

Understanding The Special
Needs Of Southeast
Asian Youth

Denis Tucker, Exec. Assoc. Director
La Crosse Area Hmong Mutual
Assistance Association, Inc.
2615 George Street, Suite A
La Crosse, WI 54603

(608)781-5744

Understanding The Special Needs Of Southeast Asian Youth

Introduction

As of December 1990, there are over 2,500 Southeast Asian refugees living in the La Crosse area. There are five distinct Southeast Asian refugee groups. They are the Cambodians, Chinese (Vietnam born), Hmong, Laotian, and Vietnamese.

The largest of these groups is the Hmong, presently numbering approximately 2,400 persons.

For this reason this presentation will concentrate on the Hmong people from Laos.

The Hmong Family

The family is the most important aspect of Hmong life and has the most important influence on the Hmong people. The needs and concerns of the family as a whole are of greater importance than those of the individual. To be Hmong means being close to one's family, preserving its dignity, and doing nothing to bring reproach or shame.

The familial social structure greatly influences the values, priorities, and behavior of the Hmong. The importance of loyalty to the family will affect individual decisions about behavior.

When considering the Hmong family it is again important to remember not to stereotype. There is no one description to cover all variations of Hmong life. There are many variables that come into play; length of time in country, English ability, etc.

Early Marriages

Within the Hmong culture men have traditionally been the heads of the family. It was the responsibility of the husband to be the "bread winner" supporting the family financially. Since the majority of the Hmong were farmers, the harder they worked the more prosperous they were and the better off their families would be.

In Laos, men married at age 15-17. The Hmong women married as young as 12 years old, however most were between 14-16. The adolescent years were not given much attention since many youths moved directly from childhood into the responsibilities of adulthood. Parental responsibilities for a child ceased when a

young person married and began raising his or her own family.

Traditionally the groom had to pay the bride's family a purchase price for his wife. In most cases the marriage was negotiated between the families of the two people. The young couple believed that love would develop as they built their lives together. In cases where the couple chose each other-the arrangements or negotiations between families occurred at a later time.

In Laos when a woman married she became a member of her husband's clan. If her husband died she had the option of returning to her father's clan, or remaining with her husband's. If she chose to return to her father's clan, she would forfeit her children as they will always be members of her husband's clan.

It was common for a man to have as many as three to five wives at the same time. The woman was only allowed one husband, however. The husband's first wife would hold priority in the female hierarchy.

In this country the practice of early marriage is changing rapidly, although it does still exist. As families realize the importance of their daughters getting a good education, marriage is put off to at until least high school graduation in many cases.

In more and more communities young women are putting off marriage to gain at least some college education. However, for some of the older more traditional families early marriage is still part of the expected role of their daughters.

There are other reasons, at least in this country, for girls to marry very young. In many families the daughters are expected

to assume a lot of responsibility for the care and maintenance of the family. Household chores, babysitting, cooking, etc., demand a lot of time and work. There is little time for homework. In addition, many families are much more cautious about letting their daughters get involved in extra-curricular activities than they are with their sons. In the majority of families girls are not allowed to date. Girls begin to feel trapped, overworked, misunderstood, and unimportant. Sometimes the only way out appears to be marriage.

Family Communication

In many Asian countries and other places in the world, children BELONG to their families. The parents have responsibilities and obligations to their children. Many times other extended family members (aunts, uncles, grandparents) are also involved in the child rearing.

Children, too, have responsibilities toward their families. It is expected they will consider their family first in any decision they make.

In the Hmong tradition, if a parent mistreats a child clan leaders speak to the parents. The care of the child may be given to a family or clan member for a period of time, depending on the severity of the situation.

Traditional Hmong culture places great attention and respect on age. An older person was respected and children were expected to care for the aged parents. Less attention was given to children. Children, for the most part, were taught appropriate

behavior through observing the conduct of their parents and other adults. There was not a lot of discussion or verbal communication between parent and child.

Disciplinary measures for most Hmong families begin with scolding or "talking to" their children when misbehaving. Most Hmong families feel that physical punishment in the form of spanking is appropriate for children of all ages. If children repeatedly engage in behaviors the family cannot control, clan leaders are called in for assistance. Due in part to early marriages, traditionally parenting by the Hmong was completed by the time their child reached adolescence.

