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## Ties that bind: family obligations as immediate and anticipatory obstacles

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### ABSTRACT

While research on Asian American students has overwhelmingly emphasized family ties as an important contributor to student success in high school, what it neglects is how family ties can constrain students in their educational endeavors. Based on a study of 30 low-income Hmong American high school students, I argue that poverty can create conditions in which family ties bind students to gender-based expectations and obligations that prevent them from pursuing opportunities for social mobility. In their discussion of mobility obstacles, Hmong students consistently brought up family as a significant barrier. Whereas males were concerned about fulfilling family obligations related to performing cultural and religious rituals, females were distressed about providing social and economic support for their families. Both males and females framed family obligations as obstacles that interfere with their schooling but females were also concerned that family obligations would restrict their ability to pursue opportunities away from home.

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### Introduction

The category of Asian American encompasses a diverse range of people from many countries, each with their own unique culture and history of settlement in the US (Takaki 1998). Some groups have historical roots in this country that date back to the mid-1800s while others have only been here within the past 30–40 years. Most groups came here as immigrants in search of better educational and economic opportunities while some arrived as involuntary immigrants, refugees who were forced from their homeland due to fear of persecution. Given the diversity of the groups that constitute Asian Americans, it is not surprising that when we examine their educational attainment, there exist wide disparities. For instance, while over 50 percent of Japanese, Chinese, Koreans, and Asian Indians hold a bachelor's degree or higher, less than 20 percent of Hmong, Cambodians, and Laotians have completed college (Valliani and Byrd 2015). Yet, in the larger American imagination, all Asian Americans are perceived as high academic achievers and successful professionals.

Given the prevailing notion that Asian Americans are academically more successful than other groups, the literature on Asian American students have largely sought to make sense

of how it is that they are able to do this. This literature routinely emphasizes how family ties, in the form of family obligations, is an important contributor to the educational success of these students (Caplan, Choy, and Whitmore 1991; Lee 1991; Zhou and Bankston 1999; Lew 2007). In particular, these studies suggest that a strong sense of family obligation is not only compatible with students' academic achievements but it also helps facilitate students' educational success. In this paper, I draw upon the experiences of Hmong American high school students to complicate the argument that Asian American students who exhibit strong family ties will inevitably achieve educational success.

My research on 30 low-income Hmong American high school students demonstrates how family ties, in the form of family obligations, can become a constraining force rather than a motivational factor when families face economic deprivation and parents lack the knowledge about what opportunities best position their children for upward mobility. Among low-income Hmong American families, family obligations and educational success can create conflicting demands, thereby leveling students' educational aspirations and taking away from their academic focus. The failure to distinguish between advantageous and disadvantageous family obligations in the literature on the educational achievement of Asian American students has led to a broad characterization of family ties as a key contributor to the success of Asian American students. In doing so, the literature overlooks how economic and cultural capital play a role in determining whether strong family ties can be turned into educational achievement and attainment. In this study, I identify three mechanisms by which family ties can interfere with students' schooling and level their educational aspirations.

## Literature review

The impact of the family on the development of adolescents has been the subject of much research. One area of research that has received a great deal of attention is the impact of family ties, in the form of family obligations, on adolescents' psychological and cognitive outcomes. Family obligation is defined in terms of the extent to which an individual feels a sense of duty to assist others and to take into account the needs and wishes of the family when making decisions (Fuligni, Tseng, and Lam 1999; Fuligni and Pedersen 2002; Desmond and Turley 2009). The attitudes held by adolescents regarding family support and obligation is also a key element of family obligations such that Fuligni, Tseng, and Lam (1999) conceptualized it to include young adults' expectations of how often they should assist with household tasks and young adults' beliefs about their obligations to support and be near families in the future.

Most studies have focused on the positive effects of strong family ties for students' well-being and their educational outcomes (Fuligni, Tseng, and Lam 1999; Zhou and Bankston 1999). This research points to how family obligations provide adolescents with meaningful social roles and how such bonds allow parents to monitor and shape their children's behaviors. Adolescents with a desire to support and consider the needs of the family have higher educational aspirations and a stronger belief in the importance and usefulness of schooling (Fuligni 1997; Fuligni, Tseng, and Lam 1999). Several studies have noted that adolescents from immigrant families often construe doing well in school as a way to repay their parents for making sacrifices to come to the United States (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 1995; Fuligni, Tseng, and Lam 1999; Zhou and Bankston 1999). They argued that adolescents from Asian and Latin American families are acutely aware of the great sacrifices their parents

made to come to this country. These youths feel that success in school is an important part of their family obligations and that their academic success will assist their family's fortunes.

