

INTEGRATING DIVERSITY AND FOSTERING INTERDEPENDENCE: ECOLOGICAL LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT REFUGEE PARTICIPATION IN MULTIETHNIC COMMUNITIES

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Communities in the United States are becoming increasingly diverse, in part, because of the continual resettlement of refugees and immigrants from around the world. The promotion of refugees' well-being and integration depends upon how our communities value diversity and provide opportunities for meaningful involvement. However, refugees often face challenges to such involvement. An ecological perspective suggests that it is important to consider not only the characteristics of individuals but also to examine the extent to which particular settings are able to facilitate the participation of community members. The purpose of this study was to understand the participation experiences of 54 Hmong refugees living in multiethnic housing developments. Interviews revealed that while Hmong residents valued participation highly, most were excluded from meaningful avenues of participation because of multiple barriers, including language differences, time constraints, and discrimination. No supports to address these barriers existed in their communities. It is important to understand and build individuals' capacities to participate and communities' capacities to promote involvement, integrate diversity, and foster interdependence. Participation is fundamental to the process of enabling refugees to become an integral part of their new communities and is a potential way for them to regain a sense of control over their lives and the decisions that affect them. © 2002 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last 20 years, the number of refugees and displaced persons in the world has rapidly increased. Between 1984 and 1995, the number of refugees in the world increased over 50% to 15.3 million (United States Committee for Refugees, 1996). While the United States has provided a safe haven of resettlement for more refugees than any other country (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1998), adjustment to life in the United States is often difficult for these displaced individuals. Refugees often struggle with overcoming past traumas at the same time that they are faced with an unfamiliar environment, language, and culture. Extensive research has found that refugees have lower levels of psychological and socioeconomic well-being than other immigrants and than the general population (e.g., Bach & Agiros, 1991; Rumbaut, 1991a; Westermeyer, Neider, & Callies, 1989). Given that most refugees will not be able to return to their homelands, it is important to consider processes that enable refugees to enjoy a higher quality of life in the United States.

The adverse mental health consequences related to becoming a refugee (i.e., the trauma of war, violence, escape, and resettlement), particularly for the Hmong and other Southeast Asian refugees, have been extensively documented (e.g., Carlson & Rosser-Hogan, 1991; Westermeyer, Neider, & Callies, 1989). Given the traumatic circumstances most Southeast Asian refugees have had to endure prior to their resettlement in the United States, it is important to consider the prevention of further distress. Ying and Akutsu (1997) point out that refugees' existing distress will be exacerbated and that refugees may be more likely to develop clinical psychiatric symptoms and disorders if their adjustment in their country of resettlement is more difficult. Rumbaut (1991b) argues that refugees are at particular risk for psychological distress because of their marginal position and relative powerlessness. It is difficult for them to deal with the extensive changes (usually undesired) they have endured and to try to achieve their life goals in a new, foreign environment. Thus, it is important for refugees to feel that they have influence and control in their new environment. This is often challenging not only because refugees find themselves in communities with unfamiliar cultures and language, but also because many, particularly Southeast Asians, face oppression based upon their race (Sue and Morishima, 1982). Furthermore, Southeast Asian refugees must overcome past traumas while dealing with multiple sources of stress in their new lives, including separation and social isolation, ambivalence and antagonism from others, culture shock, financial problems, health problems, and intergenerational conflicts (Uba, 1994). It is important to note that recent research has documented that much of refugees' distress in their countries of resettlement is due to these exile-related stressors (Miller, 1999); that is, daily economic concerns about survival in a new country, loss of community and social support, and loss of meaningful social roles, rather than solely to past traumas (e.g., Gorst-Unsworth & Goldenberg, 1998; Pernice & Brook, 1996).

In addition, while refugees must adapt to ways of life that are very different from their previous experiences, they must also struggle to become integrated into communities that are often less than welcoming (e.g., Benson, 1990; Goode, 1990). Although the United States has become increasingly diverse (Allen & Turner, 1990; Edmondson, 1996), different ethnic and cultural groups often remain isolated from each other and negative attitudes and misperceptions among groups persist (e.g., Guthrie & Hutchinson, 1995; Merry, 1980; 1981). In some areas, conflict, violence, and hate crimes have increased, often with refugees as the targets (Hein, 1995; U.S. Commission on

Civil Rights, 1988). Therefore, given the challenges faced by refugees and the potentially negative dynamics within multiethnic communities, there is a strong impetus to understand the processes through which refugees' well-being and their integration into their resettlement communities can be promoted. One promising process for facilitating well-being and integration is refugees' participation in their communities (e.g., Jong, 1989).

REFUGEE PARTICIPATION

To consider what it means to be a refugee one must understand that they have lost almost everything (e.g., home, loved ones, community, valued social roles, way of life) and must begin whole new lives in a different place. The idea of really becoming a part of their new community—that is actively participating in that community—is fundamental to our understanding of the refugee experience if we hope for an inclusive country and communities and for real democracy.

