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Expanding Definitions of Family: Influences on Second-Generation Lao American College Students' Aspirations

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Abstract

This research examines familial influences on the educational and occupational aspirations of second-generation Lao American college students. In-depth, individual interviews were conducted with 10 Lao American college students. Findings from this study illustrate the value of familial relationships in students' educational experiences and how these relationships are perceived to have considerable influence on students' aspirations. Consistent with previous studies on aspiration development, the data suggests that Lao parents are highly influential on students' aspirations. However, Lao American students also placed high value on the advice of extended family members, almost to the point where their influence appeared indistinguishable from parents. This paper also extends the research on aspiration development in immigrant populations by examining the influence of refugee migration.

Introduction

Lao American students have been placed within an educational paradox due to the stereotypes that plague Asian American and Southeast Asian American students. They are either labeled as overachieving Asian Americans due to the model minority stereotype or they are viewed as underachieving dropouts due to the deviant minority stereotype that is associated with Southeast Asian Americans (Museus, 2014; Ngo, 2006; Ngo & Lee, 2007). In reality, census data consistently proves that Lao American students continue trailing in educational attainment in comparison to their fellow Asian American counterparts and the general U.S. population (Kouanchao, 2013; Uy, 2011). Even among Southeast Asian American groups, Lao Americans have the lowest percentage (13%) of adults aged 25 and older who have earned a bachelor's degree or higher (SEARAC, 2011). In California, where the largest population of Lao Americans has settled, scholars have observed that the children of Lao refugees experience among the most serious disadvantages in their schooling across racial and ethnic categories (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). Disparities in opportunity and achievement pose severe problems for the Lao American community; lower educational attainment levels are positively correlated with higher rates of poverty, which could force families to rely on social services (Baum & Payea, 2005; Museus,

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2013; Swail, 2004). Despite these alarming circumstances, there is a paucity of educational research examining the experiences or educational needs of Lao American students.

Although several scholars have addressed the unique educational experiences of Southeast Asian American students (e.g., Chhuon, 2013; Chhuon & Hudley, 2008; Kouanchao, 2013; Museus, 2013; Ngo, 2009; Ngo, 2010; Uy, 2011; Vue, 2013), this research is the first to focus on the educational and occupational aspirations of Lao American college students. Research has consistently found a correlation between educational aspirations, educational expectations and academic achievement; students with higher educational aspirations and expectations are more likely to achieve (Feliciano, 2006; Hong & Ho, 2005; Sewell, Haller, & Portes, 1969; Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010). For this study, educational aspirations refer to students' desired major and the highest educational attainment level (degree) desired, and occupational aspirations refer to students' desired career (Mau & Bikos, 2000). Additionally, I narrowed the focus of influence on students' aspirations to family. Since the family is the "strongest social unit" (Schapiro, 1988, p.159) for Lao people, it is important to understand how families play a role in students' aspiration development. First, I set the context for understanding these experiences by discussing Lao migration to the United States.

Lao Migration to the United States

As refugees, Lao Americans endured a journey to the US that is much different than other voluntary immigrants. During the Vietnam War, the United States created mass devastation by continuously bombing Laos in order to cut North Vietnamese supply chains on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Bankston and Hidalgo (2007, p. 239) aptly noted that, "War created the paths of migration between North America and Southeast Asia". Once South Vietnam fell to Communist forces in 1975, the Pathet Lao quickly took over the Royal Government of Lao, and the mass migration of Laotians to the United States began. Nearly one million refugees from Southeast Asia entered the United States between 1975 and 2000 (Zhou, 2005). Compared to other Southeast Asian groups, Laotians spent the most time in refugee camps; nearly 23% of Laotians spent more than two years in refugee camps before arriving in America (Caplan, Choy, & Whitmore, 1991). The majority of Laotians who migrated as part of the third wave of Southeast Asian refugees were subsistence farmers with little or no formal education (Ngo & Lee, 2007; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996).

Recognizing the more recent immigration of Lao refugees to the US, this study extends the aspiration development literature by considering how the circumstances of parental migration can influence their children's aspirations.

Aspiration Frameworks

Studies on the educational aspirations of low-income and minority youth demonstrate the value of utilizing multiple theoretical frameworks in order to capture influential factors in different aspects of Lao American students' lives (home, school, and individual experiences) that impact their aspirations.