Research on the impact of family ties among Asian American students has also primarily focused on the positive effects of strong family ties (Lee 1991; Fuligni, Tseng, and Lam 1999; Zhou and Bankston 1999). For instance, Lee (1991) attributed the success of Korean American students to a Confucian ideology that places emphasis on filial piety, respect for the elderly, and subordination to the father and parental care. She argued that academic achievement for these students is not just a personal matter but is related to the honor of the family such that students view doing well in school as fulfilling their obligation to the family. Similarly, Fuligni and Pedersen (2002) suggested that the family cohesion that is reflected by a sense of obligation and respect translates into positive relationships with peers and better educational adjustment. Many Asian students attain success in school partly because of an obligation they feel toward their families. Chao (2000) found that adolescents who are well aware of their familial duty to do well in school and youth who place more importance on their family obligations tend to possess a higher level of academic motivation than their peers. Lew (2007) found in her study of middle-class and low-income Korean American students that although both groups of students believed in the importance of education, high school dropouts did not maintain close ties to their parents or their parental co-ethnic networks.

Other studies argued that close family ties, when combined with integration into the ethnic community, helps direct students in the right direction for educational success. Zhou and Bankston (1999) demonstrated in their case study of the Vietnamese community in New Orleans that Vietnamese high school students who reported strong orientations toward family values of obedience, industriousness, and helping others were more likely to do well in school than those who did not. Zhou and Bankston (1999) argued that the integration of Vietnamese youth into the family and ethnic community help reinforce traditional family values and behavioral standards that allowed students to succeed academically. This argument is also shared by scholars of the segmented assimilation perspective who argued that poor immigrant youth who remained well-integrated into the immigrant family and community hold the best chances of upward mobility as these ties prevent youth from assimilating into the native-born mainstream youth subcultures (Portes and Zhou 1993; Zhou 1997).

While these studies have expanded our understanding about the experiences of Asian American families and students, they have overlooked how family ties can be a constraining force in the educational endeavors of students when parents lack the economic or cultural capital to exploit these ties into educational success. Research has documented ways in which family ties can disadvantage students transitioning into adulthood (Fuligni and Pedersen 2002; Ream 2003). Involvement in supporting the family can compromise adolescents' psychological well-being by overwhelming them with excessive responsibilities and interfering with their ability to engage in other activities, such as studying for school and socializing with friends (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 1995; Chase 1999; Fuligni and Pedersen 2002). Though associated with greater academic motivation, a strong obligation to assist the family can also involve responsibilities and activities that compromise the ability of young adults to pursue postsecondary schooling (Fuligni and Pedersen 2002; Desmond and Turley 2009). Fuligni, Tseng, and Lam (1999) found that while a moderate emphasis on family obligations was associated with positive adolescent development, extremely high

value of family duty and obligation was associated with less positive adolescent development. Desmond and Turley (2009) examined the influence of Hispanic high school senior's preference to live at home while in college, a proxy for students' ties with their families. They found that, net of other factors, students who indicated that it is important to stay at home during college are less likely to apply to college, especially to selective institutions. Ovink and Kalogrides (2015) found that familism is not just a Latino phenomenon but one that is shared by students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Moreover, some scholars argue that strong cultural identities and social ties, which is considered a source of social capital in some populations, may sometimes be insufficient because of racial or class disadvantages (Stack 1974; Zhou 1997). In a study of a poor African-American community, Stack (1974) showed that African-American families depended on patterns of co-residence and kinship-based exchange networks for survival. This means of survival, however, demanded the sacrifice of upward mobility and geographic movement, and it discouraged marriage because of structural constraints. Fernandez-Kelly (1995), in a study of teenage pregnancies in a Baltimore ghetto, found that kinship networks in ghettos were often graced with strong family and friendship bonds. However, these networks lacked connections to other social networks that controlled access to larger sets of opportunities.

Given that family ties can be a hindrance, it is important for studies on Asian American students to seriously take into account the possibility that children's connections to their parents and their family may inhibit their educational endeavors. I do so in this study by examining the experiences of Hmong American high school students. Hmong Americans present an interesting case to examine because their educational and economic outcomes lag behind many of their Asian American peers. Hmong Americans are one of the more recent Asian American groups to arrive in this country, coming over as refugees who fled political persecution in Laos (Vang 2010). The largest concentration of Hmong is found in California, followed by Minnesota and then Wisconsin. According to Xiong (2012), 38 percent of Hmong Americans lived in poverty in 1999, compared with less than 13 percent of Asian Americans and 13 percent of the overall US population. By 2010, Hmong poverty rates declined, but still remained relatively high, with 25 percent of Hmong families living in poverty in comparison to just 11 percent of families in the US (Vang 2013 HND). In California, only 13 percent of Hmong have a bachelor's degree or higher compared to 49 percent of Asian Americans (Valliani and Byrd 2015).

## Conceptual framework

I draw upon the concept of frames to examine how Hmong students make sense of the role of their family in their educational journey. Frames is defined as 'an interpretive [schema] that simplifies and condense the "world out there" by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions within one's present or past environment' (Benford and Snow 2000, 80). Frames demonstrate how individuals 'locate, perceive, identify, and label' occurrences within their life and the larger society (Goffman 1974, 21). Both of these definitions emphasize the importance of subjective understanding in how people perceive and act upon the world. The idea behind frame is that people's perception of events in their lives can shape how they behave. By highlighting certain aspects of social life and hiding or blocking others, 'frames can be thought of as a lens through which we observe and interpret social life' (Small, Harding, and Lamont 2010, 14).