Participation in one's community has been linked with numerous positive outcomes, including individual, intergroup, and community benefits. Many researchers have found that participation can be an empowering process for individuals (e.g., Florin & Wandersman, 1984; Zimmerman, 1995; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988). For refugees, participation in the broader community is an important process through which they can acquire the language skills, cultural knowledge, and connections they need to access resources and adjust to a new, unknown environment. Participation is also an avenue through which refugees can contribute to their communities and through which their experiences and knowledge can be valued. Participation facilitates individuals' integration into their broader community (Tomeh, 1974), and when it occurs voluntarily in integrative social settings, it reduces prejudice and increases understanding among members of different groups (Florin & Wandersman, 1990; Jong, 1989; Kelly, Azelton, Burzette & Mock, 1994). There is also evidence that individuals' participation in voluntary organizations can lead to empowered communities that gain power, resources, and decision-making influence (e.g., Speer & Hughey, 1995) and is associated with improvements in the physical, social, and economic conditions of neighborhoods (Florin & Wandersman, 1990). Although community participation is a valuable process which contributes to both individual and community development, only a small percentage of people are involved in their communities. Participation in their local communities is even less common among recent refugees.

Refugees face many obstacles to participating in their neighborhoods because they are often struggling to adjust to new environments with unfamiliar languages and cultures. They tend to rely on members of their own ethnic group to support them in meeting the demands of adjustment. Although ethnic support networks are very important for newcomers and have been documented as facilitating immigrant adjustment (e.g., Bankston & Zhou, 1995; Church, 1982), involvement in the larger community is essential for the development of non-native language abilities and the acquisition of skills and knowledge to succeed in a new country (e.g., Rumbaut, 1991b). However, there has been limited research on the level of participation of refugees in their communities. How do refugees participate in their communities in the United States? What are their experiences of participation? What barriers do they face? How do settings support or preclude their involvement and meaningful participation?

To answer these questions, we need to develop an understanding of the intersection of the culture and experiences of a particular refugee group and their specific context. What are the unique challenges and experiences of the particular refugee group in their community? Within this intersection, what needs to be done to promote their participation? This study considered the contextual conditions within a particular setting (three multiethnic housing developments) and the characteristics of specific community members (54 Hmong refugees). Multiethnic housing developments are a common starting-off point for many refugees, who are often relocated in low-income, urban areas. In addition, these settings often have many opportunities for residents to participate and access resources. The refugee group we focus on are the Hmong, because their adjustment has been particularly challenging (Rumbaut, 1989), and also because, as a collective-oriented culture, they highly value community participation.

THE HMONG

The Hmong are a hill-tribe people from Laos, whose resettlement in the United States in the last 20 years follows a long history of persecution and suffering as an ethnic minority in several countries. Originally from China, many fled Chinese efforts of forced assimilation and migrated to the mountains of Laos and Vietnam about 150 years ago. As a result of their recruitment by the CIA to fight against the North Vietnamese and their communist allies in Laos during the Vietnam Conflict, many Hmong were forced to flee from Laos to Thailand between 1975 and 1990. Between 1975 and 1996, the United States accepted many of these Hmong refugees for resettlement. Approximately 250,000 Hmong currently live in the United States, and the number of Hmong in the United States is increasing faster than any other Asian group (Yang & Murphy, 1993).

Many aspects of Hmong culture have been shaped by their experience as a minority group in every country where they have lived. They have worked hard to preserve their cultural identity and, as their patterns of migration show, will move rather than be forced to assimilate. Their immigration to the United States has challenged the integrity of their culture more than any other relocation because it is difficult to remain completely autonomous here. The United States intentionally dispersed the Hmong when they were resettled here to lessen the impact on any one community, and it has not been possible for them to lead self-sustaining lives as farmers as they have always done in the past. Through secondary migration within the United States the Hmong have regrouped somewhat, but most recognize that some degree of integration and involvement in the broader community is essential. It is important, therefore, to create opportunities for Hmong refugees to acquire the necessary skills, language ability, and resources to successfully make the transition to life in the United States, while still preserving their Hmong identity.

Compared to other refugee and immigrant groups, the Hmong have been particularly challenged in their adjustment to life in the United States. Numerous factors have contributed to their difficulties: significant language and cultural differences, limited previous education (which puts any individual or group at a disadvantage in the United States), limited transferable occupational skills, and the particular context into which they were relocated (most Hmong arrived here in the 1980s in the midst of a severe economic recession with high unemployment). As a result of these factors, the Hmong have experienced a large gap between the abilities they possess and the needs

they must fulfill (Scott, 1982). In fact, statistics from the U.S. Department of Commerce indicate that the quality of life for the Hmong community is precarious. In 1990, their median household income was \$14,300, 67% of Hmong households received public assistance, 87% of Hmong lived in rental units, 86% did not have a high school degree, and 60% were linguistically isolated (Hein, 1995). In another study of refugee adjustment, over half of the Hmong refugees reported problems with psychological well-being, and their rate of distress was three times higher than that of other Americans (Rumbaut, 1989). These statistics suggest that it is important to consider processes that might facilitate the well-being of Hmong refugees.

To promote the well-being of Hmong refugees, it is essential to understand some of the important aspects of Hmong culture and the experiences of Hmong refugees. Hmong culture is a collectivist, clan-based culture (Scott, 1982), which, as opposed to American and other Western cultures that emphasize autonomy, privacy, and individual initiative, is based upon a “we” orientation and the importance of group solidarity, duties and obligations, and a collective identity. There are approximately 13 different Hmong clans in the United States and decisions made by the clan leaders affect all members of the clan in a given city or area. Solidarity with family, clan, and other Hmong people is fundamental to Hmong culture. For instance, relatives considered cousins in a European American culture are treated as brothers and sisters by the Hmong, while anyone in the same clan is considered a cousin. This emphasis on clan and community is an important strength of the Hmong community, which commonly results in an incredibly extensive and strong support system. Hmong families often pool economic resources and support each other in making decisions and overcoming hardships. More than any other immigrant group, the Hmong have succeeded in preserving many aspects of their culture, interdependency, and sense of ethnic community (Fadiman, 1997).