Kao and Tienda (1998) were the first to examine the aspirations of Asian and Latino students in their study comparing the educational aspirations of white, black, Asian, and Latino youth. They combined the status-attainment model (Sewell, Haller, & Portes, 1969; Sewell, Haller, & Ohlendorf, 1970) and the blocked-opportunities frameworks (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986;

Gibson & Ogbu, 1991; Ogbu, 1991; Sue & Okazaki, 1990) in order to appropriately capture aspiration development among minority students. The status-attainment model posits that educational aspirations are largely influenced by significant others, who are “the persons exerting the greatest influence” upon the student (Sewell et al., 1970, p.1015). Significant others primarily refer to parents and their background characteristics, which include education, socioeconomic status, and the educational expectations for their children. However, the status-attainment model was developed on studies with white, male youth and has been found to be insufficient for understanding aspiration development among racial and ethnic minority students (Kao & Tienda, 1998). Therefore, Kao and Tienda integrated the blocked opportunities to examine the social and structural barriers that influence the aspirations of minority youth. Both frameworks were also integrated into this study to evaluate how family background (family’s race/ethnicity, parents’ education, family structure), family resources (immigrant mother, educational resources, outside classes), and students’ own educational experiences shape their educational aspirations. I expand further on these frameworks by adding another dimension in this study — Lao parents’ migration history as refugees.

Aspirations of Lao American Youth

Few studies have exclusively examined the aspirations of Lao American students, and the few that exist describe Lao American youth as having low aspirations (Baizerman & Hendrick, 1988; Park, 2001). Baizerman and Hendrick’s (1988) study focused on Lao youth (age 13 through 24) in Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota. These students had much lower expectations for their future than their parents had for them. Even though students reported “dreams” of obtaining college degrees and professional occupations, they were not academically qualified for scholarships nor were their families able to provide financial support. However, considering that most Lao refugees settled in the US after the mid-1980s, Baizerman and Hendrick’s study should be considered a preliminary examination into the struggles of first- and 1.5-generation Lao immigrants. In a more recent examination, Park’s (2001) study comparing the educational and occupational aspirations of Southeast Asian and white high school students also found that Lao students had the lowest educational and occupational aspirations when compared to other Southeast Asian and white students.

Despite reportedly lower aspirations, some have argued that second-generation children will develop higher educational aspirations out of respect for their parents’ struggles (Zhou, 2005). Zhou found that immigrant children often internalize the daily struggles they see their parents experiencing as new immigrants and develop a new level of respect for them; consequently, many children will internalize their parents’ high educational aspirations. Unfortunately, parents and children’s aspirations can often be conflicting. Several scholars have found that Asian American parents tend to push their children towards what they deem to be “safe” careers, which includes medicine and engineering (e.g., Fuligni, Tseng, & Lam, 1999; Museus, 2013; Park, 2001). Due to family and ethnic community pressure to bring pride to the family, many children will forgo their own educational and career interests to pursue the safe professions their parents desire for them.

Parental Influences on Students' Aspirations

As mentioned in the prior section, parental educational expectations and aspirations can have a profound influence on children's own educational aspirations and attainment (e.g., Davies & Kandel, 1981; Feliciano, 2006; Goyette & Xie, 1999; Hong & Ho, 2005; Kim, Rendon, & Valadez, 1998; Mau & Bikos, 2000; Park, 2001; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Schneider & Lee, 1990; Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010). Using an ecological approach with the status-attainment model, Kim, Rendon, and Valadez (1998) found that parental expectations had the largest effect on Asian American students' educational aspirations. Other scholars have argued that parental expectations are instilled in their children through a cultural context, claiming that the high value that Asian cultures place on education results in higher parental expectations of students. Thus, these expectations are "extremely powerful" in shaping their children's achievement and aspirations (Schneider & Lee, 1990, p. 374). Similarly, Museus' (2013) examination of parental influence on Southeast Asian American students' educational trajectories using a cultural mechanisms perspective found that students had a deep respect for parental sacrifice and a strong understanding that their parents viewed education as a means of socioeconomic success.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this article was to examine how family is perceived to influence the educational and occupational aspirations of second-generation Lao American college students. The questions guiding this research were: 1) What role do Lao parents play in the development of their children's educational and occupational aspirations? 2) What role does Lao parents' migration history as refugees play in the development of their children's educational and occupational aspirations? and 3) What role do other family members play in the development of Lao American students' educational and occupational aspirations? Drawing from prior research, I expected that Lao parents would play an important role in the development of their children's aspirations, but on the other hand, little is understood about the influence of extended family members. Therefore, the nuances of how these relationships were influential were explored using qualitative methods.