Research shows how people frame their social world can influence how they act. Examining participation in a Latino housing project, Small (2002) reveals that individuals' descriptions or framings of their neighborhood influenced whether they participated in the local activities of the neighborhood. Those who conceived of the neighborhood as a community, a neighborhood with a significant history of political and social involvement, continued that tradition by participating in local activities. Meanwhile, individuals who perceived the neighborhood as merely projects, low-income area with no notable history, did not. Harding (2007) examines frames regarding teenage pregnancy in disadvantaged neighborhoods and finds the existence of both mainstream frames that highlight the potential for a teenage pregnancy to derail schooling and alternative frames that highlight the adult social status that comes with childbearing. Young (2004) finds that the relative degree of isolation of black men shaped their framing or interpretation of the issues of stratification, inequality, and prospects for mobility. The men who experienced greater social exposure across race and class lines tended to emphasize social conditions. The more socially isolated men tended to blame black men themselves for their plight.

Research specifically on education has also contributed to a greater understanding of the role of frames in shaping the behaviors of high school students. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) argue that due to structural discrimination in the form of inferior schooling and job ceiling, some black Americans develop a coping mechanism that associates academic achievement with 'acting white.' This framing of academic achievement as 'acting white' causes a social and psychological situation that diminishes black students' academic effort and thus leads to underachievement. While their 'acting white' thesis has been debunked by many researchers as a cause of black underachievement (Tyson, Darity, and Castellino 2005; Carter 2006), Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) focus on how different interpretations of academic achievement may give rise to different behaviors is a valuable contribution to the concept of frames. MacLeod's (1987) study of two teenage male groups reveals that the group who subscribed or framed the opportunity structure as essentially an open one that rewarded hard work and effort was more integrated in schools and positive about the future. The other group who framed the opportunity structure as closed due to class-based obstacles was more likely to drop out of school and was more despondent about their future.

Frames represent a valuable conceptual tool in understanding how Hmong American high school students perceive the role of family, specifically family ties, in their own lives. With the concept of frames, it is possible to examine how students conceive of their ties to their family and how this understanding influences what they think about their schooling and their future. Do Hmong American students subscribe to the frame that family ties are advantageous in their educational journeys? Or will they frame family ties as potential barriers that interfere with their schooling?

## Method

Data for this paper were drawn from a larger in-depth interview research project that investigated the perception of mobility and opportunity among 30 Hmong American high school students from in Fresno, California, home to the largest Hmong population in the state.

I recruited a total of 30 interview subjects from two high schools through a summer Hmong language class. Each interview lasted from one to three hours. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Subjects consisted of incoming sophomores, juniors, and

seniors in high school. There were a total of 14 males and 16 females. The parents of students in this sample consisted of small independent farmers, low-wage workers, and government assistance recipients. To protect the identity of the students in this paper, pseudonyms have been used instead in place of their actual names.

In-depth interview was the method of data collection in this study because it gives research subjects the opportunity to articulate their thoughts and views about the topics of inquiry. In doing so, in-depth interviewing makes it possible to gather data that express how students make sense of their experiences, upbringings, and aspirations. I relied on a semi-structured in-depth interviewing format in which I asked general questions followed by more specific questions to probe students to explain in more detail anything they said that was relevant to my research. The interview guide was divided into four sets of general questions. The first set involved asking students to introduce themselves, describe their social environment, and describe their family. The second set inquired students about their own aspirations and their parents' expectations. In the third set, students were asked about how they think about their chances of achieving success relative to other demographic groups (race, class, and gender) in this country. In the final section, students were asked about their schooling experiences. As a Hmong American myself, some students took for granted that I knew about some of the cultural and religious obligations they discussed. Consequently, they talked about such responsibilities without elaborating much on the nature of them. In these instances, I have had to draw upon research studies to provide more context for these obligations, especially in the case of male subjects.

To analyze these interviews, I first transcribed all the interviews. Then, six interview transcripts were selected, representing students from across the GPA spectrum, to do a detailed analysis. These six interview transcripts were then coded, and main themes were identified. Next, the codes and themes from these six interviews were applied to the other interview transcripts, though I made sure to avoid trying to fit all the other interview responses into the themes identified in the initial six interviews. When new codes and themes emerged from later transcripts, they were not merged with the earlier ones but kept as separate codes and themes, then reapplied to the earlier transcripts. I kept up this process until I reached a point in which data from additional interviews would no longer yield any substantial findings or themes. This method of coding is commonly referred to as data saturation (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson 2006; Bowen 2008).

