represented historically in the West, furthering the erasure of Hmong women’s experiences.

The research question focuses on Hmong women who either immigrated as children to the United States or were born to immigrant Hmong parents in the United States and how their ambitions have been impacted by not seeing their own selves reflected in US leadership culture as bicultural women and how they have resolved to approach and solve for these obstacles. Beyond that the research also seeks to find ways in which Hmong women learned to navigate psychic disequilibrium to achieve their professional goals.

**Adrienne Rich and Psychic Disequilibrium**

Adrienne Rich was an author, poet and feminist trailblazer. Considered by many to be a prodigy of writing, having won the Yale Younger Poets' prize as a Radcliffe student she was also a Guggenheim Fellow. Rich's writings focused in her later years on deconstructing the self, away from the shaping and boxing-in society expects of women (Doherty, 2020). In her later poetry, post-feminist revolution and through deep friendships with feminist writers like Audre Lord, Rich would come to develop her writing through reflecting on a woman's life being created by



those who wish to place women in lesser roles; roles that were defined by society and not a path any women could easily transcend. Rich's own experience with heterosexual marriage, motherhood, homosexuality and focus on womens' rights deeply impacted her writing and indeed she saw her own art as a form of politics itself and not two separate entities with one being commentary and the other being action.

So much emphasis is given to the impostor phenomenon being an affliction that impacts one's own ability to succeed. That it is an inner voice that casts doubts about one's own abilities or downplays one's contributions to a successful outcome. For some, it is so prevalent that it has impeded their ability to grow. "Social-psychological research shows that those groups in society

that are often linked to the impostor “syndrome,” such as women and ethnic minorities, are also subject to persistent negative stereotyping (Eagly et al., 2000; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Ellemers, 2018). This speaks to the heart of Rich’s concept psychic disequilibrium: that the willingness for women to believe that they are not worthy or able, stemmed not from a simple lack of self empowerment, but that the world surrounding women rendered them powerless intentionally.

Like Hmong women who seek out professional and leadership roles beyond their nuclear families, Rich saw and defined how our desire to become our true selves was blocked by society’s expectations of women, reinforced generations prior. That actual femaleness is not one of gender, but grown out of the political and engendered to women from birth. Furthermore, as author Leena Her wrote in her essay *Rewriting Hmong Women in Western Texts,* (2016), “...draws a distinction between ‘women’ who are real, material subjects of their collective histories” and ‘Woman,’ which she represents with the capital letter W to designate the “cultural



and ideological composite Other constructed through diverse representational discourse” (p. 4). For Hmong women, there is a very real dissonance between what the Hmong expect of women in their society, how the dominant society sees and traditionally portrays Hmong women and who Hmong women actually want to be and/or express themselves.

As Christian Haines (2017) argued,

> More specifically, [Rich’s] poetry discovers a pre-individual commonality and, through that commonality, constructs a politics of the common, or a politics standing against the neoliberal reduction of life to the terms of private property, entrepreneurship, and the so called free market (p. 182).

Hmong women experience this oppression of being marginalized as women, twice over–as

women at all and as women who come from a displaced cultural group whose society is unprepared for the evolution of women in their culture. This is evidenced by Hmong women's leadership being largely relegated in the Hmong community as leaders for only Hmong women based organizations and were not respected as true leadership and representative for all Hmong (Vang, 2010).

In Rich's (1994) book, *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979 - 1985,* psychic disequilibrium is a phenomenon prevalent in society in which one's own worth and ability to fully feel accepted and seen in their community is dwarfed by expectations set by others. And it is not just expectations but overt and covert rules and benchmarks of acceptable values, beauty, and behaviors; the further one moves away from these rules, the less desirable they become and their impact is diluted if not completely lost on society. As Rich (1994) stated, "It takes some



strength of soul--and not just individual strength, but collective understanding--to resist this void, this non-being, into which you are thrust, and to stand up, demanding to be seen and heard," (p. 199). If society does not want to change, the burden falls onto the individual to either conform or find the tremendous fortitude to forge on even in the face of great societal judgment.

For Hmong women today, professional success, while seen as generally positive within the community, comes at a great cost. It is a tri fold of circumstances: of self-sacrificing between who their nuclear, traditional Hmong family may want or need them to be, to how Western society deems them eligible to become, and who they believe they want to become. Many Hmong women today have rooted ties to Hmong cultural beliefs and standards. For example it is not unusual for even the most professionally successful Hmong woman to also be a "nyab," (daughter-in-law), which is traditionally seen as an important complement to her husband and

husband's family. It was not too long ago that many Hmong practiced excluding women from the dinner table during important cultural feasting events; quite literally a woman did not sit and eat with the men during these events, even if her professional role and accomplishments dwarfed that of her husband's. This again is a demonstration of how the juxtaposition between Western and Hmong cultures impacts Hmong women, and not a determination that Hmong culture intentionally treats women as inferior.

On the other end of the spectrum of Hmong women's portrayal, American media has, time and again, portrayed Asian women as a monolith–meek, demure and in some cases sexually promiscuous and exotic. The Hmong were no exception to this depiction in the U.S. "Hmong Americans soon inherited many Asian American stereotypes, as Hmong were undifferentiated



from other Asian cultures. After immigration, Hmong were quickly burdened by conceptions of anti-modernity and exoticism" (Craig, 2016, p. 212, as cited in Vang, Nibbs, & Vang, 2016). According to Mok (1998), the rise of the Asian woman stereotype gathered speed in the 1950's and 1960's through U.S. servicemen bragging about the sexual appetite of Japanese women's willingness to please and was further exacerbated and affirmed by mainstream media . Seeing no reflection of themselves in leadership and feeling both cultural and societal pressure, Hmong American women do suffer psychic disequilibrium in ways that are wholly unique.

Given these challenges that Hmong women face within their own culture and the dominant culture, it can be argued that it is not the impostor phenomenon alone that prevents their ultimate success. Since society has no true place or recognition for them, they are not, in fact, impostors. To be an impostor would imply that there is a place in society for you, but you have not reached it because you feel like you do not belong. The opposite of this is, you do not

belong at all because there is no place for you. When racism, gender, classism and other inherited values are deeply embedded in the predominant culture, all others who fall outside those values are actively excluded (McGee et. al., 2022). That is not impostoring; it is a legitimate exclusion. When Hmong women pursue advancement they face the lack of support from their Hmong counterparts and are trying to create a place in American society where they are already excluded. Psychic disequilibrium takes into consideration all the exclusions that exist when society intentionally prevents assimilation and actually benefits from others' exclusions. Indeed it provides a vehicle for unseen persons who have fought for place to understand the fight was not internal but external and as Rich (1994) noted, a 'herculean' task.



**Summary**

The Hmong have lived in the United States for over nearly fifty years, but their story started well before. Thousands of years of Hmong history in fact dating all the way back to China, during the first noted dynasty, the Xia Dynasty dating 2207 - 1766 B.C. (Michaud, 1997). The purpose of this study is to examine the evolution of Hmong women and their leadership development post-Hmong immigration to the United States. As the Hmong continue to build their roots and raise the next generation in the U.S., Hmong women have, despite the challenges, also risen in visible leadership roles for both Hmong and non-Hmong. The purpose of this study is to focus on how the impostor phenomenon has impacted Hmong women leaders and how the lack of environmental familiarity, familial understanding and support have impacted their leadership journeys. Through literature review, surveys and individual interviews, this study will enrich its findings with the unique experiences of these individuals.

Chapter two provides some background with a history and description of impostor

phenomenon, Rich's concept of 'psychic disequilibrium,' and Hmong past and present in the U.S. Chapter three describes the methods used to collect data and analysis. Chapter four contains the results, themes from the analysis, and evidence to support those conclusions. Chapter five makes known any limitations to the study and provides recommendations for further research in addition to the conclusion.



# CHAPTER TWO

## Literature Review

### Chapter Overview

The research questions ask, *How does psychic disequilibrium contribute to impostor phenomenon in Hmong American women's professional ambitions?* And the secondary question: *What is the relationship between culture and identity within psychic disequilibrium among Hmong women and their leadership experiences in the United States?* This chapter describes some of the foundational challenges of the Hmong diaspora in the U.S., their current footprint in today's society, and focuses on the success and challenges of Hmong women who have sought and/or are in leadership roles in the U.S. It also lays the foundation for impostor phenomenon and psychic disequilibrium.

### Socioeconomic Trajectory

More than forty-five years after the first wave of post-Vietnam War Hmong immigrants came to settle in the United States, it can be argued that the same ethnocentrism and outlier mentality still impacts the Hmong today. Based on census data of Hmong attainment, there are certainly areas in which Hmong people have continued to struggle to gain their socioeconomic footing, namely in earned income above the poverty line and in educational attainment.

In Minnesota, according to 2020 data from Minnesota Compass (2023), more than 88,200 Hmong live in Minnesota, with 94.6% concentrated in the Twin Cities. Of this population, 34.1% are foreign born, meaning 58,200 of the Hmong are first-generation Americans, having been born in the U.S. and only knowing one homeland. 57% report owning their own home, certainly



an aspect of the ‘American Dream.’ However beyond this, the Hmong continue to have a sizable representation of an ethnic group in the U.S. that lives below the poverty line. According to the 2019 Pew Research (2021), 17% of Hmong live below the poverty line, in comparison to 13% of All Americans and 10% of All Asians. Hmong also have lower educational attainment, at 46% have a high school education or less, versus All Asians at 27% and All Americans at 39%. Beyond high school the trend continues: 17% of Hmong have obtained a bachelor’s degree, versus 30% for All Asians and 20% of All Americans. Only 6% of Hmong have earned a postgraduate degree. There are significant nuances that exist within these numbers that go beyond low statistics which can be better captured through qualitative research.