Methodology

The data in this article is drawn from a larger study of educational aspirations in Lao American families. This exploratory study used in-depth interviewing and grounded theory methods to guide data collection and data analysis.

Participants

Purposeful sampling techniques were used to recruit second-generation Lao American college students (Patton, 2002). I recruited my participants from across the California Central Valley and Southern California due to the relatively substantial Lao communities near Garden Grove and Fresno, California. Using word-of-mouth, social networking sites, and emails, a request for participants was sent to Lao community members with whom I was connected to. Students who answered the original call for participants then recommended the study to their peers. The final sample included ten student/parent pairs; five pairs of families were from Southern California

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and five pairs were from the Central Valley. This study focuses on interview data collected with the students.

Student participants ranged in gender, age and grade level in each location. Demographic information is presented in Table 1. Overall, the study contained four females and six males. Only one participant lived away from his home and community; all other students lived with their parents.

Table 1
Student participants

Name	Age	Year in school	Type of institution
<u>Southern California</u>			
Arthur	19	2	4-year state college
Kat	20	2	4-year state college
Nathan	20	2	community college
Sara	21	2	community college
Peter	23	5	4-year state college
<u>Central Valley</u>			
Matthew	19	1	4-year university
Donna	19	2	community college
Maddy	19	3	4-year state college
Jack	20	2 (part-time)	community college
Derrick	22	recently graduated	4-year state college

Note. All names are pseudonyms.

Data Collection

Students were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire and participate in individual, face-to-face interviews. The demographic questionnaire solicited information regarding students' age, living situation, school information, and started an initial inquiry into students' major and career aspirations. Once students signed consent forms to participate in the study, questionnaires were filled out prior to the start of the interview. In-depth interviewing methods were used in conjunction with grounded theory methods in this exploratory study (Charmaz, 2001; Johnson, 2001). In-depth interviews are appropriate for researchers seeking depth in information and knowledge, which often involves topics that are very personal to informants. Examples of questions included: "What is the highest level of schooling you hope to achieve? And how did you make this decision?" and "What do you know about your parents' immigration story?" These semi-structured student interviews generally lasted one hour in length and were digitally recorded with permission from students.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using grounded theory methods. According to Charmaz (2001), researchers "already possess a set of 'sensitizing concepts' that inform empirical inquiry and spark the development of more refined and precise concepts" during the process of coding (p. 683). A primary sensitizing concept in this study was "aspirations." Guided

by grounded theory methods of coding, open coding was first used to analyze the data. During the second round of reading, notes were made on the transcript to demarcate emerging themes arising from the data. After the second round of coding, data analysis was then guided by the conceptual framework. The emergent themes from the second round of coding were organized according to the components of the conceptual framework: family background, family resources, students' educational experiences, and parents. Parents' immigration history was a new component added by this study. The findings that are reported in this paper are the main themes that emerged from the data.

Researcher Role and Identity

My own identity as a second-generation Lao American better allowed for the establishment of rapport and trust with my participants. Rapport is an important component of an in-depth interview and often requires more personal self-disclosure on the part of the researcher (Johnson, 2001). However, this also meant extensive reflexivity was required during the process of data collection and data analyses. I am what anthropologists would consider a "halfie researcher" (Subedi, 2006). Halfie researchers' "in-between status requires that they be more accountable to how they have researched and written about the people with whom affiliate" (Subedi, 2006, p. 574). As a Lao American who is familiar with the communities from which I recruited participants, I was determined, as a co-ethnic and as an educator, to conduct research that honors and advances the Lao community in an ethical manner. While I acknowledge that my identity as a Lao American helped me relate to my participants, I used rigorous reflexivity to examine my role as an educational researcher and as a Lao American in the design, data collection, data analyses, and write-up of this study in order to ensure ethical research practices.