## Findings

Based on data from 30 in-depth interviews with a group of Hmong American high school students in Fresno, California, I find that in their discussion of mobility, specifically what they think they need to do to achieve success, and what obstacles stand in their way, they consistently brought up their family as a significant barrier. In doing so, these students framed family ties as an obstacle in their educational endeavors. The type of family obligations students feared that might deter them from achieving their goals varied according to their gender. Whereas males were concerned about fulfilling cultural obligations related to performing cultural and religious rituals, females were distressed about providing social and economic support for their families. Males primarily viewed family obligations as an obstacle in the immediate present in that the fulfillment of family obligation interfered with their schooling. Females were concerned about the impact of family obligations in

the present as well as in their future. Looking forward toward their future, female subjects were apprehensive that social and economic obligations would limit or prevent them from pursuing higher education or other opportunities outside of Fresno.

The family obstacles brought up by students and their perception of how it affects them illustrate three interrelated processes by which family ties, in the form of family obligations, can lead to unfavorable adolescent outcomes such as reduced academic effort and pessimistic educational and occupational outlooks. The first mechanism is that family obligations place excessive demands on students such that students are unable to devote the sufficient time or mental concentration toward their academic coursework and school activities. The second mechanism is that because of family obligations, parents discourage their children from pursuing educational or occupational opportunities outside of their hometown for fear that their children will be unable to fulfill these obligations. The third mechanism has the same effect as the second in that it constrains students from seeking opportunities outside their hometown. However, the third mechanism operates through instilling a sense of guilt in students that they would be forsaking their families (via not fulfilling anticipated future obligations) if they move away from home; this sense of guilt persists in spite of the fact that some families are receptive to the idea of their children moving away to pursue opportunities. Each or a combination of these mechanisms operates to depress the educational aspirations or impede the academic efforts of many students in the study. In the following sections, I draw upon the stories of several interview subjects to demonstrate the findings above. Given that gender was an important factor in how students interpreted mobility obstacles, I have separated my findings according to gender to highlight these differences in views.

### ***Female subjects: family obligations as social and economic support***

Female subjects were faced with the pressure of supporting their families socially and economically. These expectations and obligations are largely a direct result of the low economic status of their families. Many female students made references to their family's reliance on government assistance while some talked about the inability of their parents to make ends meet even when employed. Consequently, some are pressured to start contributing to the family right away while others feel the need to do so in the near future. As a result, many female subjects framed family ties in the form of obligations as immediate obstacles; they indicated that support of their family interfered with their schooling. Others framed it also as anticipatory challenges; they foresaw such challenges coming up in the future and potentially forcing them to give up educational and occupational opportunities that exist outside of their hometown.

### ***Family obligations as immediate obstacles***

Mai, a student with a 2.6 GPA, is a senior in high school who aspires to become a registered nurse. Like many of the female respondents in this study, Mai is concerned about how family obligations will affect her ability to achieve her goal because of the social and economic support her parents expect from her. Mai's father recently suffered a stroke and has been hospitalized as a result. Since her father was the only person who worked, the family is struggling to get by. Consequently, her mother has begun telling her to look for work to help pay household bills. In addition to this expectation of economic support, Mai is also



expected to be a source of social support within the family. Her daily household routines reflect this latter expectation. During the weekdays and weekends, she explains her routine as consisting of helping her mother with household chores before she is able to focus on her schoolwork or other activities. When asked to discuss potential obstacles to the realization of her goals, the problems of her family factored visibly in her response:

**Mai:** One could be having a boyfriend. They could get in the way. Family issues.

**Interviewer:** Tell me more.

**Mai:** Depending on them [boyfriend], they could be short-tempered and put a lot of stress on you. If you have family issues, that could put a lot of stress and pressure on you.

**Interviewer:** What makes you think that?

**Mai:** Cause that happened to my sister. I see what she was going through. I see from her and it makes me think about myself and I don't want to go through that. I have a stepfamily too. Sometimes, we don't get along because of money issues. My dad goes back and forth each night. There's a lot of disagreement and arguments. That's one reason why my dad is so stressed. My stepmom goes out a lot and my dad doesn't say anything but when my mom goes out, my dad gets angry. My dad has the brain of a kid now.

**Interviewer:** How does this affect you?

**Mai:** Seeing my mom stress and cry, it makes me emotional. I won't be able to concentrate. The problem of my dad's stroke, I stayed with him until two in the morning so I didn't do any of my homework.

Mai is concerned about how family issues will de-rail her plan by stressing her out and making it difficult for her to spend sufficient time on her studies. She recognizes the financial difficulties her family faces now that her father is no longer employed. Given the nature of her family obligations which requires her to provide economic and social support, Mai framed family ties as barriers in the immediate present. She does not view the expectations of her family as compatible with the demands of her schooling. The exchange below with her parents further demonstrates how these social and economic obligations, when combined with high academic expectations, become overwhelming:

They get mad if I get Cs. They want me to get As and Bs ... They start yelling at me. They are like 'Why are you so dumb?' I'll be like 'I'm trying my best, especially trying to help you two and finding time for myself, it's hard.'