Despite these strengths, the large gap between their skills and needs and the time Hmong refugees have spent in refugee camps (anywhere from a few months to 19 years) have resulted in many Hmong refugees feeling particularly powerless in the United States. Many have lost a sense of control over their lives. This is contradictory to their usual experiences of being active in their communities and decision-making processes. Community participation is fundamental to most Hmong people—their lives revolve around it. Therefore, it is important to consider how their inability to participate in many recent decisions in their lives may impact their current participation. In addition, it is not clear whether the Hmong people value participation in the broader community in the same way they value participation in the Hmong community. As discussed previously, Hmong traditionally lived in homogenous communities distinct from other ethnic groups. Furthermore, collective-oriented cultures are based upon the idea of an in-group (in this case Hmong people) and out-groups (non-Hmong). Therefore, it is important to consider how participation in multiethnic communities is conceptualized and experienced by Hmong refugees.

Multiethnic Communities

Most refugees resettle in urban areas because these are the primary locations of sponsors, jobs, and housing (Hein, 1995). The neighborhoods in which refugees are located are often low income and if not multiethnic before, become so as newcomers arrive. One specific type of multiethnic community is public housing developments, which are unique because they are most often home to low-income residents living in

very close proximity to each other. Residents of public housing may be in great need of making connections to resources in the community. In addition, public housing developments often have community centers, resident councils, and other formal opportunities for community involvement. Thus, participation in public housing developments may be both urgent and possible. In the three multiethnic housing developments targeted in this study, other residents in these communities were taking advantage of resources in the community and opportunities to participate in decision-making, while most Hmong residents were not. Therefore, it was particularly important to employ an ecological perspective from which to develop an understanding of the fit (or lack thereof) between the participation opportunities and settings and the needs, wants, culture, and skills of Hmong residents.

Ecological Framework

This study was implemented with an ecological framework, which suggests several important components. First, it implies a focus on the process as well as on the outcome of the research, which involves the researchers' real and genuine engagement in the setting over time and the emergence of the research questions from the needs and experiences of community members (Rappaport, 1994). An ecological perspective also requires an emphasis on a specific individual or group, their setting, and the interactions between them (Kelly, 1968). In terms of the process of this project, its origins organically evolved from one of the researcher's involvement in the setting. The first author was interested in the public housing developments because these were settings with many Hmong refugees. After working with Hmong people in a refugee camp in Thailand for 2 years, she wanted to learn more about their situation in the United States. However, it was development staff who initiated our contact with the public housing developments; they were frustrated because they had resources and participation opportunities at the development community centers that were not being accessed by most refugee residents. After spending several hours a week for more than a year in the setting (with staff and also visiting refugees in their homes), it became clear that the Hmong residents and other refugees were also extremely frustrated with their lack of access to resources, their inability to participate, their feelings of exclusion, and the intergroup conflict and discrimination. Thus, it was evident that staff and residents had very different perspectives and that diversity did not seem to be meaningfully valued in these settings. Although staff perspectives were an important part of the initial engagement in the setting, what seemed most essential was to present the perspectives of those who seemed most marginalized—the Hmong—to address many staff and other residents' tendencies to blame refugees for their lack of involvement. Therefore, listening to and presenting the perspectives of refugee residents was critical.

CURRENT STUDY

The purpose of this study was to examine, from refugees' own perspectives, how and to what extent they participate in their communities, in order to determine ecologies that promote diversity and participation. Thus, the focus was on the characteristics of contexts and settings that enable refugees to participate and contribute their skills and knowledge to their new communities. In other words, it was important to begin by considering the extent to which the environment meets the unique needs of its

members, provides the necessary supports, and is accepting of diversity. We often look at absence of particular individuals and groups in a particular setting as a lack of interest, but this is victim blaming. Because research in this area is limited, the study was exploratory and addressed three broad questions: (1) How were Hmong refugees thinking about their participation in their multiethnic communities?; (2) How and to what extent did Hmong residents participate in their communities?; (3) What barriers to participation were Hmong refugees experiencing in these multiethnic communities?

Method

Sample. The participants in the study were Hmong residents of three multiethnic, low-income public housing developments in a medium-sized Midwestern city. Each site had between 100 and 150 residential units and a community center with computers, tutoring facilities, and a small gym. All three sites were predominantly African American (between 48% and 73% of residents). Asian/Asian Americans comprised the next largest group (19% to 27%), with Hmong people representing 10% to 15% of total residents. Hmong adults were randomly sampled from the 54 Hmong households in the three housing developments. Fifty-four adults from 32 households were interviewed. Ninety-four percent of households and 86% of individuals approached agreed to participate. Fifty-nine percent were female; most were married (81%), had an average age of 46 (range 19–78) and had an average of 7 children (range 0–16). About equal numbers were employed (44%) and identified childcare as their primary role (43%). Many (41%) were not literate in any language. Respondents had been in the United States an average of 12 years (range 4–23) and average age of immigration was 35 (range 12–66).