Findings

Consistent with previous studies on aspiration development, the data suggests that Lao parents were profoundly influential on students' educational and occupational aspirations. While some parents were perceived to directly influence their child's educational choices, others appeared more indirectly influential. Two subthemes emerged under parental influence: respect for parents' immigration histories and the guilt of financial dependence. The data also suggested that extended family members had significant influence on the aspirations of second-generation Lao American college students and often times were as impactful as parents' opinions. Although the interview protocol did not ask about the specific roles of extended family members, it emerged across the interviews that narrow definitions of family do not apply to Lao American students. Rather, all members of one's family (e.g., parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents) was how students conceived of the term "family."

The Role of Parents: Respecting Parents' Immigration Histories and the Guilt of Financial Dependence

Parents played an important role in the aspiration development of all 10 student participants in this study. Some parents were perceived to have directly influenced their child's choice of major, while other parents were perceived to have a more indirect role in their child's decision. The direct influence manifested in two ways: parents pressured their child to choose the academic

major that they desired or the child internalized the pressure they perceived coming from their parents. Students who had chosen a major of their parents' desire had previously preferred career paths that were considered economically unstable for their future. Across these interviews, two main reasons were found to explain why parental influence appeared so strong: respect for parents' immigration histories and the guilt of financial dependence.

Four out of ten students chose the major of their parents' desire. For example, Jack took the advice of his high school Regional Occupation Program (ROP) teacher and spent his first two years of community college planning to major in linguistics so he could join the FBI. However, two weeks prior to our interview, Jack changed his major to electrical engineering after intense pressure from his father and extended family members. When asked how he came to decide on electrical engineering as a major, he replied, "Well, I didn't really decide on it. {sigh} My family kind of forced me to change my major." Jack's father and extended family disregarded his aspirations to major in linguistics because they did not understand how it would translate into a stable career. This produced an enormous amount of guilt that Jack could not overcome. As his father's only son and as the eldest male cousin in the family, he felt forced to be a dutiful son and good role model for his younger cousins. Despite the time and effort he had invested into becoming a linguistics major, Jack abandoned his own aspirations for those of his family's. As seen in Jack's situation, Lao parents will tend to push their children as a result of their high educational expectations (Schapiro, 1988).

Peter's childhood dream was to be an architect; however, he never attempted to pursue this lifelong dream due to the pressure imposed by his parents to choose accounting as a major. Similar to Jack, Peter shared that the selection of his academic major was based almost solely on what his parents wanted him to do. He explained why he believed his parents pressured him into accounting:

I think it has to do with like other people talk to them saying, like, what I should do, and, I think they also agree with them saying like, I can find accounting, like, in many places other than doing other careers, I don't know. Because I've heard them talking to like other parents, their kids who have like, sociology degrees or like, yea. They really want me to do accounting just because I can find a job after I graduate.

Like many immigrant parents, Peter's wanted him to pursue a major that would lead to financial stability in the future, even though he stated that he had "no passion for it." Already in his fifth year at a four-year state college, Peter was struggling in the major. When asked whether he had ever considered changing his major, he responded, "If I can? Yea...I would love to...I still want to do architecture." However, after five years, Peter just wanted to graduate. Previous research has found that many immigrant parents tend to push their children into the sciences or technological fields because these majors were known to provide "safe" professions (e.g., Kao, 2010; Kao & Tienda, 1998; Ngo, 2006; Sue & Okazaki, 1990; Um, 2003). In Peter's case, the field of business, specifically accounting, is understood as a "safe" profession within the Lao American community.

Direct pressure from parents was not the only determinant of children choosing to fulfill their parents' aspirations. Some students chose "safe" majors based on perceived parental expectations. For example, Sara selected nursing as a major because she perceived this to be her parents' desire. While she preferred to study sociology and pursue a career in social work, she

felt indirect pressure from her family to choose a path that would lead to a more economically stable future. Sara's parents did not know what a sociology major is, but she was certain they would be disapproving of a major that did not immediately translate into a promising career. When asked if sociology was the major she would have wanted to pursue, she enthusiastically replied:

Oh yea! Definitely. A lot more than nursing at one point...But I think being around an environment with my family, they kind of influenced me to do what would be more considered stable in my life and would have a better life that way.

Her final decision was to enter the medical field in hopes of guaranteeing a comfortable economic future while also appeasing her parents.

Parental pressures also led students to choose a major that was a compromise between what they desired for themselves and what their parents' desired. For example, when Arthur was in his high school, he began considering possible majors and became interested in sociology and psychology. Arthur described how his mother responded to his interests,

Well, she took it in at first, and then the next day she was telling me how it's low paying and you would have to work like six years to actually get a good paying job, like get a good income.