**Hmong American Women**

The field of study on Hmong women and their agency or lack thereof within their own Hmong society and American society is a divided school of thought. The dominant research on Hmong women from a Western lens has been fixed on seeing the women more as servants and supporting players within their social structures in Laos, pre-immigration to America and this foundational belief continues to influence much of the research now (Vang, C., Nibbs, & Vang, M., 2016)). As more scholars of Hmong descent and female identification study and write about Hmong women and their experiences, the more research finds that the role of Hmong women then and now, is quite different from how past research has shown. Hmong women scholars have

sought to redefine Hmong women's roles in Hmong society away from the predominant literature which has consistently portrayed Hmong women as decentralized figures with marginalized roles within their family structures.



The concept of 'discursive colonialism' is defined as implicit descriptions and depictions of a type of person/ethnicity/gender that paints them as a monolith. Hmong women, as author Her (2016) writes, deserve an analysis and interpretation free of Western subjectivities. One of those subjectivities is the centering of White feminist theory as the norm, and all other women, primarily from categorically underdeveloped nations or third worlds as 'others,' monolithically antithetical to Western feminist values and in need of rescuing. As Lee, M., (2016) states, "by essentializing Third World women as victims or passive dependents in need of rescue within their own patriarchal societies, Western feminist discourse reproduces Third World women's subjectivity, depriving them of agency within the contexts of their own societies." (p. 87). To better understand the history and development of Hmong women in the U.S., researchers must be conscientious about the source material that has previously studied this group and dismantle the bias that is embedded through discursive colonialism.

A challenge of Hmong women's portrayal both in the scholarly texts and media is that they are seen more as victims of their own culture, which later becomes romanticized when Hmong American women achieve professionally in American society. That she achieved in spite of her cultural upbringing is corollary to the fact that Hmong women have always played a central role in their culture even pre-Vietnam, a fact that was completely overlooked or misinterpreted through existing past Western research . As an example of a direct rebuttal to previous anthropological study of Hmong women's roles as simply related to domestic life and

transactional/functional, Lee (2016) argued that,



> The importance of Hmong women's complex roles and the multiplicity of their contributions to society must be considered within the context that while men mostly serve the interest of their paternal clans, women promote their paternal clans as well as the clans of their husbands, thereby holding together Hmong people as a society, (p. 88).

Hmong women today are not provided a fair opportunity to have their journeys to professional success fleshed out for the complex and multidimensional process it is, when society around them uses a type of victimhood as a common denominator of that success. As Bomar and Vang stated, "The spotlight on Hmong patriarchy masks the agency of women to navigate the opportunities and limitations that exist in any society in which they reside," (Vang, C.Y., Nibbs, F., & Vang, M., 2016, p. 120). As much as Hmong women may recognize their own culture is unprepared for their ambitions beyond the nuclear family operating in the U.S., they can also have an understanding that their culture's belief system in family, honor and survival also plays a critical role in the resilience and fortitude they may have needed in accessing opportunities and preserving through obstacles to their goals. As Boman and Vang (2016) argued, "Moreover, if deficits are located primarily within the culture and family, problems and limitations experienced by Hmong American women are disassociated from macrosystems of oppression," ( p. 121). Belief that the patriarchal cultural values of the Hmong are the only impediment to Hmong women's role in American society discounts the role of society as the oppressor which itself utilizes racism, gender inequality and poverty as tools of subjugation.



**Views of Leadership**

In Northouse's 2019 book, *Leadership,* he writes about several established leadership types, among them 'authentic leadership,' which he interprets from Walumbra et. al. (2008) of comprising ". . . four distinct but related components: self-awareness, internalized moral perspective, balanced processing, and relational transparency," (p. 198). This definition of authentic leadership can prove perplexing to those who are of two cultures such as Hmong women who live in the U.S.

There are incongruencies that exist between what is valued in leadership and the unique leadership qualities embodied by Asian American leaders and namely Hmong leaders. It cannot be assumed that simply because someone adheres to these authentic leadership definitions, leadership roles will naturally come to them as well. Circumstances can and do play a large role in whether or not someone is given a leadership role, in a professional setting.

**Characteristics of Leadership**

Illustrated in Bill George's (2003) Authentic Leaders's Characteristics, he proposes five main core attributes of authentic leadership: Purpose, Values, Relationships, Self-Discipline and Heart. With each of these he connected a corresponding developmental quality: Passion, Behavior, Compassion, Connectedness and Consistency. These are all characteristics that form the foundation of his own leadership trajectory and that he has found is his research to be the most impactful and effective way to lead, whether one is leading a large Fortune 500 company or a small local business.



Figure 1

*Authentic Leadership Characteristics.* (George, 2003. Used with permission from the author.)

Northouse, Leadership 8e. © SAGE Publications, 2019.

Using Northouse's (2019) tenets of leadership and from the perspective of a Hmong woman's role in her traditional home role, one could easily find a woman who is capable of supporting her own leadership or in some cases her husband or clan-based leader, (self-awareness) stoically, (internalized moral perspective) and also be able to think creatively to ensure all parties present are welcomed hospitably, make a meal stretch from five people in attendance to fifty at a moment's notice, (balanced processing) and remember each and every name and title of those in attendance, (relational transparency). Northouse also writes about how 'critical life events' also are an integral part of becoming an authentic leader, as these lived



experiences are deeply embedded in our lives, (p. 206). And yet many of the most critical life events in a Hmong woman's life, are not taken into consideration widely when viewing her as a leader or potential leader, beyond believing this woman rose above her traditional (undervalued

in American society) cultural values.

Additionally in America the ideal leadership skills and paths are generally seen as masculine qualities, known as ‘agentic traits,’ which authors Eagly and Koening (2014) describe as “assertive, forceful, dominant and competitive.” This further leads to, “role congruity” in which certain stereotype attributes between the two genders, male and female, are seen as more conducive to leadership over the other. Eagly and Karau (2002) state, “Specifically, the overall approval of communal qualities in women and agentic qualities in men has been demonstrated in research on (a) the beliefs that people hold about ideal women and men,” (p. 574). This is a direct juxtaposition to many Asian Americans such as Hmong, who see these qualities as unbecoming.

> For the Asian American who may have been taught that being respectful means listening more and saying less, saying something only when one has something important or well-thought-out to share, witnessing someone who is continually talking might indicate disrespect, a blowhard, a lack of intelligence because he or she speaks without substance or value, and is therefore “not a leader,” (Akutagawa, 2013, p. 283).

Indeed many qualities that Asian Americans are acculturated to, develop the opposite effect on American views of leadership, which can appear to be limiting to their talents (see Figure 2).



Figure 2
*Asian Balancing Cultures (ABC) Model.* (Akutagawa, 2013, Huang-Nissen, 2013. Used with permission by the authors.)

## Asian Balancing Cultures (ABC) Model

| Career Enhancing | Asian Cultural Values | Career Limiting |
|---|---|---|
| Good team player, works well with different people | Harmony | Avoids conflict, unassertive. Can be taken advantage of. Can't be authorative |
| Respectful and loyal to boss(es). Seeks out & values those with experience. Knows how to leverage that knowledge. | Respect for Authority/Elders | Reluctant to disagree or challenge. People pleaser or "suck up". |
| Sensitive to the feelings of others. Take other people's point of view/feelings into account. Look for win-win when possible. | Shame | Too concerned with appearances, what others think. Fearful of high risks. Not confident. |
| Not boastful of achievements. Share credit where due. Appear down to earth. Being willing to learn from others. | Humbleness/Humility | Doesn't get/take credit for contribution |
| Reliable, Results-Oriented. Doesn't give up. Puts 110% to do the best job. | Hard Work | Inefficient, limits opportunities for social interactions/networking. Worker bee, not a leader |
| Don't like to lose. Strive to meet and exceed company goals. | Importance of Success - Be #1 /Be the Best | Inflexible and overly demanding. Perfectionist. Not a good team player |
| Open to new ideas, resourceful. Thoroughly understands the work and strives to continuously learn. | Learning/Education | Danger of being too narrowly focused. Rely on book smarts, not people smarts |

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**Source: Sally Huang-Nissen**

*Figure 1.* Asian Balancing Cultures (ABC) model. Copyright 2013 by Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics, Inc.

Akutagawa (2013) through the leadership development program with the Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics, Inc., or LEAP, created a curriculum specifically for supporting and growing Asian leaders in the professional workplace into senior leadership roles. This model embraced the sensitivities around cultural differences, helped to address the opposing sensibilities of what makes a leader, and maximized the inherent cultural values of Asian



Americans to translate effectively into the American leadership paradigms. As LEAP has found, many sectors both corporate, government and higher education have low participation rates of Asian Amercans in their existing and respective leadership development programs. This is due in

some part to prevailing stereotypes about Asian Americans. As Akutagawa notes, "perceptions about the lack of leadership ability, disinterest in leadership roles, as well as perceptions about overrepresentation and "having made it already" are contributing selection factors in the corporate, government, and higher education sectors," (p. 281). Hmong women experiencing impostor phenomenon and/or psychic disequilibrium could be well served by implementing LEAP's program on leadership development which takes into account their unique identities as Asian Americans.

A crisis of connection occurs here for Hmong American women, one which impacts many Asian Americans and leadership stereotypes, namely ethnocentrism. However in the case of managers and supervisors it can be argued that they who wield the power bear more accountability for upholding ethnocentric ideals when it is also they who have the power to hire and promote. This is validated by the dismal figures of Asian Americans represented in key, national leadership roles across the country. As author Akutagawa (2013) with Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics, Inc., (LEAP) finds, only 2% of Fortune 500 companies have Asian Americans as executive officers or top earners; only 2.6% of Fortune 500 corporate boards have Asian American members. Non-profit and foundational boards fared slightly better, but still dismal overall with only 2.55% board representation at the Top 100 foundations (p. 279).