The mechanism operating here in the case of students like Mai who face obstacles in the immediate present is that family obligations are burdensome and they are unable to spend adequate time or devote the necessary concentration on their academic work. Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (1995) noted how, during difficult economic times, children have to put aside their schoolwork to help provide for the needs of the family. Similarly, Lee (2001) found that like other immigrant children, Hmong children have significant family responsibilities that they must juggle with along with their schoolwork. Many students are responsible for interpreting for their parents, driving parents to appointments, performing household chores, and even working to support the family. Girls, in particular, are often expected to help cook, clean, and take care of younger siblings. In many instances, family obligations often had to come before schoolwork, which ultimately affected their grades (Lee 2001).

***Family obligations as anticipatory obstacles: parental resistance***

While respondents like Mai framed family obligations as affecting them only in the immediate present, other female respondents framed family obligations as potential barriers in their future. Tracy, a junior with a 3.5 GPA who hails from a large family with four brothers and three sisters, is one such student. She is concerned about immediate as well as anticipatory family obligations. When she gets home from school, Tracy is often called upon to do household chores. Although she has brothers at home, she explains that they are always occupied by their video games. Tracy wants to become an elementary school teacher someday. She wants to pursue higher education outside of Fresno but is facing resistance from her parents. She states:

I've told them that I don't want to go to [Fresno] State. I want to go outside of Fresno. Maybe a UC [University of California] school or go study someplace else, but they want me to go to State. My parents think that one school is the best because one of my older brother or sister has gone there.

When asked what obstacles might prevent her from becoming a teacher, she responded:

**Tracy:** My parents for sure. I would just say my parents. They don't work so they get welfare, government money. They would ask for money from my brother for gas and for stuff. My brother's helping them pay their rent. They would just put the bill on my brother.

**Interviewer:** How might this get in the way of you reaching your goals?

**Tracy:** They don't want us living apart from them. My brother and his wife, they want to move out of the house but my parents, they wouldn't let them because they expect family to stay around, to be with them.

**Interviewer:** That's for your brother. How might that affect you?

**Tracy:** Maybe later on, when I'm twenty-one and older I might want to move out of the house. Have my own apartment. Start a life. Just going to school even if it's just living by myself. My sister wanted to do that. She couldn't get out of the house. It might be an obstacle stopping me from doing what I want. Just getting out of the house.

Tracy's concerns reflect her observation of how her parents have been unwilling to let her older siblings move out of the house. Her parents have also reacted negatively to her goal of attending college at a University of California or another institution outside of Fresno. Part of this resistance is grounded in the social and economic needs of the family. Her parents rely on government assistance and need the support of their children to cover household expenses. Part of it is attributable to her parents' lack of knowledge about higher education, specifically their inability to distinguish between different types of colleges. As result of her experience and observations, Tracy framed family ties as obstacles that will restrict her ability to move beyond Fresno to pursue educational opportunities.

The mechanism operating in the case of students like Tracy is that of the second mechanism. Because of immediate and anticipated social and economic obligations, parents discourage their children from pursuing educational or occupational opportunities outside of the city for fear that their children will not be able to fulfill these obligations. This parental discouragement is the result of obligations as much as it is the consequence of the parents' limited knowledge about the structure of higher education. The imposition of spatial restrictions limits students' perception of the viability of opportunities outside of Fresno. The obstacles Hmong female respondents face in where they can pursue educational opportunities also reflect gender-based constraints. Previous research on parental expectations of

females finds that parents are much more restrictive with the freedom and independence granted to females when it comes to where they can attend college. Gibson and Bhachu (1991) found that boys had far more freedom than girls to make decisions regarding social life course and career choice. Very few girls actually expected that their parents would allow them to go away to college. Similarly, Valenzuela (1999) found that due to the nature of their responsibilities, girls are usually spatially bounded and are not permitted to venture too far from the home. Lee (2001) showed that although Hmong parents support higher education for their daughters, most expect their daughters to attend colleges near home.

### ***Family obligations as anticipatory obstacles: internalized guilt***

Yer is another student who shares a very similar predicament to that of Tracy. However, unlike Tracy, Yer does not experience pushback from her parents in her desire to pursue higher education outside of Fresno. A senior in high school with a 3.0 GPA, Yer comes from a family of six sisters and two brothers. All her older siblings have married and moved out of the house. Since Yer is now the eldest daughter in the household, many of the household chores fall upon her. Unlike the parents of some of the female subjects in this study who do not respond positively to the idea of their daughters moving out of Fresno for college, Yer's family is actually supportive. At the time of the interview, Yer had just finished applying to Fresno State, Fresno City College, and UC Merced. She really wants to attend UC Merced, which is an hour's drive from Fresno, to become a nurse but she has some hesitations. She explains:

I applied to a UC. I'm scared. Where I'm going to live if I go to UC Merced? I don't have a phone and a car. My brother's like, 'No matter what we are going to support you.' My parents are okay with me going there, but I'm not okay. I'm just scared. If I was to get accepted, I don't know.