Arthur's mother demonstrated her disapproval of his intended majors by providing him with a list of degrees and their corresponding salaries after graduation. She wanted him to be the first doctor of the family, whether it be a medical doctor or earning a Ph.D. In the end, Arthur chose accounting and explained his decision by saying, "I would be guaranteed like a good job, an income, and pleasing my parents." Since he knew he had no desire to pursue medicine as a career, Arthur compromised his original desires for a career path that would be satisfactory for himself and his parents.

The experiences of the Jack, Peter, Sara, and Arthur mirror the experiences of Southeast Asian students in other research on parental influences on college students' educational trajectories (Museus, 2013). However, as can be seen in Peter and Arthur's case, Lao American parents also view accounting as a field that promises a stable economic future. In both instances, Peter and Arthur explained that they had family members who are successful accountants.

Of the ten students interviewed, six pursued their own educational and occupational aspirations. Three students reported that their parents expressed a preference for them to pursue certain majors, yet there was no pressure to pursue these majors. Earning a doctorate and entering the medical field is what all of these parents hoped their children would aspire for, but they also understood the realities of not being able to force their children into career paths that they did not desire for themselves. There was a mutual understanding in these parent-child relationships that although parents hoped their children would become doctors, they would be satisfied with any major or career so long as their children were successful and happy. For example, Nathan shared what he perceived to be his parents' aspirations for him:

I think the main thing would be just going to a four year [college] and getting my degree from there. They told me to just find something that I would love to do,

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you know? Because my mom always says, “You don’t want to wake up and hate your job.”

Nathan’s parents were very supportive of his decision to explore the fields of medicine and information technology. Despite not having any direct pressure placed upon them, all six students took their parents into consideration when making educational decisions due to some of the factors discussed below.

Respecting parents’ immigration histories. The overwhelming majority of students expressed a sense of obligation to consider choosing the major of their parents’ choice, even for students who pursued their own aspirations. Parents’ history as refugees and their experiences as immigrants commanded a high level of respect from students, but this did not appear as a direct influence on students’ major or career aspirations. Kat’s statement reflected how the majority of the students felt regarding the impact their parents’ histories have had on them:

I mean, coming from a poor country to come here and to have a better life, it just pushes me to want to give them, to help them out with a better life and to help myself with a better life. That’s always, that’s always an influence. It’s always in the back of my head. I feel like “You need to do this because you need to give yourself a better life”...because not even stories, just little tidbits, ya know?

All participants acknowledged the struggles their parents’ endured to in order to provide for their family, and some felt more influenced by this experience than others. Interestingly, only one out of ten students knew the entirety of his parents’ immigration story, but this was only due to the fact that he had recently asked as a young adult. Another student, Sara, also claimed to know the majority of her parents’ immigration journey, but intriguingly, her mother’s interview contradicted this. She assumed that Sara was uninterested in learning about her immigration story. The majority of students knew the “basics” of their parents’ story—that they escaped from Laos, lived in refugee camps, and then came to the US very poor. Regardless of not knowing the details, all of the students expressed the utmost respect for their parents’ struggles.

Stemming from the limited knowledge of their parents’ immigrant experiences and students’ current financial dependence on their parents, there was a clear desire for future economic stability from all students. Having internalized their parents’ experiences, students desired a future that was more comfortable than their parents’ arduous efforts to settle in America. As a result of their gratitude, many of these students desired to care for their parents after they established themselves in their careers. Parents’ refugee experiences and struggles motivated their children to succeed not just for themselves, but also for their parents. These findings are similar to the experiences of first-generation Latino students in Ceja’s (2004) study, whose aspirations were also influenced by the internalization of their parents’ lived experiences. Not only have these experiences help shape Lao American and Latino students’ aspirations, they are a source of motivation for academic success.

The guilt of financial dependence. Financial dependence was an emergent theme from the data during open coding. Although the issue of student finances and tuition was not an explicit topic in the interview guide, many students shared how they were paying for college. Seven of the ten students had parents who were contributing to their education. Many of the students relied on

both financial aid and parental assistance, but three students shared that their education was completely funded by their parents. These were also students whose parents were perceived to directly influence their choice of majors: Sara, Peter, and Jack. They openly discussed the effect that their financial dependence had on their educational decisions. While students in Zhou's study (2005) felt pressured to pursue safe professions due to family pride, these Lao American college students succumbed to the guilt of financial dependence. They felt obligated to be obedient due to their financial dependence. Sara shared:

I definitely think that if I was not living with my family. You know if, could be, if I had my expenses, you know, be fine and I was fairly independent with that. I definitely don't think I'd be going into nursing...But um, I just think that the major influence was the family and the living arrangements.