Procedures

Promoting Community Support for Study. To promote Hmong residents' participation in the study, the support of the Hmong clan leaders in the area was sought and acquired. This support was communicated to Hmong residents at the annual Hmong New Year's celebration, where the researcher and the project were introduced. With support from clan leaders, a high rate of participation in the study was anticipated and achieved. In addition, one of the researcher's existing ties and knowledge of the Hmong community and the more than one year she spent in the setting prior to this study were also important in promoting Hmong residents' participation.

Resident Interviews. A structured interview, containing both open-ended and fixed-response questions was constructed in English, translated into Hmong, then piloted and revised. To arrange the interviews, the researcher, accompanied by a translator, visited each selected household. Residents were interviewed in English or in Hmong with the assistance of a bilingual Hmong translator, depending upon their preference (8 were completed in English, 46 in Hmong). Interviews lasted 1 to 2 hours, with most completed in about 1 hour.

To ensure that the data collected were authentic and accurate, certain procedures were followed. If the interview was conducted in English, the researcher asked the questions and recorded the respondent's answers verbatim. Otherwise, the translator asked the questions and translated verbatim responses, which the researcher recorded in English. All translators were trained in interviewing techniques, including probing

and importance of accurate translations. Translators were required to give verbatim responses, not their interpretations. Because the researcher was present for all interviews (and had an adequate understanding of the Hmong language), clarification occurred when necessary.

It is also important to note that the interviewer and translator took steps to ensure that respondents felt free to share their honest feelings and ideas. The interviewer and translator told each resident about their own backgrounds and involvement in the Hmong community, and took time to develop a rapport. Many respondents welcomed the interviewer and translator into their homes by offering food or drinks. Often, Hmong residents presented family pictures or pictures from Laos and shared stories about their lives. In addition, several interview questions evoked many personal details about current life hardships, to which the interviewer and translator carefully listened and empathized. Finally, many Hmong adults shared that they felt better after talking with someone about their lives.

Data Analysis

Respondents were asked seven open-ended questions about how they participated in their housing development, the importance of their participation, and factors that made it difficult for them to participate. Respondents' answers to these questions were combined to create a narrative for each individual and these narratives were content analyzed. To ensure the trustworthiness of this process, a comprehensive list of themes was created and then narratives were re-read and coded against the list. Individual codes were then aggregated into more substantive themes (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). An objective third party reviewed the content analysis and coding framework.

RESULTS

Analysis of Hmong residents' descriptions of their participation experiences and desires revealed that, overall, the Hmong valued participation and wanted to be involved in their communities, but often felt precluded from meaningful participation because of numerous barriers. Thus, their lack of involvement was not due to lack of desire. In fact, three quarters of Hmong residents wanted to be more involved in their communities. Instead, this lack of involvement indicated a failure of the communities to create ecologies supportive of diversity. Evidence to support these themes is presented in detail below.

Do Hmong Refugees Value Their Participation in Multiethnic Communities?

Before analyzing the ecological conditions that prevented the meaningful participation of Hmong residents, it was important to establish whether this was something Hmong residents actually wanted or desired. Given their history, it might be that many Hmong residents preferred to focus on involvement within the Hmong community. However, this was not the case. Hmong residents highly valued participation in their broader communities, with 94% of respondents noting that their participation was important. Respondents identified both individual and community reasons for the importance of participation.

Importance for Community. A majority of respondents felt that participation was very important for the broader community of the housing development in which they lived. In their opinions, participation was valuable because it involved working together, helping others, raising children together, maintaining good relations among community members, and being a part of the community. As several respondents said:

“It’s important because being part of the residents here you must be able to participate here—for the better of the group.”

“Everyone working together is important. It’s like a table, if it has only two legs it won’t work. It needs four legs to stand.”

“I would like to have a council of people to look out for everyone. Some people would be from each group, Hmong, Vietnamese, American, African American, to share and solve problems together.”

These statements illustrate that the Hmong residents did value participation not only within their own ethnic community but also within their neighborhoods and across racial and ethnic boundaries.

Importance for Self. Most respondents also felt that participation was important for personal reasons, such as a way for them to learn and acquire knowledge (i.e., English, American laws), to gain experience, to raise their awareness about their community, and to be involved with their children. Others believed that participation was important to ensure that other people would like and respect them, know them, and help them. In their own words:

“I believe that if you participate, you will get more experience and this will help you.”

“. . . if you participate then a lot of people know you and they know you’re good and more people help you and you don’t have a lot of trouble.”

“We’re hoping to find someone who can come and teach English and math to the Hmong women here. There are a lot of Hmong women here who want to learn. We would also like training to prepare us for better jobs. If we don’t have training, no one will hire us and we won’t have money to feed our families.”

These quotes illustrate that not only did Hmong residents believe their involvement would be beneficial to themselves but also that many of the ways in which Hmong residents wanted to be involved did not exist in their communities. Often, community services and participation opportunities that are available do not match the needs and desires of refugees, and service providers are usually unaware that current services or programs are not relevant.

How and To What Extent Do Hmong Participate in Multiethnic Communities?

It was also important to determine the extent to which Hmong residents were participating in their multiethnic communities. When Hmong residents were asked how they participated in their housing development communities, about half reported that

they did not participate at all. However, almost half of respondents mentioned both formal and informal ways in which they were involved.