Surveys of parenting practices in this country have shown that adolescence is the age where Hmong families have the most difficulty. The reasons may seem obvious, but the turmoil families are thrown into should not be minimized. Stress and frustration are experienced by both sides of the intergenerational conflict.

Intergenerational Conflict

The Hmong parents having never been a teen ager in this country do not realize the pressures their adolescent youth are faced with. They feel their children lack respect for them and they fear the loss of their language and culture. Lacking understanding of the western lifestyle, educational system, English, job skills, etc., many of the Hmong parents are not able to be a support for their teenagers.

The youth faced with peer pressures are forced to make

decisions they have not been trained to make.

Role reversals have added to the stress in families. In many cases the teenagers can speak English much better than their parents. The kids become interpreters or teachers for their mothers and fathers. This places great stress on the children and parents.

Intergenerational conflict is characterized by the youth rebelling against the traditional Hmong social order which, according to the elders, has preserved Hmong social harmony throughout the centuries. Growing up in the United States, where many have spent most of their lives, Hmong children receive a formal education in American schools, through contact with American society and from American television. Many of them still believe they belong to the Hmong culture, while in reality they do not have any idea of their own traditions or value system. Most do not know how to read and write in the Hmong language and many have difficulty understanding the spoken language of older Hmong adults. Many of the youth pretend to live the American way of life, but most of them do not understand the true American system/spirit. Unfortunately some Hmong youth believe Americanization to be following the example of inappropriate western "friends" and television heroes.

Although some youth try desperately to fit in with their western peers, many are simply unable to do it at this point in time. This comes from a variety of causes. The Hmong are an easily identifiable minority. Each of them face racist, prejudicial attitudes/treatment at one time or another. Having to

cope with these, and other, pressures combined with a lack of self confidence places some youth in a very vulnerable situation. Seeking their own support group some become members of gangs.

As of the present time very few Hmong youth in the La Crosse area have actually become members of gangs. However, the numbers of Hmong youth with behavioral problems is increasing as intergenerational conflict within the families increases.

The La Crosse Area Hmong Mutual Assistance Association's (HMAA) South East Asian Leadership (SEAL) training program is an example of a service being developed to meet the special needs of Southeast Asian youth. (See enclosed material)

Finances/Availability

The majority (approximately 73%) of Hmong families in the La Crosse area are receiving some type of public assistance. Most families live in substandard housing, yet pay high rent and utility bills. The average family size is seven. The large families combined with limited income and expensive housing costs result in very little funding available for other needs.

Depending on the living arrangement and the type of public assistance program they are in, the majority of Hmong youth lose financial assistance at either age 18 or 19. If the youth came to this country at an older age it may mean he/she will spend a couple of years in high school without any financial assistance. In some cases the youth may be eligible for the county's general relief program. At best this funding is extremely minimal.

The result is greater stress and pressure on the youth and

the entire family. In many cases high school students are working part time to assist their families financial situation. This is another reason the HMAA developed the SEAL training program for Southeast Asian youth.

Integration Into High School

As of November 1990 there are over 800 Southeast Asian students in the La Crosse School District. Approximately 200 students are in grades 9-12.

The La Crosse School District has in place an excellent English as a Second Language (ESL) program for refugee youth. ESL instruction is the foundation for integration into high school. As English ability improves the students are moved into mainstream classes. At this point increased interaction with non-refugee students takes place. However, ESL teachers are providing and encouraging cultural presentation/discussions with other classes long before mainstreaming begins. Many time refugee students are utilized as presenters.

The HMAA and the La Crosse School District co-sponsor the Multicultural Youth Council (MYC). The MYC was established in December of 1989 in an attempt to increase appreciation for cultural and racial diversity through education.