For Sara, the obligation and influence she felt from her family extended beyond their support of her educational expenses, but it was also due the fact that she was living at home and financially supported by her parents. In fact, all of the students except Matthew were living at home. Peter's educational decisions were also highly impacted by this financial guilt and felt obligated to choose the path his parents desired. He expressed:

Just because I would feel bad. Like I know they're paying for school so I just want to make them happy...School's just way too expensive now, and I just want to get done so they can stop paying for it.

In Peter's situation, the financial burden he was placing on his parents was the main reason he had chosen accounting as a major. However, none of the students reported that their parents had used finances as leverage for choosing their desired majors. The guilt of financial dependence had developed within themselves. Combined with feelings of being trapped in a particular situation and the real/perceived parental pressures, Sara, Peter, and Jack felt forced to abandon their own aspirations.

The Role of (Extended) Family

Many cultures consider family as the strongest social unit. In Lao culture, this is certainly the case, but the term "family" extends far beyond the nuclear family (Schapiro, 1988). Siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents were all involved in the development of students' aspirations. Similar to parents, extended family members had very high expectations for students. The role of family members was seen in three main ways: encouraging students to attend a specific school, assisting in the process of getting into college and offering advice based on experience, and offering to assist students entering into a profession in which they, themselves, were employed. At times, the role of the extended family and the role of parents often appeared indistinguishable.

Family members who attended college were valuable in offering students advice and assisting in the application process. All of the students had a family member, nuclear or extended, that had attended college before them, and half of the students had a sibling who was also in college. Maddy shared:

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I have two aunts who are very studious and they've got their bachelor's and one of my aunts got her master's. They've always really enjoyed school and told me about their experiences and to really take advantage of going to school and getting a degree.

Often, older relatives encouraged practicality in their discussions regarding students' aspirations for their desired major or career. For example, Donna discussed two of her aunts' involvement:

I feel like they kind of like were supportive in our decisions and kind of, but then again, supportive but realistic...My aunt, she's always been the one to say, "Can you afford this?", or like, "Can you see yourself majoring or like getting a career from anthropology?"

Although older relatives wanted students to pursue their own aspirations, they also understood the realities that students would face once they finished their degrees. Therefore, they did not discourage students from pursuing their own aspirations, but they also encouraged students to consider the career prospects of majors they intended to pursue.

Siblings and cousins were also helpful in the college application process and offered advice on which courses to enroll in. The guidance of older siblings or cousins was crucial for many of these students. Although they were going through the application process with their friends, family members often offered insider advice on things like what courses to enroll in. Peter shared how his cousin was instrumental in helping through the process of getting into college, "[My cousin] helped me a lot. Just because she was already in college and she told me what I would do, so yes, it was very, very nice having her." Unlike the experiences of older relatives, siblings and cousins were close enough in age that their experiences were similar and their advice was fresh. These younger relatives tend to be more positive about pursuing academic goals for reasons related to interests and passions rather than solely practical concerns. For example, when Peter raised the idea of becoming a culinary chef, his older cousin offered to help him secure an internship with the chef at her workplace. Younger relatives were more empathetic about students' happiness and ability to pursue their own interests. This may be due to their generational similarities, while older relatives, such as Donna's aunts, are 1.5 or first generation immigrants who are more likely to gravitate towards safe professions. Younger relatives were likely experiencing, or had recently experienced, the same emotions as the students in this study.