Formal Participation. A quarter of respondents identified formal ways in which they participated, such as attending resident council meetings and other activities at the community centers, helping to clean or improve the neighborhood, and volunteering at the community center to clean the laundry room or to help with the Head Start program there.

“I go to meetings, I volunteer to help clean up around the neighborhood and office.”

“I go to meetings whenever I’m home and I know about them, and I share whatever I see around the neighborhood that’s not right, that should be changed.”

Informal Participation. Respondents were slightly more likely to mention other, more informal ways in which they were involved. Hmong residents talked about helping their neighbors, relatives, and other Hmong residents in their developments:

“I have a garden and I always give my neighbors corn and vegetables.”

“I watch the neighbors’ kids when they play outside, make sure they don’t run into the street.”

Former Participation. One common response from Hmong residents was that they had participated in the past, but because of barriers or frustrations, no longer were involved in the community:

“I went to meetings before, but when you have a question, they [the other residents/resident council leaders] don’t let you say. I raise my hand, but others raise their hands and talk first. The meetings don’t help me, so it wastes my time.”

“Two years ago, I volunteered to pick up trash around the buildings, but now they [the housing development] changed managers, and it seems like the new manager doesn’t want any help.”

Although some Hmong residents were participating in their communities, their meaningful participation was limited by language barriers and discrimination (described subsequently) and three quarters wanted to be more involved in their communities than they currently were. Given the fact that Hmong residents highly valued participation in their broader communities, it seemed important to try to understand why this discrepancy between their desires and the actual situation existed. With regard to this, two ecological lessons emerged: (1) the individuals and the communities themselves did not have the capacity to integrate diversity, and (2) the communities did not have the capacity to foster interdependence, which occurs through interaction in a supportive environment (Kelly et al., 1994).

Ecological Lesson #1: Capacity to Integrate Diversity

The ability to integrate diversity was challenging for both Hmong residents and their communities. For real and meaningful participation to occur, there must be a capacity within the setting and the individuals in the setting to integrate people with diverse strengths, needs, desires, abilities and to do so in a way that enables people to use each other as resources and benefit from each other (Kelly et al., 1994). It is through the creation of such settings that participation becomes a vehicle for empowerment of the individuals and the community (Rappaport, 1994).

Individual Capacity. For Hmong residents there were three main areas of individual capacity to consider: (1) their collectivist culture which emphasizes the community but also often creates an “us/them” dynamic by defining the community as members of the same family, clan or ethnic group, (2) their history as a marginalized minority in every country they lived and as refugees, which inhibited their participation in their broader communities and their ability to have influence and control over their lives, and (3) their experience as newcomers to the United States with limited transferable skills and difficulties communicating. In response to the first concern, Hmong residents indicated that they did want to participate in their broader communities and were not concerned solely with their involvement in the Hmong community. The second and third concerns, however, were salient for most respondents. The fundamental issue was feeling that they did not have the ability or capacity to participate. Many Hmong residents blamed themselves for this, mostly identifying skills or resources that they lacked. They did not seem to believe that they could make changes or improve and contribute to their communities.

“If you go [to resident council meetings], the policeman thinks you don’t understand and they look down on you. The Black people are on the top and you are on the bottom. You have to help yourself first. The police won’t help us. That’s why the meetings don’t help. If you’re very smart and can speak English well then Americans will help you and work together, but if not, forget it. Some Vietnamese people get involved a lot, but not Hmong people. When I went to work and there was a problem, the Vietnamese all tell the manager, but the Hmong don’t say anything. Only Hmong people don’t get involved a lot. Other people, Vietnamese people, Black people, American people get involved a lot. But Hmong people don’t get involved a lot.”

“I want to be more involved. If there is anything I can help with, I will. Anything that I can do without talking.”

“If there were things I knew how to do, I would like to get more involved. I’m not sure what those things are.”

“There doesn’t seem to be anything that I can do or help with . . . if there was anything that I could do, I would volunteer to help.”

Lack of Resources. More specifically, Hmong residents discussed several resources that they did not have but needed to participate—including language, time, and awareness—as inhibiting their ability to participate. As would be expected among recent refugee groups, language differences posed great problems and almost all residents discussed this issue:

"The reason that I don't go to meetings is that I can't speak the language. Even if I have a good idea, I can't tell them so I just stay home and keep it to myself."

"The problem is the language. If you don't know how to talk, they think you are lazy. For example, think about bulls fighting. One has long horns and one has short horns. The one with short horns is going to get hurt more. It's the same with smarter people. In this country, people compete everyday."

"If you understand English then you can participate and it would be important, but if you can't understand anything then it's not important. You should at least know the language before you can participate. It's difficult for me to participate."

Time was also an issue, due to work, taking care of children, and other responsibilities:

"We're working so we don't have time to be involved in the community."

"Since my wife works, I take care of the kids so it's hard for me to participate. If there was childcare, I would be available to participate in activities."

Other Hmong residents were not aware of opportunities for participation in their communities:

"Because I don't know how to read so sometimes I don't know when the meetings are."

"I don't really know what's going on here."

A few respondents indicated that they did not feel that they could or should participate because they were too new at their particular housing development:

"I'm new here so I don't think it's right for me to go looking around."

"I just moved here last year and I didn't know a lot of neighbors here . . . I would like to be more involved because my children go to the center there."