Despite the reassurances from her brother, Yer still feels uneasy about the prospect of leaving Fresno for college. A key factor in Yer's concerns about going outside of Fresno to pursue higher education is her family. This was apparent when Yer discussed potential obstacles to the realization of her goals. She brought up her family as an obstacle, and when asked to elaborate more, she responded:

**Yer:** I think it would be as of right now because I have a boyfriend too and we've been dating for two years now, if I were to go to Merced, I don't wanna go because I have people here. That's something that might hold me back, him and my family.

**Interviewer:** Why might your family hold you back?

**Yer:** Cause my dad works but my mom doesn't and I want to be there to help my mom. I don't want to leave them; it's like I'm abandoning them.

While Yer assumes many responsibilities in her family, the obstacles confronting Yer are not necessarily immediate family needs, but rather anticipated family obligations in the form of social support. These anticipated family obligations result from the recognition that her father works a low-wage job and is the only income earner. As the eldest daughter in her home, she recognizes the key role she plays within her family. Consequently, Yer framed family obligations as an anticipatory obstacle via the internalization of a sense of guilt about leaving home to pursue higher education opportunities.

Michele is another student who framed family ties as an anticipatory obstacle, putting her in a difficult situation as she ponders leaving Fresno and her family to pursue occupational opportunities. With a 3.3 GPA, Michele aspires to attend UC Davis, which is a three hours'

drive from Fresno. She comes from a family in which neither of her parents work. When asked to discuss obstacles that might get in the way of her achieving her own dreams, she immediately responded with family issues:

There's a lot of us. Anything can pop up. In my family, we aren't united. It's like we are not really there. My oldest siblings, they are not really connected with my parents. There's a lot of disconnected parts. What if my mom is really old and something happens to her and nobody wants to take responsibility, and what if it's me? Someone has to step up. What if they don't want to step up? What if my sister steps up, but she needs my help? Anything can happen 'cause my family, we really have a disconnect thing.

In the exchange above, Michele framed family obligations as a potential barrier that might prevent her from accomplishing her future plans. Her family does not seem particularly close to one another, and she is worried that as a result of this family situation, she might be forced to provide for her parents. The health of her parents, in particular, concerns her. For Michele, these future obligations may jeopardize her ability to attend UC Davis or even finish college to become a crime scene investigator. Her brother is supportive of her schooling, but she feels a sense of guilt that comes from not being able to provide for her family in the future if she is not near them.

The stories of these female students indicate that they frame family obligations as a significant barrier when it comes to achieving their own goals. These students are acutely aware of their family's low-income status and the pivotal role that they occupy in their family. Some students have internalized a sense of responsibility that continues to influence their decision-making as they think about what the future holds. Family obligations affect these respondents in different ways, and they are represented by the different mechanisms by which family obligations can lead to disadvantageous outcomes later on in these adolescents' lives.

### ***Male subjects: family obligations as cultural obligations***

While the primary concern for female subjects was family obligations in the form of social and economic support, the primary family obstacle for male subjects was cultural obligation as it relates to the responsibility of continuing religious rituals and cultural customs. Male subjects were more likely to frame these obligations as primarily immediate obstacles. Before delving into the findings from male respondents, I will provide a brief description of Hmong culture and traditions, which is necessary to contextualize the family obligations male subjects face.

### ***Hmong culture and male responsibilities***

Hmong culture is predicated on a kinship organization and its manifestations through rituals of ancestor worship, also known as shamanism. The primary organization of the Hmong is the clan and individuals who share the same surname are members of one clan. There are a total of 18 distinct clans in the Hmong community. Traditionally, the clans provided any social services required of their members. In a time of need, an individual will first turn to the clan and the clan is obligated to respond. All members of the same clan are socially and culturally expected to provide mutual assistance to one another.

Hmong believe that the fortune of an individual or family depends on close observation of ancestral reverence and kinship networks. Consequently, Hmong families will live in the

same area as other members of their clan. When a person is ill, or a person suffers repeated misfortunes for which there is no ready explanation, or a family is constantly quarreling or afflicted by misfortune, a shaman is consulted. In her research on Hmong refugees in Wisconsin, Koltyk (1998) describes how shamans travel to kinsmen home to perform healing ceremonies. These rituals are held on the weekends to accommodate the schedules of working relatives. The ceremonies are often all day affairs and relatives from all over the community area are requested to attend. In Hmong culture, men only make spiritual offerings. Hmong parents are most afraid of not having male descendants to take care of their needs in the afterworld. Thus, couples with no sons often adopt baby boys and raise them as their own. Given the Hmong's expectations of their children, boys are trained from early in life to fulfill their roles of being the men of the house. They are expected to know the cultural rituals and customs and support their fellow clan members in these activities as well.