The MYC consists of representatives from the Hmong, Cambodian, Chinese, Bangladesian, African American, Native American, Vietnamese, Norwegian, German, Danish, Irish, English, and other nationalities. Recently MYC members have traveled to Viroqua, Wisconsin, and Caledonia, Minnesota High Schools

providing panel presentations on cultural differences/similarities. In the near future Holmen High School will be visited. Plans are underway to implement a local high school mini-exchange program. This will allow minority students from La Crosse to visit outlying high schools for one or two days and students from those schools to visit La Crosse schools. In this manner other students are exposed to the opportunity of getting to know someone from another cultural/racial background. In November 1990 three members of MYC and I attended the Multicultural Youth Conference in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. The youths participated in discussions and a Youth Panel Presentation dealing with issues of racism affecting minority students. These types of educational presentations have proved effective in answering rumors and myths, and promoting greater understanding between all groups.

Nonracist Service Delivery

To

Diverse Populations

To meet the needs of Southeast Asians, and other minority populations, the individual service provider must be able to recognize that his/her own biases may come into play.

Insensitivity, discriminatory efforts, overt, and covert examples of racism are myriad. Service providers must be aware of the dysfunction of these behaviors to work with self-awareness to change such attitudes and behaviors.

In order to develop a model for social services which can minimize the effects of racism, it is important to look first at the practice, attitudes, knowledge, and skill of the social service or mental health practitioner. The individual who provides direct service is the major instrument of treatment and resource mobilization. A skilled nonracist practitioner can effectively mitigate many of the effects of racism in a program. Conversely, a direct practitioner who is overtly, covertly, or even unconsciously racist can do grave damage, even in a service delivery structure that has sought to eliminate institutional racism.

Developing nonracist practices is not simply a matter of having concern for clients. The central issue is whether the worker has attitudes and skills which can be used in conscious process of empowerment for the client.

In "Black Empowerment: Social Work in Oppressed Communities,"
service delivery. He presented four characteristics of the
nonracist practitioner which are essential in developing a
strategy of empowerment for oppressed groups:

1. The practitioner should possess the ability to perceive
in any behavior-others or one's own-alternative
explanations for that behavior, particularly those
alternatives that the self might most strongly reject as
false;
2. The practitioner should possess the ability to collect
objectively through the senses those verbal and
nonverbal cues that would help to identify out of all
possible alternatives the one that is most likely or
most probable for a given client;
3. The practitioners should have the ability to feel
warmth, genuine concern, and empathy for people
regardless of their race, color, or ethnic background;
and
4. The practitioner should be able to confront the client
when true feelings of warmth, genuine concern, and
empathy have been expressed but have been misinterpreted
or distorted by the client.

The desire to help or a sense of sympathy is not sufficient
to eliminate racist effects from practice. An example is the
typical American insistence on direct eye contact-which can make
persons from other cultures very uncomfortable. E.g.-the Juvenile
Court Judge who presumed guilt for a delinquent act on the basis

that a Navajo youth would not "look him in the eye."

Practitioners need to perceive behavior insofar as possible through the attitudes, structure of meaning, and beliefs of the client.

Clients who sense warmth, genuineness, and empathy in service providers respond with greater progress. The application of these feelings across race and cultural difference is a test of a practitioners ability to sense a common humanity and to understand, appreciate, and respect differences.

In many Asian cultures, there is a sense that open disagreement is disrespectful and offensive. It becomes essential for the practitioner to develop nonconfrontive ways to seek out the clients real feelings about treatment and service delivery.

It is vital that American service providers develop their knowledge about the cultures, communication patterns, needs, expectations, and aspirations of the refugee populations to be able to avoid the racial and cultural stereotyping that has occurred for so many ethnic groups in the United States. Increased knowledge combined with genuineness promote attitudes supporting nonracist treatment and advocacy skills.

Attitudes must then be combined with intervention skills and action. There are four identified specialized skills that need to be directed towards empowering the client. They are:

- 1) Establishing rapport
- 2) Establishing expertise
- 3) Assessing client strengths
- 4) Establishing the client as an agent of change

Utilizing the above skills in, combination with a supportive attitude, will greatly assist practitioners in developing culturally sensitive, nonracist services for clients.

For more information on the refugees from Southeast Asia and developing appropriate services, feel free to contact me.