Although the Hmong residents were part of a collective-oriented culture which emphasizes the well-being of the Hmong as a group, their responses indicated that they did want to participate more broadly in their communities and they believed that this was important. However, because they lost much of the control over their lives as a result of their experiences as refugees and because many did not speak or read English well, Hmong residents needed opportunities or settings that enabled them to regain this sense of control, rather than contexts which further contributed to their frustrations and feelings of powerlessness. Unfortunately, their communities' capacities to integrate diversity were also limited.

Community Capacity. At the three housing developments, the staff were well-intentioned but did not know how to include the Hmong. Most importantly, the settings did not provide resources and supports to enable Hmong participation, which unfortunately, is a common occurrence within multiethnic communities and communities with influxes of refugees and/or immigrants (e.g., Jong, 1989). This was evident through the research-

ers' observation at meetings and community center activities and also through Hmong residents' comments. Notices for meetings were posted in English only, which precluded residents who could not understand English and those who were not literate in any language. In addition, translators were never present at meetings or events. Service providers often have limited understanding about language, cultural, and other barriers that may be prohibitive to refugees attempting to utilize programs and services. Therefore, supports that may be necessary for refugees to access services or participate in activities, such as hanging flyers in languages other than English or providing translators for programs or services, are rarely recognized (e.g., Guthrie & Hutchison, 1995, Jong, 1989). Although there was a lot of self-blame, many Hmong residents realized that their communities lacked supports they needed (e.g., translators, childcare). For instance, many not only experienced limited English ability as an individual barrier, but also talked about the lack of translators as a barrier to their participation:

"I don't go to meetings because there is no translator."

"If there was a translator, I would participate in anything they have here."

Other residents said they would participate in community activities if childcare was available. Although this is related to the individual barrier of not having enough time to participate, it is distinct because it involves specific requests for childcare to be provided.

"If there was childcare, I would be available to participate in activities."

"I'm busy with my children. I have to take care of my children. If I had a babysitter, I'm willing to participate."

Other community dynamics which impeded Hmong residents' participation in their communities will be discussed below, but the important point evident from these comments is that the communities did not have supports and resources which would facilitate the involvement of all community members. Thus, the outcome is that the Hmong felt incapable and the setting viewed them as incapable, which not only precluded Hmong residents' involvement but also exacerbated their lack of self-efficacy. Often service providers wonder why certain refugee or immigrant groups are not utilizing community services. They tend to "blame the victim," attributing lack of involvement or utilization to lack of interest or effort of refugees. Gutierrez & Lewis (1999) note that many service providers and agencies are inadvertently ethnocentric, assuming that particular ethnic groups do not access and use services because of a problem inherent to the ethnic group rather than with the services offered—what Gutierrez and Lewis call an individual fallacy assumption. In particular, the needs of Asian refugees and Asian Americans are often ignored because service providers believe they prefer to seek and receive help from members of their own communities (Sue & Morishima, 1982). Although ethnic support networks and mutual assistance associations are important sources of resources and support for many refugees, they are not necessarily adequately prepared and funded to meet all needs of refugees or to connect them with resources in the larger community.

Ecological Lesson #2: Capacity to Foster Interdependence

One of the fundamental ecological principles, which Kelly (1968) first applied to psychology, is the concept of interdependence. Kelly explained that components within a social unit are interdependent and therefore changes in one component affect other components. Kelly continued to formulate his ideas about interdependence to explain that “the ecological meaning of the concept of interdependence is that people can be interconnected and mutually interactive in a supportive social setting” (Kelly et al., 1994, p. 425). Kelly also emphasized that the concept of interdependence directs us to think of the community as the unit of analysis for some interventions, to look beyond a sole focus on the characteristics of individuals. Individuals cannot necessarily interact in mutually supportive and beneficial ways if the settings they are in do not support these processes. This is particularly relevant in this case. Although their culture valued interdependence, Hmong refugees did not feel valued or welcome in their communities. Their communities lacked the capacity to foster interdependence among residents, as evidenced by discrimination, poor intergroup relations, and the lack of voice afforded to Hmong residents.

Discrimination/Intergroup Relations. Over a quarter of Hmong residents identified discrimination or poor treatment by members of other racial/ethnic groups as major barriers to their participation.

“I wouldn’t like to get involved because I’m not a citizen so sometimes people treat me differently than White or Black people.”

“If Hmong people go to the meetings or not, it doesn’t matter. Their opinion isn’t counted. There is discrimination now, so Hmong opinions don’t count.”

Furthermore, many residents viewed their interviews as an opportunity to disclose incidents of serious and perpetual harassment by their neighbors, for which they had sought help to no avail. For instance, one woman said:

“I would like to change the people who bother each other. When you’re outside, they [other residents] say strange things to you and yell at you. Some people, their kids bother each other. But the kids say, ‘It’s not my fault’ and the parents believe their kids. They don’t know what’s going on. Right now, the big problem is my neighbors next door who play the music really loud. When I knock on their door one time and ask them to turn it down, she says, ‘No, it’s my house. I can do what I want.’ She doesn’t care. I told her I can’t concentrate or do anything, but she doesn’t care. I went to tell [the manager] but he says he can’t do anything because it is in their house. It makes me sad and mad because I can’t do anything. I think they don’t like us. That’s why we have problems a lot; they give us a lot of trouble. I always watch my kids when they play outside and when kids come to bother them, I tell the kids to go home and not bother them. Sometimes M and X [two other Hmong women at the development] tell their own kids to go home, but I say this isn’t right. This is our yard and we have to tell the other kids to leave them alone. We have to fight for our rights to live. If you move to another place, same problem. Some people are good, but some are bad. Some say, ‘But I don’t know how to speak English.’ But you have to fight for your rights because it makes your kids sad.”