Family members also encouraged students to pursue majors that would lead to the careers that they currently had. It was mentioned earlier that Jack wanted to major in linguistics, but his family wanted him to choose engineering. Aside from facing pressure from family members, Jack's sister and uncle were already engineers, and his uncle felt confident he could secure him a job after graduation. Describing the family pressure, Jack said, "My cousin- she has a son, and she said, 'You gotta set the role model for him'. Because I'm the oldest of all the boys." For Jack, the pressure from the family to choose a career path that younger family members can look up to was strong, but it was also compounded by the possibility of guaranteed employment with his uncle's help. Although the job guarantee was not the deciding factor in why Jack chose engineering, there was also a sense of relief that his future was secure. This also illustrates that although students want to pursue their own passions, they can also be doubtful of their future job security and its prestige. If Jack were certain that he would pursue a career with the FBI after earning his linguistics degree, would he have tried harder to explain this educational path to his

family? Instead, he chose a major that he was pressured into by his family. Engineering has positive implications for Jack's future in two ways: it is considered a safe career and he is already guaranteed a position right out of college.

Some students had as much of a desire to fulfill the wishes of their extended family members as they would for their own parents. Donna described her family's influence on her aspirations, "The *whole* family raised us, and so I don't think I would've been here [in college] if it weren't for them." She acknowledges the family's role in helping her successfully enter college as well as being part of her motivation to succeed in college. Matthew's grandparents and aunt played important roles when he was deciding on universities. He shared:

Once junior year came around I was like I don't want to go to UCLA, but Irvine, that sounds like a pretty cool place and it's close to like my cousins and stuff. And then I guess after [my grandparents] passed away, it's like aw man, I should probably go there because I told them I want to. It's kind of like a promise, so I kind of want to keep that promise. And also [my aunt], like she's always telling me, "You do really good in school so you should go to UCI."

Also, since Matthew planned to leave his home community due to a lack of job prospects, he was determined to find other universities near extended family members. While previous research has found that Southeast Asian American students' college choice are highly influenced by proximity of the campus to their home, this study illuminates that for Lao American students, the close proximity of the college to extended family members seemed just as important in their college decisions (Teranishi, Ceja, Antonio, Allen, & McDonough, 2004).

Discussion

This study revealed the importance of not only parents, but also other significant relationships on students' educational and occupational aspirations (e.g., Berzin, 2010; Goyette & Xie, 1999; Kao & Tienda, 1998; Kim, Rendon, & Valadez, 1998; Park, 2001; Poon & Byrd, 2013; Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010). As one of the first qualitative studies to explore the influences on students' aspirations, the results provided detailed description as to how each of these relationships were influential. Thus, it is important to understand that for Lao American students, it is likely that the concept of family influence extends beyond parents and perhaps even siblings; the influence of extended family members can sometimes be indistinguishable from the influence of parents for Lao American students. Kouanchao's (2013) study of Lao American college students' identity development found that participants "could not conceptualize an identity in which family and culture were disentangled or divorced from their experience or sense of being" (p. 138). Similarly, this paper showed that students' educational and occupational aspirations are intimately connected to the perceived desires of their family, which includes members of students' extended family. Therefore, high schools that offer college informational sessions should explicitly extend the invitation to any member of a student's family and not just parents. Parents who have limited knowledge of the English language or of the school systems may rely on other children and extended family members to translate and explain the information being disseminated about colleges and careers.

Second, the findings also provide insight into how Lao American parents' histories as refugees had a profound and indirect influence on their children's aspirations. All of the students

considered their parents' histories and struggles to be influential on their educational and occupational aspirations. These students were motivated to succeed academically, not only for themselves, but also for their parents. Southeast Asian American students in previous research expressed similar sentiments; parents' hardships as new immigrants served as motivators for students' academic endeavors. Familial histories of struggles served as an important motivational tool, despite students not knowing the entirety of their parents' immigration experiences. Future studies examining the development of educational and occupational aspirations of the children of immigrants should consider the different modes of migration. Most existing theoretical models on aspiration development use quantitative measures to consider race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, parent education, and parent immigrant status (Kao & Tienda, 1998). These studies have not delineated between more traditional immigrants and refugee migrations and adjustment. Hence, this qualitative examination provides a valuable look into how refugee experiences shape young adults' motivation and aspirations in higher education.

Third, the impact of financial dependence revealed negative consequences on students' happiness with their educational decisions. The guilt that students feel for relying on their parents can lead them to abandon their own educational aspirations for a potentially unfulfilling path. There is likely a relationship between parents' immigration histories and students' guilt of financial dependence due to the fact that the guilt had developed within the students, themselves, and not due to parental pressure. All of the Lao American students in this study expressed how they very much respected and honored their parents for their experienced hardships as refugees to the U.S. Therefore, this respect may be compounded onto the guilt of financial dependence, leading students to succumb to the pressure of satisfying their parents. A focus for future study would be to understand the psychological effects of the financial hold parents have over their children. Although none of the students reported that their parents were using financial reliance as direct pressure to adopt their aspirations, it was also not addressed in the present study. Exploring the financial situations of students and parents may provide beneficial findings. Do students who rely on financial aid perceive/face less pressure from parents than those who pay for their child's education?