### *Family obligations as immediate obstacles*

It is against this backdrop of cultural obligations that males struggle to make sense of their family and educational expectations. The story of Vong illustrates the issues male subjects face in regard to family obligations. A senior in high school with a 2.4 GPA, Vong comes from a family of five brothers and one sister. Vong wants to complete college, get a job, and make enough to support his future family. When asked to discuss potential obstacles, Vong elaborated on how his family might inhibit his ability to achieve success:

**Vong:** Like arguments. Mom and dad or like brothers don't get along. Funerals or weddings. Weddings are okay. Or like disagreement, they don't want me to be who I am.

**Interviewer:** Can you give me an example of that? Something in the past that you think about?

**Vong:** Recently, it was hard enough for me to come to school because of my sister's funeral. Throughout the whole week, I stayed up all night. I had 4 hours of sleep going to school. Trying not to bring a part of family to school is difficult. That's two different lifestyles. At home you are quiet but at school you are not. It's different. At home, there's too much stress, I don't want to bring it over to school ... You might miss days at school too because during the funeral I miss like a day or two already. It drains you out. It makes you tired. You won't have enough sleep. You'll be tired at school.

While other family-related issues such as death and family arguments were specified here, what is consistent in this exchange is his worry about how cultural obligations in the form of religious rituals and cultural customs might prevent him from putting all his effort into school. Vong discusses how the funeral rituals were exhausting, which caused him to miss several days of school. Hmong funerals generally last 3 days, 24 hours each day. And during this time, Vong and members of his family and clan are forced to be awake at almost all hours as part of the customs. Moreover, he understands his role as one of the son who has to carry on the cultural and religious customs. Consequently, Vong framed family ties in the form of cultural obligations as obstacles in the immediate present by interfering with his ability to focus on his studies.

Chue, a senior with a 3.0 GPA, is another male student who feels the burden of trying to live up to cultural obligations. Chue, however, faces the added pressure of having a father who is a practicing shaman and being the eldest son in his family. As a result, he is expected to know much more about the religious rituals and to accompany his father wherever his father is called to perform. In the Hmong community, shamans are called upon regularly

to perform healing ceremonies. To accommodate the working schedule of their clients, these rituals usually take place on the weekends and can last anywhere from half a day to a full day (Koltyk, 1998). For Chue, this means that his weekends are usually booked with helping his father with shaman rituals, which consists of traveling to a client's household to perform the rituals. Chue has little time to socialize with his friends or work on school projects on the weekends, something that he resents about shamanism:

It puts a lot of pressure on me cause they expect a lot already. I'm trying my best to keep my grades already. Sometimes, I just want to stop and chill for a while. Shaman rituals are a lot of time and pressure. I'm not interested as much. I don't see it as a primary thing ... If I'm busy on a specific day and they want me to participate in their ritual, I might not be able to choose one. Either become involve with my dad's ritual or continue on doing what I want to do like education.

For Chue, the balance between getting good grades and satisfying the wishes of his parents is difficult to maintain. Chue aspires to graduate from college and work in the field of computer engineering. He does not view the demands of his schoolwork and those of shamanism as compatible as both take a lot of effort to do well. As such, he framed family obligations in the form of cultural obligations as an obstacle that gets in the way of his schooling by taking away time from his studies.

James, a junior in high school with a 3.0 GPA, is another student who shares the concern about family cultural obligations. Unlike most male respondents, James was among the few who also framed cultural obligations as anticipated obstacles in that they may restrict his ability to move outside of Fresno for educational opportunities. James explains that his father is very strict and frequently lectures to him and his brother:

My dad wants us to become overachievers, become a doctor, get straight As, go to Hmong funerals and learn Hmong rituals and traditions. We are growing up but we aren't ready for that yet. We are at an age where we are going to stress a lot ... He tried to teach us Hmong rituals once, and then he says he's willing to pay for us to learn from others, but we don't want that because school is enough. Me and my brother didn't want that.

The expectations that James and his brother would follow their father's footsteps and practice cultural customs at such a young age when they have other things they need to focus on such as school is worrisome for James. It is not that James views cultural customs as unnecessary. Instead, it is that he and his older brother feel they are not yet ready for such obligations at this point in their lives. James's concern about the impact of cultural obligations on his own goals is not far-fetched. His father discouraged his older brother, who was a valedictorian of his high school, from attending UCLA, which is a four-hour drive from Fresno, because his father thought it was too far away from home. Ultimately, the brother relented and agreed to attend Fresno State. Based on his experience and observations, James is worried that family cultural obligations could interfere with his ability to focus on school in the immediate present and his ability to move out of Fresno in the future.

While most male subjects framed cultural obligations as an obstacle that interferes with their time for school work or socializing with friends, a couple of students did not perceive such a conflict and instead framed participation in rituals as meaningful and a source of pride. David, a senior in high school with a 2.85 GPA, is a student who did not perceive a conflict. He explained that because his dad was old and was rarely able to leave home, he and his brother have to take his dad's position at the different Hmong cultural functions.