No Legitimate Voice. Another example of the communities' inability to foster interdependence was expressed by residents' belief that they did not have a legitimate voice in the community. Some felt that the community was not open to their participation because they were not specifically asked to participate:

"I don't participate in anything because they [staff and other residents] don't ask us. We feel that they do not welcome us to participate here."

"If they came to ask me to participate in any activities, I would. But according to my opinion, they already have people to participate and they don't need me."

Other residents believed that their voice was not listened to or heard in the community:

"We don't do that much because the problem is they're [other residents] picking on us and we don't feel good. Also, we don't know the language and when we talk to them, they turn away from us and we don't think they want us to be involved with them. Very rarely do I go to meetings. We see a lot of papers saying, 'meeting, meeting', but we ignore them because if you don't know the language well, I don't think they will listen to you."

"They [other residents and staff] don't listen to me, so I don't go anymore. I told two police at a meeting that we needed a crosswalk from Turner to the liquor store across the street because a lot of children go there to buy candy. They didn't listen to me, and a few months later, a Black child was run over there. It was very sad."

Overall, the interviews with Hmong residents revealed that they wanted to contribute to their communities and access available resources but they were not sure how and they were also not sure they would be welcomed and accepted. On the other hand, the staff at the housing developments wanted to promote diversity and interdependence, but did not know how. In particular, they did not recognize the supports that were necessary or the types of opportunities residents desired and they were unaware of underlying group conflict. Thus, what resulted was a lack of capacity among the residents and the communities to integrate diversity and a lack of capacity within the communities to foster interdependence, which together, severely limited the meaningful participation of Hmong residents.

DISCUSSION

Interviews with Hmong residents revealed that they participated both formally and informally in their communities and valued it highly, but that their involvement was limited because they experienced multiple barriers, including language differences, time constraints, discrimination, and a lack of awareness of opportunities; many felt disempowered and excluded from meaningful participation in their communities. No supports to address these issues existed in their communities. Thus, the findings from this study suggest that while Hmong refugee participation in multiethnic communities may be an important step towards facilitating their well-being and integration into their resettlement communities, an ecological perspective reveals that such participation is difficult to achieve.

Participation and Empowerment

Many Hmong residents mentioned their inability to report problems, their lack of voice in the community, and beliefs that they could not effect change in their communities. Taken together, these experiences suggest that the settings in which Hmong residents lived were not empowering and that they themselves were not empowered. Specifically, Hmong residents usually lacked the skills (language ability), knowledge (awareness of participation opportunities), and political efficacy (belief that they could make change), which are considered essential aspects of psychological empowerment and precursors of participation (Zimmerman, 1995). Furthermore, their communities not only failed to foster the development of any of these abilities, but also often served to silence their voices.

Moving beyond the individual capabilities of Hmong or other refugees, it is essential to consider their communities. As Rappaport (1994) explains, "In the empowerment worldview, the concern becomes how to collaborate with people to create, encourage, or assist them to become aware of, obtain, or create the resources they may need to make use of their competencies. However, empowerment is not limited to individual competencies. It also involves contextual or setting variables as well as social and political processes" (p. 366). In this case, the context in which participation occurred was clearly related to Hmong participation in multiethnic communities. Since interaction and participation in multiethnic communities are low and most often occur within ethnic groups, not between groups (Guthrie & Hutchinson, 1995; Jong, 1989; Humphreys & Woods, 1993), attention to the climate in ethnically mixed communities and how it influences participation is essential. Most researchers agree that participation is facilitated or inhibited by both individual and contextual characteristics and the complex ways in which they interact (e.g., Wandersman, 1984; Wandersman & Giamartino, 1980).

The findings from this study suggest that the extent to which Hmong felt included and accepted in their communities was related to their participation. First, similar to previous researchers (e.g., Guthrie & Hutchinson, 1995; Hein, 1995), our data suggested that Hmong residents were less likely to participate due to negative intergroup relations. Attention to intergroup dynamics is critical for refugees who are often a minority in their resettlement communities. Hmong residents also reported that the extent to which their environment welcomed their involvement, including the degree to which the community invited them to participate and provided them with a voice in the community, influenced their participation. These findings are consistent with those of Hein (1995) who found that Southeast Asian refugees were less involved in tenants' meetings that were organized in ways that were counter to their cultural beliefs. Thus, Hmong residents felt excluded both by their neighbors and by the choice of activities in the community. Together, these findings suggest that involvement of refugees in their communities may require supports to foster such participation.