Denis L. Tucker

Understanding The Special
Needs Of Southeast
Asian Youth

Denis Tucker, Exec. Assoc. Director
La Crosse Area Hmong Mutual
Assistance Association, Inc.
2615 George Street, Suite A
La Crosse, WI 54603

(608)781-5744

Understanding The Special Needs Of Southeast Asian Youth

Introduction

As of December 1990, there are over 2,500 Southeast Asian refugees living in the La Crosse area. There are five distinct Southeast Asian refugee groups. They are the Cambodians, Chinese (Vietnam born), Hmong, Laotian, and Vietnamese.

The largest of these groups is the Hmong, presently numbering approximately 2,400 persons.

For this reason this presentation will concentrate on the Hmong people from Laos.

The Hmong Family

The family is the most important aspect of Hmong life and has the most important influence on the Hmong people. The needs and concerns of the family as a whole are of greater importance than those of the individual. To be Hmong means being close to one's family, preserving its dignity, and doing nothing to bring reproach or shame.

The familial social structure greatly influences the values, priorities, and behavior of the Hmong. The importance of loyalty to the family will affect individual decisions about behavior.

When considering the Hmong family it is again important to remember not to stereotype. There is no one description to cover all variations of Hmong life. There are many variables that come into play; length of time in country, English ability, etc.

Early Marriages

Within the Hmong culture men have traditionally been the heads of the family. It was the responsibility of the husband to be the "bread winner" supporting the family financially. Since the majority of the Hmong were farmers, the harder they worked the more prosperous they were and the better off their families would be.

In Laos, men married at age 15-17. The Hmong women married as young as 12 years old, however most were between 14-16. The adolescent years were not given much attention since many youths moved directly from childhood into the responsibilities of adulthood. Parental responsibilities for a child ceased when a

young person married and began raising his or her own family.

Traditionally the groom had to pay the bride's family a purchase price for his wife. In most cases the marriage was negotiated between the families of the two people. The young couple believed that love would develop as they built their lives together. In cases where the couple chose each other-the arrangements or negotiations between families occurred at a later time.

In Laos when a woman married she became a member of her husband's clan. If her husband died she had the option of returning to her father's clan, or remaining with her husband's. If she chose to return to her father's clan, she would forfeit her children as they will always be members of her husband's clan.

It was common for a man to have as many as three to five wives at the same time. The woman was only allowed one husband, however. The husband's first wife would hold priority in the female hierarchy.

In this country the practice of early marriage is changing rapidly, although it does still exist. As families realize the importance of their daughters getting a good education, marriage is put off to at until least high school graduation in many cases.

In more and more communities young women are putting off marriage to gain at least some college education. However, for some of the older more traditional families early marriage is still part of the expected role of their daughters.

There are other reasons, at least in this country, for girls to marry very young. In many families the daughters are expected

to assume a lot of responsibility for the care and maintenance of the family. Household chores, babysitting, cooking, etc., demand a lot of time and work. There is little time for homework. In addition, many families are much more cautious about letting their daughters get involved in extra-curricular activities than they are with their sons. In the majority of families girls are not allowed to date. Girls begin to feel trapped, overworked, misunderstood, and unimportant. Sometimes the only way out appears to be marriage.

Family Communication

In many Asian countries and other places in the world, children BELONG to their families. The parents have responsibilities and obligations to their children. Many times other extended family members (aunts, uncles, grandparents) are also involved in the child rearing.

Children, too, have responsibilities toward their families. It is expected they will consider their family first in any decision they make.

In the Hmong tradition, if a parent mistreats a child clan leaders speak to the parents. The care of the child may be given to a family or clan member for a period of time, depending on the severity of the situation.

Traditional Hmong culture places great attention and respect on age. An older person was respected and children were expected to care for the aged parents. Less attention was given to children. Children, for the most part, were taught appropriate

behavior through observing the conduct of their parents and other adults. There was not a lot of discussion or verbal communication between parent and child.

Disciplinary measures for most Hmong families begin with scolding or "talking to" their children when misbehaving. Most Hmong families feel that physical punishment in the form of spanking is appropriate for children of all ages. If children repeatedly engage in behaviors the family cannot control, clan leaders are called in for assistance. Due in part to early marriages, traditionally parenting by the Hmong was completed by the time their child reached adolescence.