Additionally from a Hmong cultural perspective, two forms of leadership emerge: positional leadership and influential leadership, (Moua & Riggs, 2012). Within the Hmong community, positional leaders are seen as people, primarily male, who command constituents and hold a concentration of power. Thus this type of leadership is both seen and heard throughout the community respective to the size of the constituency, and in turn respected. An

example of such positional leadership in Hmong diaspora would be the General Vang Pao, who is largely revered as a Hmong savior, who led his people from war torn Laos, and would someday lead a return to the homeland.

Moua and Riggs (2012) also write about influential leadership, "someone who has substantially influenced her respective field, community or society," (p. 5). In their perspective this leadership more equally allows women leaders but also consequently is the lesser respected type.

**Impostor Phenomenon in Women**

"Women who experience the impostor phenomenon maintain a strong belief that they are not intelligent; in fact, they are convinced that they have fooled anyone who thinks otherwise," (Clance & Imes, 1978, p. 241). Impostor phenomenon is the misguided but deeply embedded belief that any achievement attained was more coincidental than anything and that they did not actually contribute significantly enough to the outcome and yet is reaping some of the recognition. "The impostor phenomenon describes a psychological experience of intellectual and professional fraudulence," (Mak, Kleitman, & Abbott, 2019; Clance & Imes, 1978; Matthews & Clance, 1985). That recognition, while in most circumstances a welcome action, can cause the



person suffering from the impostor phenomenon to further affirm their belief that their lack of competence will be found out. This can sometimes snowball into the person openly downplaying or even hiding their achievements. This action can sometimes be masked by modesty or magnanimous behavior, but is driven by a hope to not be found out to be phony. This study seeks to examine the causes of why the impostor phenomenon disproportionately impacts Hmong women who seek leadership roles within their inner and outer communities.

Impostor phenomenon per Clance (1985) suggests that the common characteristics of impostors' families include: 1) priority of intelligence and success, 2), lack of positive reinforcement, 3) disparity between feedback received from the family versus feedback received from the outside world, and 4) perceptions of impostors that their interests and talents deviate from their family's interests and talents," (as cited in Ahmed et. al., 2020a, p. 5). Illustrated in Figure 1 below, the cycle of Impostor Phenomenon begins with an assignment in which the results will be evaluated and spirals through anxiety, over-action or lack thereof, relief to simply be done, and parallel thought tracks of both effort and luck, which leads to discounted feedback and eventually impostor phenomenon of a belief that fraud played a role in the cycle.



Figure 3
*Cycle of Impostor Phenomenon* (Ahmed et. al., 2020a)

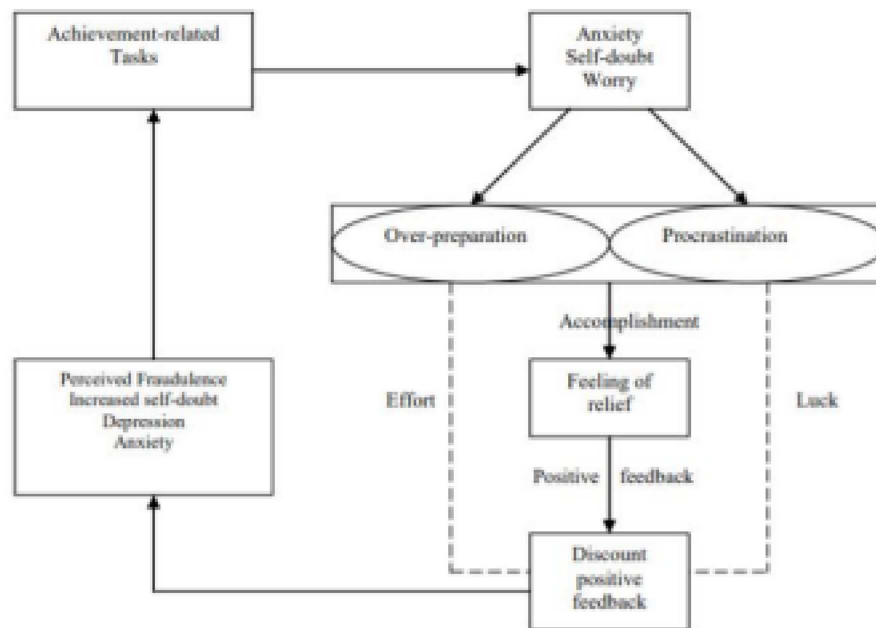



Figure 1. The Impostor Cycle (Clance, 1985), (Salkulku and Alexander, 2011). Impostors are first assigned an achievement-related task, which leads to anxiety, self doubt, and/or worry; impostors either over prepare or procrastinate on the task; once the task is completed, they will feel a temporary burst of relief, meanwhile discounting any positive feedback by attributing their success to effort or luck; the feeling of relief dissipates eventually, and impostors will begin to feel like frauds, they will doubt themselves, and may begin to feel depressed or anxious. The cycle repeats.

**Gender Inequities**

There is a correlation between being male and achieving, and being female and achieving. "...women are more likely either to project the cause of success outward to an external cause (luck) or to a temporary internal quality (effort) that they do not equate with inherent ability" (Clance & Imes, 1978, p. 242). In a culture and society that nurtures and openly



promotes the image of male leadership–male CEOs, male scientists, male presidents–women are already put into a position that forces them to take a much more obstacle-ridden path to

achieving as much as men are able to, or even surpassing traditionally male achievements. "If she were to acknowledge her intelligence, she would have to go against the views perpetuated by a whole society" (p. 244). Men and women alike, would find women openly embracing and promoting her intelligence as distasteful or over confident. "Self promotion is intuitively more normative and acceptable for men than for women" (Rudman, 1998, p. 629). This same quality in men is seen as leadership and brave risk-taking.

In the study by Clance and Imes (1978), it was found that women more often than men, must employ some level of charm, amendability and flexibility to interactions with those in power in order to gain any power or standing of her own. If that woman should also belong to a skin color that has been traditionally marketed as less desirable, have what are perceived to be unattractive physical attributes or not speak the language natively, the act of trying to win over others by charm becomes more and more daunting and less effective. For women of color, in this case Hmong women, the ability to impress people in power becomes an even greater challenge. 'Catch-22' was used regularly in this study–that women can conform to society views and use other traditionally accepted tactics to grow their standing, or be ignored or reviled for refusing to conform or in the case of women of color, not even be given the opportunity.

**Psychic disequilibrium**

Not many have heard of the concept of 'psychic disequilibrium,' nor is it a recognized social condition like impostor phenomenon. It is also less studied as a stand alone subject.



Though not specifically researched by name, psychic disequilibrium shows itself in many other studies that examines the otherness that people of color encounter in daily life. Rich (1994) uses the example of a teacher, teaching to a classroom of students in which they describe a world that

is not inclusive of the multitude of identities that students make up. And in doing this, the teacher provides no outlet in which a student can embrace their authentic identities. As Feenstra et. al., (2020) writes, “These internalized, negative perceptions of the self are borne out of environments and social interactions that lead people to question their abilities and worth,” (p. 2). This reinforcement of non-belonging, even if inadvertent by the teacher, can cause tremendous harm to the students.

Psychic disequilibrium also encompasses the racial stereotyping that people of color can face in certain groups, a form of oppression with real consequences. “In response to such negative portrayals of their group, ethnic minority students are likely to worry that their admission to, for instance, a prestigious university is the outcome of luck, instead of something they actually deserve,” (Feenstra et. al., 2020, p. 3). If a student continuously believes they do not belong at the college or university that admitted them, these feelings of inferiority can plague their progress in college and potentially increase their retention risk. Furthermore subtle racial aggressions, such as microaggressions can reinforce feelings of non-belonging and place. Lind and Tyler (1988) stated, These social evaluative cues ultimately guide individuals’ appraisals of their own self-worth, and thus shape their self-esteem and sense of being worthy or deserving of their “place” within that group or context,” (Feenstra, et. al., 2020, p. 3).



**Race and White Normativity**

There are researchers whose writings reject the notion of impostor phenomena for BIPOC and women, particularly in the U.S. where the dominant culture is capitalistic, heteronormative, predominantly White and Judeo-Christian. Using the environment as a direct contributor to feelings of impostoring, they instead consider it a type of “racialized stress and strain,” (McGee

et. al., 2022, p. 500). For instance, if someone is outside any or all of these norms, it can be argued that society actually does not have space or place for this individual. Arguably this is the case for non-Whites living in the U.S. Is it really equitable to encourage, even work directly with marginalized people to overcome their impostor phenomenon, if society has already devalued the very core of that person's identities? In a study by McGee and colleagues (2022) focused on Black Ph.D. STEM students found that "The participants' Blackness in a scientific and technological world of Whiteness means the very things that make these students unique were not allowed to flourish because of students' persistent relegation to a subordinate status," (p. 500). Because these Black students were already being seen and treated as secondary citizens, their ability to grow under those circumstances was incredibly limited.