He thought of this obligation as ‘pretty cool,’ and commented that his dad encourages them to participate because it garners the respect of his cousins.

Unlike female respondents who are concerned about family obligations in the present and the future, most male respondents who spoke of family obstacles are worried about family obligations in the immediate present. Males primarily framed these cultural and religious obligations as time-consuming obstacles that interfere with their schoolwork and social lives. Moreover, in contrast to their female counterparts, most males do not harbor any internalized guilt or anticipatory anxiety about being unable to fulfill their obligations in the future. This could be due to one of two reasons. One reason is that they plan on fulfilling these obligations later on in life when they have finished school. A second reason is that they do not anticipate these rituals or traditions to play a big part of their lives later on in life. As a result, it is not what is in store for their future that concerns them, but rather it is making time for the rituals in the present.

## Discussion

While the literature on successful Asian American students has indicated that family ties, in the form of family obligation, facilitates academic achievement among these students, this study is part of a growing wave of research on children of Southeast Asian American immigrants that complicates this generalization (Ngo 2006). Research on Asian American students typically concludes that a strong sense of family obligation is compatible with high academic achievement because academic achievement for these students is not a personal matter but is related to the honor of the family; students view doing well in school as fulfilling their obligation to the family (Caplan, Choy, and Whitmore 1991; Zhou and Bankston 1999; Chao 2000). In contrast to these studies, my study suggests that family obligations can lead to the leveling of aspirations as well as conflicts with students’ ability to sufficiently spend time on their schoolwork when parents face economic issues and lack knowledge about the structure of opportunity. Through the concept of frames, which emphasizes the subjective understandings of individuals, this study demonstrates how family ties can come to be perceived as an obstacle when students do not view familial obligations as compatible with their educational and occupational aspirations.

The importance of structural factors like poverty in shaping the type of family obligations students confront cannot be ignored. While the case of male subjects could be construed as cultural conflicts that involve their parents’ desire for them to continue religious and cultural customs, the same cannot be said about the stories of female students. Instead, the stories of female students demonstrate that the dilemmas females face are intimately tied to family poverty. Students in the research study come from large families whose parents receive government aid or work in low-wage occupations. Consequently, female students are expected to provide social and economic support to their family in the immediate present and for the foreseeable future as well. Female subjects are keenly aware of the struggles their families confront because of their low-income status and the pivotal role they play in their households. The immediate responsibility of supporting their struggling family interferes with their schooling and the anticipation of having to fulfill these obligations in the future complicate the path toward achieving their educational and occupational goals. The experiences of female students clearly demonstrate how social class shapes their

aspirations by restricting what colleges they believe they can attend given their family's low-income background.

This study points to the need for a more nuanced understanding of family obligations and the impact it has on children's educational and occupational outlooks. Instead of making general statements that family ties in the form of family obligations motivate or constraint students' mobility, researchers should seek to specify what type of family obligations and under what conditions those obligations will likely lead to positive or negative outcomes for students. In other words, there is a need for more research on the mechanisms and processes by which family ties shape certain outcomes. This study has taken a step toward this approach by elaborating on the type of family obligations faced by low-income Hmong American students, the impact it has on these students' immediate and future schooling, and the processes by which these type of obligations shape these outcomes. Specifically, this study identifies how family ties rooted in obligations that require students to commit time to their family or to always live near their parents place an excessive amount of pressure on students' schooling and their future goals. Moreover, this study also reveals the different mechanisms by which family ties constrain the ability of low-income students from achieving upward mobility. One mechanism is that family obligations takes away time from students to engage in their schooling and social activities. A second mechanism is that that due to family obligations, parents place restrictions on where students can pursue educational and occupational opportunities. A third mechanism is that students internalize a sense of guilt, even in the absence of any external pressure or resistance from family members, about moving away from home to pursue opportunities. While the type of family obligations will be different depending on the cultural characteristics of the group analyzed, the processes by which these obligations matter should reflect some of the ones identified in this study.

Another key contribution of this study is about the gendered nature and gendered impact of family obligations, which points to the need to disentangle family obligations along gender lines. Females perceived a greater role in providing for the social and economic needs of their family than their male counterparts, who perceived pressure around having to maintain the religious and cultural traditions of the community. The obligations of females are rooted in their contribution to the household, whereas those of males are grounded in their contribution outside the home in the community. Moreover, females are much more concerned about both immediate and anticipated obligations than their male counterparts whose discussion of family obstacles is primarily limited to the impact of obligations in the immediate present. As a consequence of the gendered nature of obligations, male and female students understand family obligations as having different impact in their lives. Female students are much more concerned than their male counterparts about their ability to move away from home. This finding contributes to a better understanding of why females perceived more restrictions on their spatial mobility (Gibson and Bhachu 1991; Valenzuela 1999; Lee 2001).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.



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