Surveys of parenting practices in this country have shown that adolescence is the age where Hmong families have the most difficulty. The reasons may seem obvious, but the turmoil families are thrown into should not be minimized. Stress and frustration are experienced by both sides of the intergenerational conflict.

Intergenerational Conflict

The Hmong parents having never been a teen ager in this country do not realize the pressures their adolescent youth are faced with. They feel their children lack respect for them and they fear the loss of their language and culture. Lacking understanding of the western lifestyle, educational system, English, job skills, etc., many of the Hmong parents are not able to be a support for their teenagers.

The youth faced with peer pressures are forced to make

decisions they have not been trained to make.

Role reversals have added to the stress in families. In many cases the teenagers can speak English much better than their parents. The kids become interpreters or teachers for their mothers and fathers. This places great stress on the children and parents.

Intergenerational conflict is characterized by the youth rebelling against the traditional Hmong social order which, according to the elders, has preserved Hmong social harmony throughout the centuries. Growing up in the United States, where many have spent most of their lives, Hmong children receive a formal education in American schools, through contact with American society and from American television. Many of them still believe they belong to the Hmong culture, while in reality they do not have any idea of their own traditions or value system. Most do not know how to read and write in the Hmong language and many have difficulty understanding the spoken language of older Hmong adults. Many of the youth pretend to live the American way of life, but most of them do not understand the true American system/spirit. Unfortunately some Hmong youth believe Americanization to be following the example of inappropriate western "friends" and television heroes.

Although some youth try desperately to fit in with their western peers, many are simply unable to do it at this point in time. This comes from a variety of causes. The Hmong are an easily identifiable minority. Each of them face racist, prejudicial attitudes/treatment at one time or another. Having to

cope with these, and other, pressures combined with a lack of self confidence places some youth in a very vulnerable situation. Seeking their own support group some become members of gangs.

As of the present time very few Hmong youth in the La Crosse area have actually become members of gangs. However, the numbers of Hmong youth with behavioral problems is increasing as intergenerational conflict within the families increases.

The La Crosse Area Hmong Mutual Assistance Association's (HMAA) South East Asian Leadership (SEAL) training program is an example of a service being developed to meet the special needs of Southeast Asian youth. (See enclosed material)

Finances/Availability

The majority (approximately 73%) of Hmong families in the La Crosse area are receiving some type of public assistance. Most families live in substandard housing, yet pay high rent and utility bills. The average family size is seven. The large families combined with limited income and expensive housing costs result in very little funding available for other needs.

Depending on the living arrangement and the type of public assistance program they are in, the majority of Hmong youth lose financial assistance at either age 18 or 19. If the youth came to this country at an older age it may mean he/she will spend a couple of years in high school without any financial assistance. In some cases the youth may be eligible for the county's general relief program. At best this funding is extremely minimal.

The result is greater stress and pressure on the youth and

the entire family. In many cases high school students are working part time to assist their families financial situation. This is another reason the HMAA developed the SEAL training program for Southeast Asian youth.

Integration Into High School

As of November 1990 there are over 800 Southeast Asian students in the La Crosse School District. Approximately 200 students are in grades 9-12.

The La Crosse School District has in place an excellent English as a Second Language (ESL) program for refugee youth. ESL instruction is the foundation for integration into high school. As English ability improves the students are moved into mainstream classes. At this point increased interaction with non-refugee students takes place. However, ESL teachers are providing and encouraging cultural presentation/discussions with other classes long before mainstreaming begins. Many time refugee students are utilized as presenters.

The HMAA and the La Crosse School District co-sponsor the Multicultural Youth Council (MYC). The MYC was established in December of 1989 in an attempt to increase appreciation for cultural and racial diversity through education.