When applying the theory of White normativity to the standard of desirable leadership qualities and abilities, the ability for a woman of color or Hmong woman to be able to be taken seriously as a leader or for a leadership position only narrows. In White normativity, there is a focus on de-humanizing those who are furthest away from White standards, in skin color, culture, behavior and more. As Morris (2016) writes, "White normativity makes any difference between Whites and a minority group, even one to which society attributes a generally positive



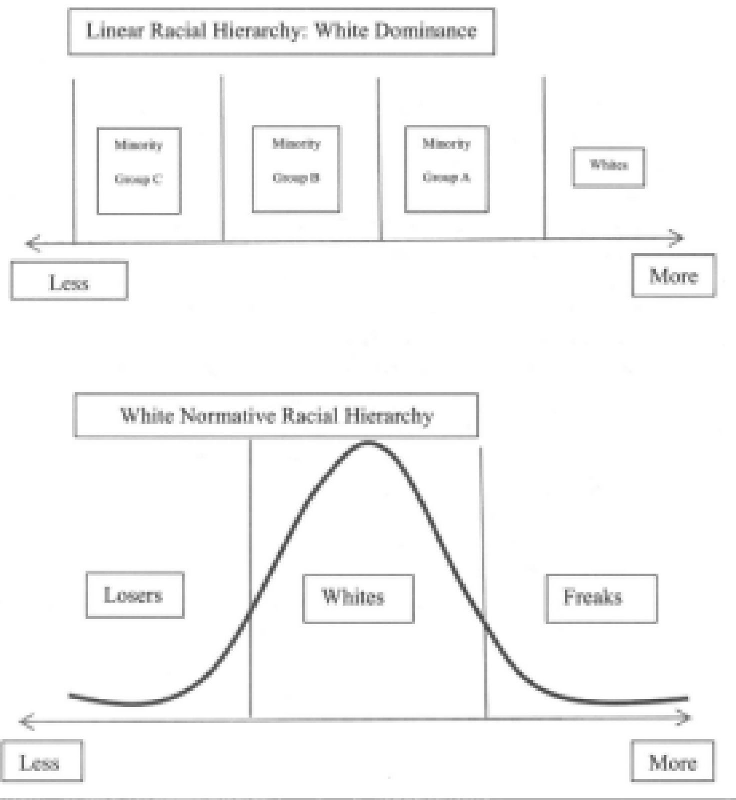
trait, look like evidence that the minority group is abnormal, or not quite human," (p. 952). Morris argues that it is not as if non-Whites have not achieved great accomplishments that are universally lauded in society; White normativity dilutes these achievements as basic characteristics of that minority group and not the individual themselves. Additionally, when non-Whites are considered far from White normativity standards, they are dredges of society; when non-Whites achieve, they are seen as rare specimens at best and freaks at worst. Morris

outlines this in his chart Figure 2 on Ranking the Positive Attributes by Racial Group:



Figure 4

*Ranking of Positive Attributes by Racial Group.* (Morris, 2016, Used with permission by the author.)




White normativity also appears at the root of the Western feminist theory used to define Hmong women and other 'third world women' in anthropological studies meant to help build a better understanding of these groups. Hmong scholars have disagreed with the study of Hmong women and Hmong society done by Western scholars and its depiction of Hmong people as a misogynistic society with underdeveloped views of women. As Mohanty (2003) writes about discursive colonialism,

> . . . focusing on a certain mode of appropriation and codification of scholarship and knowledge about women in the Third World through the use of particular analytic categories employed in specific writings on the subject that take their referent feminist interests as they have been articulated in the United States and Western Europe, (p. 17).

If the prevailing scholarly school of thought is that Hmong women are victims of their own culture, Hmong women appear to lack true agency in their lives at home and would not have the attributes necessary to lead in American society. Mohanty (2003) further argues that there is a prevalence in Western feminist literature which paints the Third World woman consistently as a monolith, an 'average Third World woman.' She describes its as, "This average Third World woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being "Third World" (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.)" (p. 22).

As a further criticism of the impostor phenomenon in inhibiting BIPOC female achievements one can look to the existing solutions for overcoming impostor phenomenon being offered. The workshops that teach everything from how to be better at networking to creating an extrovert personality, all fail to take into consideration the environmental factors that exist to exclude. "Focus on the efforts of individuals and do not address the environmental pressures that foster impostorism, especially among underrepresented racially minoritized people in academic settings," (McGee et. al., 2022, p. 501). It also puts all the pressure onto the individual to solve something that is wrong with them and does nothing to address the system that oppresses. Forcing an individual to self-improve while completely discounting the very racial, colonial and

gender barriers can and does create even more mental health issues for the individual (McGee, et. al., 2022). Additionally in the leadership development work of the LEAP, Akutagawa (2013) writes, “In other words, effective Asian American leadership development demands that we release participants from the burden of constantly having to perform cultural translation,” (p. 279).

When one considers the impact of racism, genderism and patriarchy as an inherent part of American history and society today, the odds can be insurmountable for Hmong women to overcome. Hmong women must overcome the prevalent stereotypes of being objects rather than individuals or being largely invisible, self-help courses on how to build self-confidence and even working towards credentialing is not a total solution. Teaching BIPOC people to adapt their insecurities and change to fit standards that are based on White normativity asks them to change or delete core identities.

**Impact of Impostor Phenomenon and Psychic Disequilibrium**

Impostor phenomenon is attributed to a multitude of influences. According to Ahmed et. al., (2020) major influences stem from the environment surrounding the individual: family and familial upbringing, wealth and poverty and generational differences including the age of the person impacted. This is further exacerbated by gender, race, ethnicity and cultural norms. In examining the issues that Hmong women face in their pursuit of leadership, the norms within their families such as being a good ‘nyab’ and within American society, being docile and exotic work in direct collision with a desire to be taken seriously as a leader. All these environmental



impacts contribute to the community that surrounds Hmong women and how that shapes their

lack of place.

While culture defines the world that Hmong women are born into, context is the lens of American society. Culture is what remains of the world that the Hmong left behind, one in which women were meant to be mothers, daughter-in-laws and faithful clan members loyal to the clan name they married into. Context is the world around today that expects Hmong women to be strong supporting characters but maybe not the leader. Both for Hmong women become problematic in creating identities that neither culture nor context recognizes.

**Summary**

This chapter built a foundational understanding of Hmong socioeconomic trajectory in the U.S. post immigration as well as Hmong American women today. Additionally, the groundwork for impostor phenomenon and psychic disequilibrium were introduced and further explored in which both concepts exist for Hmong women. Interweaving Hmong history, Hmong womens' place in both Hmong and Western leadership culture helped to unpack the dueling priorities that Hmong women leaders face as they feed their ambitions and seek to please their families and community. Chapter three details how these experiences are explored through the use of surveys and interviews to answer the primary and secondary research questions.



# CHAPTER THREE

## Research Methodology

### Chapter Overview

This chapter illustrates the methodology used to conduct this research and study. This study is a qualitative, phenomenological study utilizing surveys and interviews as primary data collection tools. The core research questions are: *How does psychic disequilibrium contribute to*

*impostor phenomenon in Hmong American women?* Secondary questions for this research include: *What is the relationship between culture and identity within psychic disequilibrium among Hmong women and their leadership experiences in the United States?* A qualitative study aims to study individuals and how they construct, see, and interpret the world around them and in turn how those interact with their own sense of self and reality (Flick, 2007, p. ix). As Moustakas (1994) observes, phenomenological science is "a relationship always exists between the external perception of natural objects and internal perceptions, memories, and judgements," (p. 47). Within this chapter I detailed my rationale for pursuing a phenomenological study and why using surveys and interviews provides the rich contextualization necessary to capture this data which is a unique lived experience.

The survey was deployed via social media 'crowdsourcing' in order to capture a wide range of Hmong women participants and not have geography be an issue to access for participants. The survey questions helped the researcher to evaluate the participants' own unique background in relation to the study by posing questions regarding: age, education attainment,



current professional role, geographic location, generational status. The research aim was for a minimum of six interviews but no more than twelve interviews in order for this researcher to really delve into the responses and be able to manage follow up conversations with concision. Interview protocol included interview questions that were broad and reflective and allowed for asking additional questions for clarification and elaboration.

According to Moustakas (1994), phenomenological study is adherently descriptive, reflective and focuses on wholeness. It focuses on the remainder, when worldly expectations and limitations are stripped away and which are stripped away and produces new understandings and

ideas. By limiting the number of interviews, this approach also aided in replication of the study for future use. The aim of the interviews was to further contextualize the survey findings with qualitative data and give a full appreciation of individuals both in similarities and differences.

**Research Paradigm and Rationale**

This phenomenological research was borne out of my desire to better understand and examine the concept that for people of color, impostor syndrome is not simply internal, individual manifestations of low sense of self, but a negative by-product of the world around us. As Moustakas (1994) stated, “In phenomenological research, the question grows out of an intense interest…the researcher’s excitement and curiosity inspire the search,” (p. 104). I wanted to specifically use Hmong women as the study subjects to expand the research that exists about Hmong women and impostor phenomenon particularly as it pertains to professional achievements outside the home. “Personal history brings the core of the problem into focus,” (p.104). An illustration of this is my own closeness to the topic as a fellow Hmong woman who



has struggled to balance culture and professional growth and how these can contribute positively to phenomenological study.

As the author Mai Neng Moua, also a Hmong woman, articulated in her anthology, *Bamboo Among the Oaks* (2002),

> It is essential for the Hmong. . . to write our stories in our own voices and to create our own images of ourselves. When we do not, others write our stories for us and we are in danger of accepting the images others have painted for us (p. 7).

According to Her (2016), “Later when this [Hmong] woman resettled in Western nations, she began to work outside the home, which posed a threat to Hmong patriarchal society and to her

husband, who experienced a loss of prestige, self-esteem, and authority" (p. 8). Arguably Hmong women who have achieved successes outside the nuclear home have done so even in the face of oppositional cultural beliefs and through a diaspora fraught with trauma and uncertainty in U.S. society.

The misinterpretation of Hmong customs and culture through previous anthropological study done primarily through a Western lens has failed to adequately capture the real life experiences of Hmong and their belief systems and the new world (U.S.) around them. As Her (1994) critiques of author Nancy Donnelly's study, *Changing Lives of Refugee Hmong Women,* "Donnelly's feminist and American identities become central analytic frames in her representation and interpretation of the Hmong women in her story" (p. 14). This qualitative study seeks to present a holistic representation of each participants' lived experience through their own personal lens in order to better understand how the phenomenon around them impacts



their ability to function at a very high professional level despite the cultural and societal pressures around them (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

**Research Setting and Participants**

The research participants were working professionals who identify as cis-gender Hmong women who have worked in the U.S. in progressively advancing leadership roles. The ideal candidates had more than ten years of professional work experience to ensure a base level of experience was available to discuss. The research setting for participants was virtual with exceptions made available if needed to accommodate participants. Additionally the researcher employed direct email solicitation to known Hmong women leaders in the greater community to

participate in the interviews. Email solicitation was necessary to be able to recruit participants from a community that was already in the minority of representation in leadership roles. It was not hard to see that for many Hmong women who were eligible for this study, they were the ‘first’ or ‘only’ of their ethnicity and gender in these roles.