Lastly, students who were pursuing a major or career that was chosen by their parents were unhappy with their educational experience. In addition, all of these students' educational aspirations ended with a bachelor's degree, while students who were pursuing their own desired majors or careers were considering at least a master's degree. It is important to understand the effects and consequences of students choosing their own educational pathways as opposed to students electing to follow what their parents wanted. Research concerning the role of family obligation on the education of immigrant youth found that students who felt the highest sense of family obligation earned low or lower grades than students who felt the least sense of family obligation (Fuligni et al., 1999). However, students who felt a moderate sense of family obligation tended to achieve higher academic success. Also, since educational aspirations have been found to correlate with academic achievement, what are the effects when students are not able to pursue their own aspirations?

As we can see from these findings, it was necessary to consider multiple theoretical perspectives on aspiration development in order to observe the breadth of influences on Lao American college students' aspirations (Kao & Tienda, 1998). Many of the findings in this study resonate with previous research examining parental influence on Southeast Asian American college students' educational experiences (e.g., Museus, 2013; Poon & Byrd, 2013). However, these findings shed light on the very strong influence of extended family for Lao American

college students. This qualitative study has captured students' unique educational experiences and allows us to not only see how family influences Lao American students' aspirations, but also allowed us to delve deeply into seeing how these influences varied, or sometimes unvaried, by the type of relationship to the student. As well, the study calls for an extension of these conceptual frameworks to consider parents' immigration histories when examining the aspiration development of Lao American or Southeast Asian American students. It is important to mention that the findings in this study also parallel aspiration development among first-generation Latino students (Ceja, 2004). Ceja found that the perceptions of the lived experiences of their parents not only played a role in Latina students' aspiration development but also in the development of their educational resiliency. With the abundance of literature examining the crucial role that parents play in the aspiration development of Latino students (e.g. Ceja, 2004; Ceja, 2006; Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Gandara, 1995), it would be beneficial to examine these parallels to understand how Latino students' aspirations have been successfully supported.

This research also argues that Lao American students would benefit from a relationship created between family and educators/schools. Kouanchao (2013) called for colleges to provide resources and reach out to Lao American families and communities. Educators and counselors should understand the history and background of Lao Americans in order to help them work with Lao parents to understand the different pathways their children may take for successful careers. Due to their limited understanding of the U.S. education system, Lao parents in this study conflated academic majors and careers. Therefore, some parents pressured their children out of majors such as sociology and linguistics, because they feared their children pursuing educational paths that would not lead directly to a stable profession. These stable careers have traditionally been viewed as those in the medical or technical fields, but we have begun to see that Lao parents now consider accounting as a worthy educational pursuit. These connections between family and educators/schools need to be developed throughout the PreK-16 pipeline, ensuring the success of Lao American students from the beginning of their education.

As with all research, there are limitations to this study. Although the study has provided depth into understanding the influences on the aspirations of Lao American college students, I cannot conclude that understanding these influences will affect the eventual educational attainment of these students. Also, due to the snowball sampling strategy used to recruit participants, students' demographics were quite varied. Class level, type of college institution, and whether or not students were living at home could have also affected aspirations in ways that cannot be distinguished in this study. Despite these limitations, this study sheds light onto the educational experiences of an underserved and under-examined group in higher education. Certainly, my Lao American college student participants are successful in that they have made it to higher education, but we need to ensure that they maintain high aspirations and graduate. This is imperative considering nearly half of Cambodians, Laotian, and Hmong Americans aged 25 or older who have attended college left without earning an associate's or bachelor's degree (CARE, 2011). The findings in this article contrast with previous studies (e.g. Baizerman & Hendrick, 1988; Park, 2001) that depict low educational aspirations for Lao American youth. Lao Americans students in this study described high aspirations and that they can potentially be more academically successful if they follow their own educational and occupational aspirations. This initial understanding of the influences on Lao American college students' aspirations allows us to target key areas that require support from educators and counselors to complete their college degrees and enter careers with more potential for fulfillment.

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