The MYC consists of representatives from the Hmong, Cambodian, Chinese, Bangladesian, African American, Native American, Vietnamese, Norwegian, German, Danish, Irish, English, and other nationalities. Recently MYC members have traveled to Viroqua, Wisconsin, and Caledonia, Minnesota High Schools

providing panel presentations on cultural differences/similarities. In the near future Holmen High School will be visited. Plans are underway to implement a local high school mini-exchange program. This will allow minority students from La Crosse to visit outlying high schools for one or two days and students from those schools to visit La Crosse schools. In this manner other students are exposed to the opportunity of getting to know someone from another cultural/racial background. In November 1990 three members of MYC and I attended the Multicultural Youth Conference in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. The youths participated in discussions and a Youth Panel Presentation dealing with issues of racism affecting minority students. These types of educational presentations have proved effective in answering rumors and myths, and promoting greater understanding between all groups.

Nonracist Service Delivery

To

Diverse Populations

To meet the needs of Southeast Asians, and other minority populations, the individual service provider must be able to recognize that his/her own biases may come into play.

Insensitivity, discriminatory efforts, overt, and covert examples of racism are myriad. Service providers must be aware of the dysfunction of these behaviors to work with self-awareness to change such attitudes and behaviors.

In order to develop a model for social services which can minimize the effects of racism, it is important to look first at the practice, attitudes, knowledge, and skill of the social service or mental health practitioner. The individual who provides direct service is the major instrument of treatment and resource mobilization. A skilled nonracist practitioner can effectively mitigate many of the effects of racism in a program. Conversely, a direct practitioner who is overtly, covertly, or even unconsciously racist can do grave damage, even in a service delivery structure that has sought to eliminate institutional racism.

Developing nonracist practices is not simply a matter of having concern for clients. The central issue is whether the worker has attitudes and skills which can be used in conscious process of empowerment for the client.

In "Black Empowerment: Social Work in Oppressed Communities,"
service delivery. He presented four characteristics of the
nonracist practitioner which are essential in developing a
strategy of empowerment for oppressed groups:

1. The practitioner should possess the ability to perceive
in any behavior-others or one's own-alternative
explanations for that behavior, particularly those
alternatives that the self might most strongly reject as
false;
2. The practitioner should possess the ability to collect
objectively through the senses those verbal and
nonverbal cues that would help to identify out of all
possible alternatives the one that is most likely or
most probable for a given client;
3. The practitioners should have the ability to feel
warmth, genuine concern, and empathy for people
regardless of their race, color, or ethnic background;
and
4. The practitioner should be able to confront the client
when true feelings of warmth, genuine concern, and
empathy have been expressed but have been misinterpreted
or distorted by the client.

The desire to help or a sense of sympathy is not sufficient
to eliminate racist effects from practice. An example is the
typical American insistence on direct eye contact-which can make
persons from other cultures very uncomfortable. E.g.-the Juvenile
Court Judge who presumed guilt for a delinquent act on the basis

that a Navajo youth would not "look him in the eye."

Practitioners need to perceive behavior insofar as possible through the attitudes, structure of meaning, and beliefs of the client.

Clients who sense warmth, genuineness, and empathy in service providers respond with greater progress. The application of these feelings across race and cultural difference is a test of a practitioners ability to sense a common humanity and to understand, appreciate, and respect differences.

In many Asian cultures, there is a sense that open disagreement is disrespectful and offensive. It becomes essential for the practitioner to develop nonconfrontive ways to seek out the clients real feelings about treatment and service delivery.

It is vital that American service providers develop their knowledge about the cultures, communication patterns, needs, expectations, and aspirations of the refugee populations to be able to avoid the racial and cultural stereotyping that has occurred for so many ethnic groups in the United States. Increased knowledge combined with genuineness promote attitudes supporting nonracist treatment and advocacy skills.

Attitudes must then be combined with intervention skills and action. There are four identified specialized skills that need to be directed towards empowering the client. They are:

- 1) Establishing rapport
- 2) Establishing expertise
- 3) Assessing client strengths
- 4) Establishing the client as an agent of change

Utilizing the above skills in, combination with a supportive attitude, will greatly assist practitioners in developing culturally sensitive, nonracist services for clients.

For more information on the refugees from Southeast Asia and developing appropriate services, feel free to contact me.

Denis L. Tucker