Initial survey participants were solicited through online surveys using social media platforms such as Facebook and posting the survey invitation on well-trafficked pages such as “Hmong American Experience,” and “Hmong Professionals in Higher Education.” Leadership at this stage of participation was defined as a role which supervises other employees within the organization or company and/or was responsible for significant budgetary monitoring or revenue streams or in a senior role that allows for significant influence in decision-making. Additionally using W.C.H. Prentice’s definition of leadership, participants will also be positioned in such a way that they are responsible for the productivity and participation of employees serving the



organization/company and were responsible for the growth and development of said employees, (Prentice, 2022).

Interviewees were sampled from the surveys and also selected through the direct solicitation of the researcher. This sample consisted of purposive participants. Taking into consideration that there would be challenges in finding participants, primary delineation on which participants were chosen was based on geographic diversity and professional sector as well as willingness and ability within the necessary time commitment.

Convenience sampling was used, on the basis of choosing a specific gender and ethnicity of people, in this case Hmong women, who would not easily be compared to the general population when considering their unique personal pressures and journeys. A main objective of

this research was to investigate the impact of being a Hmong woman and to see if their ability to find agency and place in society was burdened by impostor syndrome and/or psychic disequilibrium. Virtual interviews were conducted in lieu of in-person which allowed for participants to come from all geographical areas within the U.S.

**Data Collection Methods and Tools**

I collected demographic and narrative data from participants. As Denscobme (2014) stated, "As an approach to social research, the emphasis tends to be on producing data based on real-world observations," (p. 29). The data collection method included a short survey and interviews.

Interviews were conducted virtually and were an important data collection method to further contextualize and enrich the study. With interviews, I was able to ask a set of questions of



all participants, but also anticipated additional interactive questions that arose during each participant's question and answer section. As a researcher I was able to facilitate the conversation to flow and shift after each question based on the participant's willingness or desire to continue to share their viewpoints, allowing for open ended questions and comments (Moustakas, 1994).

**Survey**

The purpose of choosing internet surveys for the first step of my participant data collection was to ensure a diversity of geography in actual interview participants. In studying professional Hmong women I would be limited if my survey was not able to expand beyond my home radius. Hmong women are located across the U.S. and not just to the Twin Cities. Using internet based surveys helped me to increase the accessibility of the soliciting volunteers, which encouraged participation as well. The survey itself was not a true data collection tool; it was used

to facilitate participants for the interview along with allowing recipients of the email to forward onto others in their network for direct solicitation of possible participants.

The distribution of the survey (see Appendix A) was emailed out to my own professional Hmong women connections, but more widely and specifically I used online social networking sites. In doing so, I was able to focus my survey distribution on groups that already had an affinity to coalesce around Hmong leadership and leadership issues. As a 'ready-made research population, using these groups allowed me to circumvent trying to identify a small and marginalized group nationally, and also lent itself to participants who were somewhat familiar with the content I was seeking, (Moustakas, p. 18).



Participants' survey responses were included in the study if they later became interview participants. The inclusion criteria was participants needed to be of Hmong ancestry, female and working professionally in the U.S. Whether they were first-generation Americans, permanent residents or naturalized citizens did not matter. I then coded responses into themes and iterations.

**Interviews**

Based on the participants' demonstrated interest in further participating in the research, I sampled six responders for follow-up interviews. Participants were chosen based on their sector of work, years working in leadership roles and geographic diversity. Interviews were semi structured using an interview guide (See Appendix C). The interview guide consisted of a basic set of questions to ensure comfortability and build trust between the participants and researcher. "It allows them both to describe the situation as they see it and to provide some justification or rationale, again from their point of view," (Moustakas, 1994, p. 100). The act of asking questions was done in an unstructured manner to allow the interviewee to elaborate and drive the answers

into areas that they felt most strongly.

Selecting as much demographic diversity for the interviews was important to provide a richer context in experience. Responses could be highly influenced by geography, age, professional work experience and marital status of Hmong women. My goal was to have the interviews held virtually for each participant. There could have been exceptions made to accommodate a participant if a virtual meeting is not ideal for them. However, all participants were able to interact using a virtual meeting.



Selecting virtual for the interview experience ensured consistency across all interviews. After consent was given by the participant, I also recorded the interview for accuracy in reviewing and transcription. The video recordings were done using Google Meets. I also ran the Otter Application primarily for transcription services in the background. The file for each participant was stored securely in my Google drive. Both methods of recording were disclosed to the participant prior to their partaking in the interview. If a participant should decline to be recorded, I took notes by hand. However no participants declined having their voice recorded on the Otter Application or with Google Meets. These narratives would be the primary basis of my data collection.

**Data Analysis & Timeline**

Data analysis was conducted by reviewing the survey responses from my solicitation for participants. The survey and email solicitations ran from February 2023 through the beginning of March 2023. The survey was deployed using social affinity group pages on Facebook. Invitations to learn more about the study and ask for the survey to be considered for the interviews were distributed via direct email solicitation to known parties for further distribution

as well. From the surveys I was able to confirm participation by individuals. Because the survey had limited responses and the responses were representative of geographic and sector diversity, I was able to invite most participants to participate in the interview.

The interviews were conducted starting February 17th, 2023 and ended on March 12th, 2023 for all participants. To securely and accurately review and store the interviews, I used the Otter application to create transcriptions and a recording of each interview. I conducted all



interviews over Google Meets and recorded the meeting live using that application as well. The importance of doing both an Otter recording and a Google Meets recording was to ensure accuracy of translation. Most participants would interchangeably speak in Hmong and English; the Otter application was not able to properly transcribe the Hmong language and at times was not accurate on its transcription of some spoken English words as well. By using both tools, I was able to translate more effectively when Hmong words were used by the interviewees and also take into consideration facial expressions and body language.

In my analysis of the interviews I looked for common themes around impostor phenomenon and psychic disequilibrium to help answer my research questions and guide my further research on the topics.

**Research Approval**

Permission to conduct the research using human subjects was granted by the Hamline University Institutional Research Board, IRB on February 1, 2023. Each interview participant was provided participant consent forms which were signed and returned prior to the interviews taking place virtually on Google meets (see Appendix E).

**Summary**

This research provided information necessary to better understand the lived experience of Hmong women leaders and the role impostor phenomenon and psychic disequilibrium has played in their journeys. The tools used to gather this information were surveys and interviews. The following Chapter four shares the findings of each interview, and themes that emerged from the analysis and evidence to support the findings.

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# CHAPTER FOUR

## Results

### Chapter Overview

This chapter covers the findings from the six interviews that were conducted by the researcher. The data collection process included a short questionnaire about demographics that each participant completed. The interview data was analyzed into themes recurring among the participants. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine how impostor phenomenon impacts the lived experiences of professional Hmong women leaders using psychic disequilibrium as a lens to interpret the experiences of participants. Themes emerged during the data analysis process which were broken down into overt and covert factors that contributed to feelings of impostor phenomenon and also interpreted by the researcher as psychic disequilibrium. The following chapter introduces the interview subjects and the thematic findings.

### Purpose statement

The purpose of this study was to examine the impostor phenomenon and using Hmong women leaders as the focus population, investigate the role that psychic disequilibrium plays in feelings of non-belonging.

**Research questions**

The primary research questions were: *How does psychic disequilibrium contribute to impostor phenomenon in Hmong American women's professional ambitions?* Secondary questions for this research include: *What is the relationship between culture and identity within*



*psychic disequilibrium among Hmong women and their leadership experiences in the United States?*

**Data Collection**

***Participant Attributes***

Six participants were interviewed for the purposes of this study. Each identified as Hmong, female cis-gender and currently work professionally in the U.S. in an elevated leadership role. Pseudonyms were used to anonymize each individual. Each person was asked demographic questions prior to the interview to describe each participant in how they identified. See Table 1 for participant descriptions.:

Table 1

*Participant demographics*

| Pseudonym | Marital Status | Age | Education attainment | Prof Sector | U.S. Born | Children | Parents' Education |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Married | Divorced | Doctorate | | Public | No No Yes | None |
| | | | | High School | | | |
| Gao Joua | Married | Married | Bachelors | | Private | Yes Yes Yes | None |
| | | | | Doctorate | | | |
| Mai See | Married | 42 36 48 47 | Masters | | Private | Yes No Yes | None |
| | | | | Public | | | |
| Pang Hlee | Married | 45 38 | Masters | | Public | None | None |
| | | | | Private | | | |
| | | | | | Yes Yes No | BA & MA | |

**Gao** is a 42-year old, U.S. born, Hmong American woman residing on the West Coast. A senior level higher education professional, Gao has spent the large majority of her career working at public colleges and universities in administrator roles. Gao was a first-generation college student and received a prestigious tuition award to attend college. Gao credits the support and encouragement of her mother to pursue further education beyond high school, but also noted the pressure she was under to 'not fail' under any circumstances. Failure when pursuing higher education in her family's view, would be considered a significant waste of time since many Hmong girls of high school age at that time chose not to pursue college in favor of marriage. Gao notes that during her formative high school years she did not feel that her other female Hmong peers had the same support to pursue a college degree right out of high school like she did from her own parents. Gao transitioned from her undergraduate degree into graduate school, earning a Ph.D. while taking on progressively higher leadership roles in her industry. Gao is married with three children.