In addition, it is essential to consider the way participation opportunities and programs are structured because programs that are designed to assist or empower refugees are often ignorant of refugee cultures and what refugees need and want. One example cited by Strawn (1994) was a perinatal outreach and education program whose goal was to empower low-income women from diverse backgrounds (including several groups of refugee women) by providing them with access to resources and a social support network. Strawn stated that, "the social organization of disempowerment was embedded in the macro-environment and filtered down to the interper-

sonal interactions between well-intentioned helpers and communities” (p. 172). She attributed this to an emphasis on individual empowerment that was counter to many of the women’s cultures, such as Southeast Asian and Latina cultures. Although the intervention was structured with careful attention to superficial cultural and linguistic issues (i.e., the program included bilingual case workers, the translation of all materials, and the recruitment of individuals in their own communities), the researchers inadvertently imposed “individual” constructs of empowerment on communities with “collective” ideologies. The cultural factors and strengths within the community (e.g., strong social support networks) should have been incorporated into any effort to enable refugee women to meet their needs and exercise control over their lives.

To ensure that services and participation opportunities are culturally relevant, congruent with refugees’ needs, and accessible, it is important to involve refugees in planning services and programs in their communities (Shah, 1997). It is rare that we actually ask refugees what they want and need. Most often, well-meaning service providers assume that they know what is best for their clients.

Overall, the findings of this study highlight the importance of attending to the barriers Hmong refugees experienced to their participation in multiethnic communities. In this study, almost all Hmong residents experienced multiple barriers to their participation. While many barriers were expressed as individual concerns (e.g., individuals’ time, individuals’ language skills), it is important to avoid placing the responsibility for resolving these dilemmas solely on the Hmong residents themselves. Instead, communities must recognize that barriers to participation are often failures within the community to provide supports to overcome what may appear to be individual issues. For instance, while a language barrier is certainly an obstacle on an individual-level, it should also be considered at the community level, and in some cases, might be more effectively addressed from a community perspective (e.g., by providing English classes or translators at meetings). In other words, if multiethnic communities truly aspire to multiethnic participation, then it is essential to provide the supports individuals and groups need to participate. Other researchers have discussed the importance of attending to and providing the resources and supports needed by those who are typically excluded from meaningful participation (Bartunek, Foster-Fishman, & Keys, 1996; Foster-Fishman, Shpungin, & Bergeron, 1999). If communities fail to provide these supports, then, as this study and others (e.g., Foster-Fishman et al., 1999) have shown, important contributions of community members are lost.

In addition to reducing barriers to participation, the findings from this study suggest that multiethnic communities need to work towards creating settings that are inclusive of all community members so that genuine interdependence can be developed. This includes addressing discrimination and conducting outreach to all ethnic groups, since participation in contexts of inequality is not empowering (Gruber & Trickett, 1987). It is particularly essential to address this concern in multiethnic communities, which are often plagued with intergroup strife (Hein, 1995; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1988). An important step towards creating such a context is attention to the desires and needs of all community members when developing community activities and programs. In addition, other contextual factors need to be considered to facilitate meaningful participation. For refugees, an empowering setting would need to offer several opportunities. First, refugees need opportunities to improve their English skills and/or have access to translators so they can participate in their communities in whatever ways they choose (e.g., formally, informally, socially, politically). They also need opportunities to define meaningful collective action as a com-

munity, be heard by their communities, and understand their potential roles in democratic processes in the United States. Providing these opportunities is an important step toward making participation meaningful and empowering for refugees. An effective intervention would create settings that foster meaningful participation and provide educational opportunities needed to support this process. However, for real empowerment to occur, improved access to community resources is also essential. Without this, individuals and communities will not experience real gains in power (Speer & Hughey, 1995).

Finally, despite the emphasis here on context and community barriers, it is also important to recognize Hmong and other refugee groups as being comprised of active, resilient individuals. Most Hmong have survived and overcome difficult circumstances. The Hmong residents have faced challenges, but have continued to actively work towards their own positive adjustment, including creating mutual assistance associations in their communities so that they are not dependent only on others for help. They have worked hard to preserve many aspects of their traditional culture, and, as clearly evidenced in this study, they want to get involved in their communities and share their knowledge and ideas. However, they need communities ready to accommodate them and opportunities to develop the skills needed to meaningfully participate. As one Hmong man said:

“If I understood English, I have things that I know, that I would like to change, that I would like to make happen, but I can’t share them so I just keep them to myself. Things like how to get along with each other and how to provide for our families. I have a lot of opinions about these things and a lot of other things.”

The Hmong have much to contribute to their resettlement communities. One example of potential contribution is the value they place on community. It is important to consider how the strengths of their experiences and community cohesiveness could be preserved and built upon to promote their own well-being and enable them to become integrated into their communities.

CONCLUSION

Given the increased diversification occurring in our society and the increasing number of refugees resettling in the United States, it is essential to find venues that can enhance the successful integration and well-being of all community members. While community participation is one promising vehicle, the findings from this study suggest that refugee participation in multiethnic communities is a challenging process, particularly when communities do not support the participation of all members. Participation is particularly important for refugees because their past traumas, time in refugee camps, and forced resettlement often make it difficult to regain a sense of efficacy and control, and this powerlessness has negative effects on refugees’ well-being (Rumbaut, 1991b). Meaningful participation can help to eliminate feelings of powerlessness and give refugees a sense of efficacy and control. Attention to both individual experiences and cultures and contextual factors is critical, given the potential benefits of community participation to individuals and communities, and because participation is a mechanism for bringing people together in multiethnic communities. It is through such efforts that the growing ethnic/racial tensions and conflict that have accompa-

nied the diversification of communities can be addressed. Furthermore, with these efforts refugees will be more likely to be accepted by their new communities and able to make valuable contributions.

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