**Joua** is a 36-year old, Hmong American woman residing on the West Coast. U.S.-born, Joua has a bachelor's degree and has had a long career in a male-dominated industry designing digital art and video games. Both of Joua's parents attained education beyond high school, with one parent earning a masters degree (though it is unclear if this was during Joua's formative youth or post high school years). Joua was born in the U.S. and felt very motivated to pursue higher education as a way to escape Hmong societal norms and pursue her dream of video game design. She notes that her parents were ambivalent about her pursuit of higher education but still



did not fully appreciate the industry she chose. Joua is married with minor children and chose to

marry outside her race and ethnicity.

**Mai** is a 48-year old Hmong American woman residing on the West Coast. A senior level public school district administrator, Mai has attained a Master's degree and has worked in the K-12 system at all levels. Mai is a first-generation college student who was born outside the U.S., but spent the majority of her life in the U.S. post her family's immigration in the 1970's. Mai chose to marry as a teenager and earned her undergraduate degree after she was married. She states pursuing higher education was an important value for her to achieve and she was supported by her husband, even when the rest of their families did not necessarily share the same priorities. Mai has both adult and minor children with her spouse.

**See** is a 47-year old Hmong American woman residing in the Midwest. See works in the private sector for a global consumer products company and has held distinct leadership positions managing Fortune 500 company partnerships. See was born outside the U.S. but spent her formative years living in the U.S. She states she grew up in a part of the country that had very few and at times no other Hmong. See credits her mother's tenacity in allowing her to do 'whatever she wanted as a girl' without the patriarchal restrictions of Hmong culture with her desire to go to college and actively pursue a life outside of marriage. See believes her lived experience of not being influenced by Hmong culture as a young person has shaped the way she chooses to live her life today. See married a Hmong partner who also does not adhere strictly to Hmong cultural norms and raised her children in a way that is more similar to how she was raised. Including being married, See has two minor children.



**Pang** is a 45-year old Hmong American woman residing in the Midwest. Pang was not born in the U.S. and was raised in a traditional Hmong household. Pang was married as a

teenager and divorced shortly thereafter. Pang has a high school diploma and some college and worked in both public and private sectors in community engagement. Through her hard work and visibility in her skills as a community engagement specialist, Pang most recently became a senior level executive for a national financial institution. Even though Pang has achieved professionally more than what most people ever could with only a high school diploma, she consistently feels that her educational attainment and her identity as a 'divorced woman' is a precursor to her personal brand and at times inhibits her. She shared that even her own family and Hmong society do not always fully appreciate her journey and achievements because her achievements do not include a husband. Pang is not married and has no children by choice.

**Hlee** is a 38-year old Hmong American woman who resides on the West Coast. Hlee works in the public school system and pursued her doctorate degree to further legitimize her professionally in her industry. She also credits herself as a life-long learner and pursued education because her husband was also pursuing his teaching credential. Hlee was a first-generation college student when she enrolled for her bachelor's degree and stated she believed the traditional Hmong upbringing she experienced created challenges to accessing education and later committing herself to her career. Hlee stated her commitment to further education and working in the education field was inspired by her desire to give back to her Hmong community. Hlee is married and has young children.



**Analysis of Interview Data**

Using thematic analysis of the interviews with each participant above, themes appeared that were interwoven into each of their responses. As stated by Moustakas (1994) thematic uses, "phenomenological reflection and imaginative variation, constructs thematic portrayals of the

experience," (p. 131). Each participant's individual experiences were unique but centered greatly on their identity as Hmong and being a woman. Within these experiences emerged themes that tied their journeys together, unbeknownst to one another including sequential life events that actually were quite similar. Authentic parts of the narrative are included in the analysis findings. The following themes were identified by coding repeated appearances in the narrative and also taking note of comments and experiences shared that were unique to each participant:

1. Being Hmong and female created unique challenges at an early age which impacted their ambitions and outcomes.
2. Being married and having a husband who was fully supportive of their ambitions were key factors in professional success.
3. Impostor phenomenon and psychic disequilibrium was omnipresent; participants actively managed both phenomena at home and in the workplace.
4. Expressed a desire to be the mentor and role model they would have liked to have when they were younger.



**Theme 1: Being Hmong and female created unique challenges at an early age which impacted their ambitions and outcomes**

The study group for this research specifically targeted professional Hmong women. At what rate their ethnic identity and gender assigned at birth impacted their lives and to what extent was evident across all interview responses. As Hmong daughters, each respondent consistently recognized choices their parents made for them or influenced was rooted in each being a girl/daughter prominently. Even in the instance that one of the participants shared who was not raised in any overt way in the traditional Hmong culture, acknowledged that her mother

consciously made the decision to rebuke these norms for her daughter at a young age.

Gao shared that she was the first of her sisters to pursue a college education. And while her parents did not ban her from attending, it was not strictly encouraged either. She felt like the pressure she received was not to go onto college or university to achieve her personal goals as much as it was to not bring shame upon her family because she was a girl going to college. She recognized even back then at that age, how difficult a choice it was for her parents to allow her to go to college, unmarried.

> I have, like, three younger sisters. When I went to college. I remember my mom saying to me, like, you're going away to college and if you fail, everyone behind you will not get an opportunity to go. Right because I was the first in my family like the first girl in my family that they like, Okay, you're we're not going to allow you to move away to college. Right? It was like, it's like I was gonna go anyway, but thank you for allowing me and my mom was very clear. Do not fail. Because if you fail, your sisters would not get to go and your cousins would not get to go because you will be the stereotype (Gao, age 42).

Gao knew that her parents fears were founded in going against what was commonly seen



as an applicable next step for Hmong women, which was to stay with her family until she was married and went to live with her husband's family. Their fear was that her failure in college would bring shame to her family beyond any of her own struggles she might experience in academia. It is clear this level of shame and fear dictated many of the additional burdens Gao faced as a young Hmong woman who wanted to go to college after high school. While it fueled her to become a success at everything she did once she moved out, it also was clear to her that to fail meant generations of sisters and female cousins later going to college could be jeopardized. This duality of being, a fear of failure and a fear of letting her parents down, continues to be a daily part of her personal and professional life.

Mai shared that despite her own mother raising her daughters to be as independent as

possible in the home, culturally held beliefs on the roles of women outside the home still impacted her life negatively. Once she moved beyond her parents home, she was faced with a misalignment of her own mother telling her, “girls can do anything boys can do,” and the needs of her in-law family she married into. Because Mai married during her years of high school, she and her husband lived with his parents. In order to release the pressure she felt living in her new home, Mai and her husband decided to move out. While in traditional American customs seeking independence is valued and encouraged, in a nuclear Hmong family that was discouraged and in some cases, offensive. Mai shares:

> You know, going to school, doing a whole entire, you know, like trying to finish school. And then trying to work and then not being able to fulfill their daughter in law duties. And so like, I think, a couple of months and he [her husband] just said, you know, I know we don't have the money and all that stuff yet, but why don't we go move on [out]. And so his mom, his parents were very upset especially his mom for a while with me and and



> I think I've never really… It's interesting because they had to learn to accept me for all the things that I couldn't do as an expected ‘Hmong nyab,’ (Hmong daughter-in-law role), (Mai, age 48).

Even though Mai is clear in her recollection that her husband was the one who decided it would be best for them if they moved out of his parents home as a young married couple, the husband’s parents, particularly his mother, was most upset with Mai. Mai knew even when she was a young married teenager that education was going to be the key to her and her husband’s future. She focused mightily on going to school and working in order to build a life for herself and her husband. This caused her to have less time to prioritize Hmong ‘nyab’ duties. The dissonance between what her in-laws wanted and considered a success for Mai and her husband’s marriage, and the goals that Mai was pursuing were at complete odds with one another. It would be important to additionally note here, and was evident throughout Mai’s interview, that this dissonance was not born out of a lack of love or deep concern by her in-laws, but more of an

affront to the ways of building a life that her Hmong in-laws valued and knew to be the way. It took a tremendous amount of courage and determination for a young married couple during that time period as well, to move out of the husband's home and feel like it was the right thing to do for their marriage and future.

Similarly, See experienced like Mai, a mother who raised her and supported her to pursue independence. See shared that her own mother encouraged her to pursue her ambitions as a child and teenager such as clubs, sports and work. See's parents raised her and her brother siblings in a part of the United States that had very few, if any, Hmong communities nearby. See contributes her ability to adopt more Americanized cultures such as activities outside the home as a youth, to



her mother's iron will to raise her daughter differently from how she was raised, and due to the lack of pressure from other Hmong judging their parenting and enforcing Hmong norms for that time.

> My mom is loud, outspoken, took charge, right. So she ran the household. She was the one that was doing everything. For us. And so her expectations was you know, my sons can wash dishes just like my daughter can. Yeah. So they were expected to do you know, have their chores helped wash dishes [and granted], I still made rice, I still helped her cook and things like that. And there are still expectations of me as a young daughter, but they allowed me to go to school, go to college. I did a lot of things that I think my peers couldn't do. You know, when I was you know, I went through my dance, piano, voice lessons. I was on the dance team in high school. Like, they didn't put any limitations on what I could and couldn't do. (Mai, age 48).

See credits her mother's more progressive ways of raising her own children as the by-product of her mom herself had received some formal education in Laos before she immigrated to the United States. She shares that she did not marry until she received her Master's degree, something her mom fully supported and felt was a very important move on See's part, likely solidifying her independence and need to depend solely on her future husband.

On See's father's side, she saw firsthand that her female Hmong cousins did not enjoy the same freedoms she had; that they were more homebound and expected to do caretaking roles within their families such as cooking, cleaning and taking care of others, which left them little to no time and no permission to explore other areas of ambition. She recognized that her mother's ardent push for her to find equal footing among her brothers and all others, was due to her mother not wanting her daughter to have the same limited opportunities and more sheltered life she herself had in Laos and observed of their own extended family.



Joua's experience was similar to See's, having parents who intentionally chose to significantly moderate their fidelity to Hmong cultural beliefs and ways when raising their children in the U.S. However in Joua's case, she sees some of her formative experiences being raised in her parents' home as imbalanced, given their persuasion to not teach any of their children Hmong language or customs. In the pursuit to assimilate and speak English perfectly and know American cultures intimately, Joua recognizes now how her upbringing did not take into consideration that as a person of color, as a Hmong person, Joua would still face barriers to success in a predominantly White society.

> Um, so, growing up in Fresno, one of the things that my parents did was like they actually did not teach me Hmong growing up and the reason for that was because they said to be they, they had their sights set for me to be a lawyer. So if I was going to be a lawyer to a judge, right, then I had to be able to speak English without an accent because then people would take me seriously but the issue is that they severely disenfranchised me from being able to just be to be bilingual..bilingual actually a really important thing to be so you know, I would say, growing up because I didn't speak Hmong I unless I was self…so I am self taught… But you know, part of it is like I would definitely say it, it made it so that Hmong the Hmong community didn't feel like it was long enough. And then of course, being an American, I didn't, I'm not White, and so I didn't look American enough. And so there were I would say what happened was it made me kind of feel like I had a chip on my shoulder and sense and it felt like I always had to have something to prove and I feel like that did give me tenacity to to do more to be a trailblazer, but and to be able to have like the grit and the like the thick skin to be able to do it. But I would

> definitely say like I had to leave my community in Fresno, moved to the Bay Area to be able to see myself as a fully fleshed out person…,before it was not enough. (Joua, age 36).

For Joua there is a challenging irony that in her parents' pursuit to Americanize their children, likely with the goal of creating an intentional path to success, it did not allow Joua to fully embrace her Hmongness.



**Theme 2: Being married and having a spouse who was fully supportive of their ambitions was a key factor in professional success**

All six of the interview participants shared they were either currently married or had been married at one time. Only one of the participants is divorced and is currently not married. With the exception of one participant who is no longer married, having a husband and one who was supportive of her professional ambitions was a key factor in success. Beyond that, if the husband was also progressive in what his expectations were for his wife, including intentionally forgoing Hmong traditional values and roles, the wife was even better able to pursue and ultimately find success in a career outside the home. Being married came up frequently with each participant during the interview.

Hlee who is married currently and has children, spoke about her marriage as a partnership and how much having both she and her husband both being educators has helped them unite when faced with conflicts with Hmong cultural values.

> Um, you know, I've been very fortunate that I have a husband, who's also in education so he understands where I come from with my work and how things are work related. It's always been one of those things where, you know, he's seen the work I do and he understands you know, that sometimes, even though we're counselors, we have sports supervision on Friday nights and you know, those things that take time away from the family. And so if it's during the weekdays, he understands it's, it has created tension in the

> past before with family members if I've I was assigned like a Saturday field trip or something work related. And that took me away from you know, going with my husband to support the relatives. (Hlee, age 38).

Hlee also acknowledges that her pursuit of advanced education beyond her bachelor's degree was due to the support and encouragement of her husband. And also her own ambition that if he



could do it, she could do it as well. Together they supported each other's academic journeys as a team.

> And at the time, I met my husband, and he was pursuing a teaching credential. So he did land a teaching job. And so just I think, being around him that kind of inspired me, hey, whatever he's doing, I've been doing helping supporting– I can transition in there. So what I did was we actually went through our master's program in school counseling together I just hopped on the boat and said, hey, whatever you do, I want to do it too. (Hlee, age 38).

In breaking with social norms, Mai shares that her husband will at times forgo sitting at the 'men's table' during Hmong ceremonial meals and sit with her. She sees this as her husband equating her success as being as important as how Hmong men are revered during Hmong events and as a show of solidarity. She also recognizes that this could cause friction between her husband and the other men or cause him to be belittled.

> Or like sometimes, you know, my husband will call it out to me and he would be like, "Well, I don't want to go be sit at the table with the men. And so I'm going to sit with you and we're going to eat together." And then I will tell them no, no, don't do that. Because I don't want them then to like, chastise you. Right. You don't want them to make fun of you [husband] or stuff like that. (Mai, age 48).

Mai also recognized that she was the minority of her own peer group of Hmong women, in the partnership she has with her Hmong husband. In her experience women in her age group who are also married to Hmong men, did not typically receive the same treatment or benefits that she did.

Given her husband's commitment to progressive partnership between spouses versus the traditional Hmong marriage where the man can make a living and have a full life outside the nuclear home, and the Hmong wife *is* the home. The intensity of being both a working professional woman in an advanced leadership position but also being confined to the rules of



being a good Hmong wife and *nyab* [daughter in law] placed incredible limits on what her Hmong female peers can achieve.

> And I look around and I cannot tell you how lucky I feel, to be married to the man that I'm married to and because I have friends who work very, who are like professionals in their career and are very good at what they do. But when they get home, they become the wife they become the daughter in law they become…and I'm not saying that's a bad thing. At all, I'm not saying that that's bad, but they become subservient. It's almost like their voice got taken away. I was just having a conversation with my best friend this weekend. We were walking and you know, she's a wonderful like, professional, strong woman. And she was telling me about how controlling her life is. She's like, 'I feel like I'm bogged.' And I'm like, 'What are you talking about?' She said, 'I feel like I have like, I get home from work…and I'm this person who is so knowledgeable and skilled and everybody [at work] goes to me for for expertise and advice and I'm like meeting all these trainings and whatnot, and then I get home and I better be home by a certain time and *[translated from Hmong]* make dinner, wash and dry clothes and clean the house. All those things.' (Mai, age 48).

For Gao, the power of her marital partnership takes many forms. One that she shared among many examples that stood out is her husband defending to his Hmong elders and family his wife's work. Gao works in a field that requires both travel, interaction with male colleagues and some long office days and weekend work. In the eyes of her in-laws, this took her away from supporting her family and their family exclusively, any time she and her husband were called upon. As Gao shared:

> I travel a lot for work. And in my first year in my gig in Fresno, my husband and I were told that I needed to find a new job because a good wife doesn't leave home…[my] in-laws and uncles who were like that, this is not how relationships work. Your wife should find a new job. My husband was like, What are you guys talking about? And so and so that permeates, but like I said, if it wasn't for him, there'll be a different story,

right? But Him and I are on the exact same page. (Gao, age 42).

Hence while Gao by all accounts recognized the leadership role she played at work and was willing and ready to meet the demands of this role, her extended family did not realize or



accept such duality of existence for one of their Hmong daughter-in-laws. Unable to voice this herself in a way that was heard, her husband stood up for her and her professional role. Being on the same page together about the importance of her professional work and her husband providing arguments directly to his family that Gao's work is valuable and necessary, helped to maintain her standing in her family and not jeopardize what her work needs for her leadership.

In See's case, her husband's support of her individuality went as far as even supporting her to openly speak up or argue with another Hmong male, many times those elder to her husband. Even though See states that the Hmong family she married into is very progressive themselves, there are still norms in Hmong culture that the family followed, including the women preparing food at instant request. This is something that See said she does not believe is equitable treatment and knows her husband does not fault her nor request this of her. See shares:

> When I see people around my age or my brother in law's telling their wives that like, you know, we're in Michigan and my oldest brother was like to his wife, "So So was coming over there like, you know, their coming eat and so know, have the table ready." [laughter] Dude if you like spoke to me like that, you'll get slapped. Because that's on them [the guests] if they didn't come to the party on time. Why am I now cleaning up going through all of this again?..So those roles I think it's really hard for me to like when I see things like that happen, I have to hold my tongue because if I say something, it's not gonna be pretty, right. So I don't really adhere to a lot of those traditional roles that I see. (See, age 47).

See recognized that this is common practice for many Hmong families, that the wives are ordered to make last minute meals and set the table for eating over and over again, should any guests arrive late. As much as this is impractical in See's opinion, this was also a Hmong custom

as a show of respect. However the distribution of the work fell solely on the women's shoulders.



Corollary, her husband did not ask her to perform in this way and was respectful of her wishes to not engage these customs.

**Theme Three: Impostor phenomenon and psychic disequilibrium were omnipresent; participants actively managed both phenomena at home and in the workplace.** Every participant shared that along their professional journeys and into the more senior leadership roles they hold now professionally, they experienced professional peers and coworkers as well as supervisors who would discount their strengths. This further caused them each to question their belonging in these workplaces. Each participant shared that she did not feel that her leadership styles were always valued by her supervisors and peers and that likely their ethnicity and gender was a factor. While this may appear a universal trait in all employee/supervisor relationships, these participants felt that their unique cultural background and ethnicity was a factor and contributed to their professional peers and supervisors discounting their skills and knowledge. These feelings contributed to a high sense of impostor phenomenon. Pang shared that some of her strengths (such as thoughtfulness and timely responding) was many times seen as lack of competence or engagement by her colleagues and her supervisor. She also stressed that she felt in these moments that she was not competent or qualified and that further pushed her to question her contributions. Pang shares:

> So they're, they're just clocking through super fast and, and I'm like, I need a little bit more time to absorb this, I need to get this [data] deck and I need to go and look at it later and absorb it and then I can come back and give you my thoughts on it. But it's hard for me to immediately afterwards be like, oh, yeah, I'm ready to share. You know all my thoughts and my questions on this because I still doubt that I'm gathering data correctly. Yeah. And so, you know, I, my, my manager, you know, shared with me at my annual performance review, like she's like, I need you to respond more quickly. And that was

hard for me because I'm like, guys I don't feel very competent, about my, my ability to sort of diagnose like data that quickly and be like, Oh, this is what I think of that…So for them, it's so natural, like they start asking the questions right away, and they start, you know, saying, Hey, I wonder how these things correlate. And I'm like, Oh, I just need more time to think it over. But when I go away and come back, I feel like I do offer a different perspective that some of these folks don't think of. (Pang, age 45).

Pang also recognized that her executive senior role was earned through her past years of experience and expertise in the field. And that her own background as the child of Hmong refugees who grew up poor, actually deeply enriches her ability to do her job well and like no one else around her.

So it's been this slow climb to get to this place, but you know, I always put my head down, worked hard and focused on how I can help the community. Not just like my own community, Hmong community, but the immigrant communities, community of color and then the larger community as a whole, you know, low and moderate income communities like all the communities that I identify with, and that I think that has been a bridge for me I bring something to it that they don't necessarily that I am of, of that community. You I am a refugee and immigrant. I did grow up in poverty, you know, I saw the barriers that for the communities that we're trying to work with, and to some degree have overcome those barriers are still in progress of overcoming those barriers. (Pang, age 45).

By grounding her work in her identity, Pang truly believes that she is uniquely set up to execute her job of creating community and trust in finance and banking among populations that have traditionally been underserved by her industry.

In Gao's experience, because she found so few colleagues of color and none of Hmong descent among her peer group or supervisors, it caused her to question her professional place at work. It does not appear that this was a concern that others had or reached out to her directly to provide support. It simply was overlooked as a factor that could contribute to one's performance



by most of the people Gao has worked with over the years. She expressed her inner conflict in being someone who did not feel like they were in space that was welcoming:

> That's exactly how I have been feeling my entire life is like, I happen to somehow stumble in these rooms. And I'm like, Why? Why am I in this room? I'm not sure. Like, oh, don't speak up too loud or don't create too much trouble because you don't want them to uncover that you don't belong in this space. Right. And so it was a little bit I'd say a feeling of oh my god. I can't believe I'm here. I'm so grateful to be here. And don't create any…don't speak too loud. Don't make too much waves. Because if they find out I'm here, they might remove me. Right. So I'd say that's happened in every bit of my career. And that's really kind of while it wasn't there, so it's like, okay, well, we do not exist in the room. I exist here, but I was trying to find a way to exist in a space that didn't make room for me. (Gao, age 42).

In See's case, her peers found her to be talented and encouraged her and her potential to continue to seek out new roles that would grow her professionally. Even in this encouraging tone from her peers, See saw her opportunities to grow in a more limited way. Recognizing challenges she faced as a minority, See shared that most did not take into account how difficult it is for people of color to try to change professional roles, even if they are qualified. Psychic disequilibrium impacted how See saw her opportunities as a woman of color seeking promotional roles, whereas her peers only saw a talented and qualified individual. As See states:

> But I think everyone keeps asking why are you still there, don't want to find something else than I do. But as a person of color, you really, it's really hard to get into this new corporate culture and really feel comfortable. And so a lot of that is you know, my team itself, they're great people, right? So to find that and to already have that mutual respect for each other, yeah. It's not like you know, you know, as a White man you can jump from one executive position to another and not have to think about it. And so, you know, I think, you know, it's really hard when you start thinking about all the different challenges than, you know, a normal, non-person of color, you know, like when they want to switch jobs. It's not as difficult as they [White people] don't have to think about all these other challenges that we're all you know, you know, that we have to deal with. (See, age 47).



**Theme Four: Expressed a desire to be the mentor and role model they would have liked to have when they were younger.**

This project sought out participants who worked both in the non-profit and for-profit sector. Among the participants four worked in the nonprofit sector and 2 worked in the for-profit sector.

Regardless of which sector they worked in, each participant overwhelmingly felt pulled to be a positive role model for other up and coming Hmong with the hopes that representation in their respective areas for future generations would help those generations carry less burden of being an outsider and impostor. Five of the six interviewed to their knowledge, were the first of only a few or in some cases the only Hmong woman in the U.S. to hold the roles they did professionally.

With this realization, the participants felt both appreciative and burdened.

Pang expressed a deep connection to her own lived experiences as a poor student from an immigrant family. And how all the obstacles her family faced growing up–poverty, language barriers, transportation issues–all play a role in how she conducts and prioritizes her work today:

> Because I cared that deeply because I knew there were people who didn't trust banks who don't keep all their money under their mattress, but we have our community members because of trust. issues. And because, you know, I mean, trust issues and so many other things, right, transportation issues, like education, all these things. And so, I you know, I made the effort to create a program that would reach out to these folks. I was very successful, and I had people say like, wow, you you really thought outside the box, like what made you think that way? And I was just like, because I know people have family members. I have friends. I'm not far removed. I am not that far removed from people. (Pang, age 45).

Some of the most pronounced feelings of impostor phenomenon for the participants stemmed from the lack of representation they saw of people who looked like them and shared their similar upbringing or cultural values. Because of this occurring repeatedly in nearly each



career the women took on, each grew to accept both the burden and responsibility of being the 'first' in the industry for Hmong people and/or women and knowing that future generations of Hmong would look up to them as mentors or examples, both good and bad. As Mai shares:

> Because of you know, my my position and where it manifests the most for me is when I walk in and I'm actually the only minority and then I start to go and maybe I don't belong here or shoot these people are they also much smarter than me. And, and then I feel like I have to prove myself way more than them. Because I'm the minority in the room. And

now I have to represent all the minorities. (Mai, age 48).

Additionally Mai reflected on her professional role's impact on the Hmong community, having been installed as the 'first' of her kind, gender and ethnicity, to be appointed into a very visible public role:

> Well, you know, like having been the first myself you know, it's such a it's a it's a great honor but, but man I'm telling you like the birth of that load that is placed on you as an individual. Yeah. It's so heavy. Yeah. You know, when I became the first [redacted], I believe like I think in the nation and here, especially here, it was the very first leader that the district had ever hired. of color. And, and I was very young and I, the simple fact that when you get introduced you get introduced as the first Hmong person or like right now and when I go places, people will introduce me as the very first Hmong [redacted] in the nation. Well, that sounds really good, but man that's heavy. Yeah. That's like so heavy and you know, honestly, my dear there is no room for mistakes. (Mai, age 48).

The prioritization by these Hmong women leaders to not just do their jobs exceptionally well, but also intentionally try to create change so that other Hmong and women specifically could see themselves in the same roles, was a unique finding among these otherwise ambitious career women. As Gao reflects of the professional space she works in, how she sees herself in that space and her focus on ensuring she's making space for those who are like her, that come after her:



> It's like somehow you fall out of that realize, okay, that's the structure and yes, I belong here. And I'm going to make space, right and so, and then you get past that. But I'd say that that happens all the time. And every new space, you're going and you're assessing, you're realizing Okay, yeah, there's no one like me in this space. They've never had Hmong this space. Do I belong in this space? Okay, well the space was created for me. Okay, well, you know what, we're gonna make room. We're gonna figure it out. And we're going to figure out how to make more room for other people. (Gao, age 42).

In Joua's case she took the skills she learned in the video game industry which is already male dominated with very few Hmong, and created a non-profit organization geared at

introducing more Hmong to the field and as a space for Hmong artists to celebrate their work as well as embrace their unique Hmong identities. As Joua passionately described:

> And through that we've created a program called [redacted], where our main focus is to be able to connect established artists in visual art, literary art, performing art. And film with emerging artists are those who may be interested so that they can be able to see another career paths that are non conventional. I think there was a study done back in 2015. That said that about 60% of all employable Hmong people are in manufacturing…And so with that being the case we need to be able to expand the different career opportunities for our community and the arts is something that's very hard to automate. So that's the main thing that we're trying to do there. (Joua, age 36).

In addition to her efforts she also hosts week-long festivals to bring the Hmong community and artists together as well as provide financial aid and scholarships to ensure equitable access. The forethought and priorities of this nonprofit are clearly inspired by Joua's own lived experience and her desire to provide all Hmong who may be curious, an opportunity to see and feel themselves in a space they would not have otherwise believed possible or had explored before

In Pang's line of work in the financial industry, she often calls upon her own lived experience of poverty to put herself in her clients shoes and be able to see beyond the needs of what the industry says people want, and fulfill what her Hmong clients truly need to see and



hear. She consistently is praised for "thinking outside the box" by her peer executives when she is able to penetrate banking into communities that have traditionally not trusted financial firms. For her, the change was due to someone mentoring her at a young age around banking that changed her life in this arena.

> You know so, like, if, if I was just wasn't lucky enough to have a manager for my first job when I was 16 talk to me about going to get a bank account…so I could easily cash my checks. I'd probably still be unbanked today. Yep. If I didn't have that,...and so you know, these folks could easily be me. (Pang, age 45).

**Summary**

Among the six participants in this study, themes emerged within the stories that cemented their experiences together. None of the six participants was aware of the others' participation and yet many overlaps in their stories became clearer upon analysis. Using thematic analysis the following four themes were identifed: (1) Being Hmong and female created unique challenges at an early age which impacted their ambitions and outcomes, (2) Being married and having a husband who was fully supportive of their ambitions was a key factor in success, (3) Hmong women were commonly stereotyped as non-assertive and professional colleagues rarely took into account or recognized the challenges unique to their Hmong women peers and direct reports and (4) a desire to be the mentor and role model they would have liked to have when they were younger.



# CHAPTER FIVE

## Discussion, Major Learnings, Limitations of Study, Recommendations for Future Research, Summary

### Chapter overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to analyze the lived experiences of Hmong women leaders working professionally in the United States and how impostor phenomenon and/or psychic disequilibrium has impacted those journeys. This research was guided by the following questions: *How does psychic disequilibrium contribute to impostor phenomenon in Hmong American women's professional ambitions?* Secondary questions for this research include: What is the relationship between *psychic disequilibrium, identity and Hmong womens' experiences of impostor phenomenon.* Four themes emerged and were described in

Chapter four as shared with the researcher through interviews. Chapter five dives deeper into these themes to discuss and analyze the responses using the lens of impostor phenomenon and psychic disequilibrium.

## Discussion

### (1) Being Hmong and female created unique challenges at an early age which impacted their ambitions and outcomes

In Hmong culture similarly to many Western cultures it is males who become the heir to the family last name. Hmong males carry on the legacy of their ancestors (Yang, K., 1997). When Hmong daughters are born, their fates seemingly are already set out for them too, with the