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Human Capital Formation and Return Migration within Mong Communities in Rural/Semi-Rural Northern California

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HUMAN CAPITAL FORMATION AND RETURN MIGRATION WITHIN MONG
COMMUNITIES IN RURAL/SEMI-RURAL NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

By

Chong Yang

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By

Chong Yang

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the three individuals within my first two stages of life within the Mong experience. For my parents Say and Kia. Their unwavering dedication to their children's education continues to inspire and motivate me through all my academic and professional journeys. And also to my wife, May, who have been my best friend and partner for nearly 20 years. Because of her, I continually work on in becoming a better person and without her, I would have not been able to accomplish all my professional and academic successes. She makes the best parts of me possible.

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HUMAN CAPITAL FORMATION AND RETURN MIGRATION WITHIN MONG COMMUNITIES IN RURAL/SEMI-RURAL NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

Abstract

By Chong Yang

University of the Pacific
2021

This research uses computational grounded theory to explore the human capital formation and stay/return migration experiences of well-educated Mong adults living rural/semi-rural Northern California. Rural vitality is dependent on the return of these well-educated rural-raised adults. Out-migration of rurality's best and brightest contributes towards a brain drain and hallowing out of rurality's human capital. Findings of this research is conveyed using two research articles examining two different points on the continuum of rural vitality through the lens of stay or return migration. The first article examines Mong adults' educational experiences within their rural communities and college education. The second article examines the experiences and factors for Mong adults stay or return. The seven emerging themes describe Mong students' social capital within their communities towards educational attainment and place affinity.

Article one examines the experiences of the human capital formation of 19 Mong adults who stayed or returned to their rural/semi-rural hometowns of Northern California using computational grounded theory. Emerging themes include learning within isolation, lacking navigation capital, and finding resiliency through caring agents. Participants faced isolation early on in their educational experiences. Both participants, their friends, and families lack the required navigation capital to complete their education attainment within a timely manner.

Caring agents through established institutional support programs, educational staff, and friends/neighbors who were knowledgeable were key factors enabling Mong students to navigate higher education. Implications apply to new refugees and how they obtain, create, and navigate social capital for human capital formation.

Article two examines the experiences of the human capital formation of 19 Mong adults who stayed or returned to their rural/semi-rural hometowns of Northern California using computational grounded theory. Emerging themes include learning within isolation, lacking navigation capital, and finding resiliency through caring agents. Participants faced isolation early on in their educational experiences. Both participants, their friends and families lack the required navigation capital to complete their education attainment within a timely manner.

Caring agents through established institutional support programs, educational staff, and friends/neighbors who were knowledgeable were key factors enabling Mong students to navigate higher education. Implications apply to new refugees and how they obtain, create, and navigate social capital for human capital formation.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AAPI	Asian American and Pacific Islander
CGT	computational grounded theory
GT	grounded theory
ML	machine learning
NLP	natural language processing
NLTK	natural learning toolkit

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“We don’t count in Northern California.”

- Andy Vasquez, Yuba County Supervisor (*in support of the State of Jefferson*)

Northern California, Mong, and Their Mythical Identities

On April 16, 2014, the supervisors for Yuba County declared their support for the State of Jefferson (Jefferson) (CBS13, 2014). Jefferson is a mythical state separatist movement that was initially founded in 1941 to carve portions of California and Oregon as a separate state. However, its Yreka separatist origins go as far back as 1854 (Laufer, 2013, Chapter 1). Separatists believed they were justified in their move for secession due to the lack of representation and marginalization they faced in their respective state capitals (Davis, 1952). These counties were primarily rural and their respective states were becoming increasingly more urban. In its modern form, Jefferson represents California’s 23¹ most northern counties and the 7 most southern counties of Oregon (Goodyear, 2016). Goodyear notes that had the current dreams of the Jefferson separatists been realized, it would have become one of the poorest states in the union. For those who support Jefferson, invisibility, marginalization, and mockery are both shared identities and experiences. Rurality, or the rural way of life, is shaped by a sense of marginalization and cultural hierarchy between rurality and urbanormativity (Ching & Creed, 1996, p. 19). Much of this cultural hierarchy is shaped by the lack of economic opportunities and the lack of educational attainment among people of rurality.

¹ The count of Jefferson supporting counties varies between 20-23. The number varies upon the inclusion of Amador, Calaveras and Tuolumne counties along with all counties north of the counties of Sacramento and Yolo.

The intersection between a community's lack of educational attainment and economic opportunities can lead to tragic outcomes. On May 1, 1992, 20-year-old Eric Houston walked into Lindhurst High School (Olivehurst, Yuba County, California) and killed his former civics teacher (Robert Brens) and three students (Judy Davis, Jason White, and Beamon Hill) (Morain & Ingram, 1992). Ten other students were also be injured in the rampage. Houston had been recently laid off from his factory work and was unable to obtain any other employment due to his lack of a high school diploma or GED. Yuba County's peak unemployment rate in 1992 was 19.7 percent (BLS, 1992). Houston later confessed that he was still holding a grudge against Brens for failing him in his US History class (Morain & Ingram, 1992). Brens, 29, was in his fourth year of teaching at Lindhurst High School. Lindhurst serves the families of the towns of Olivehurst and Linda. Even after 20 years, the deep, lasting impact of those deaths still affects the school and community (Gebb, 2012). Houston's actions are the outlier and represent the extremes. However, Houston's educational and economic experiences were not so dissimilar to individuals in rurality. Hidden among those affected was a group of recent immigrants – refugees to be exact, fresh from Southeast Asia (Sullivan, 1992).

The Path to Mong-Americans in Rurality

Since their arrival, Mong have remained marginalized within the aggregation of the pan-ethnic Asian classification. Their invisibility hides them within the model minority myth and a false narrative of success within the Asian demographics. The model minority myth proclaims that all Asians, regardless of their individual sub-ethnic group, are able to obtain relative success in America. William Peterson first coined the term “model minority” in 1966 in an article in the *New York Times Magazine* to define minorities who have a high degree of success in the United States (US) (Caliendo & McIlwain, 2011). With disaggregated data, research has suggested that

the success of model minorities is driven by various factors such as immigration characteristics related to parental education, English language mastery, and home country support.

Unfortunately, the absence of reliable, disaggregated data remains the largest challenge to understanding that Asians are not a homogeneous racial group.

On September 27, 2016, then Governor Edmund G. (Jerry) Brown Jr. signed AB-1726 in law. The law required California's Department of Public Health to disaggregate demographic data on Asian and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) (Fuch, 2016). AB-1726 was the California legislative branch's second attempt at disaggregating the data. Brown had previously vetoed the unanimously passed AB-176, the previous October (Shyong, 2015). The passage of AB-1726 signified a significant win for advocates as they fought to improve data representation within the non-monolithic AAPI category, and to ultimately improve policy creation. Among those celebrating the multi-decade long fight for AAPI disaggregation were the Mong. California had previously segregated the Asian category into only eleven ethnic groups (Fuch, 2016). The Mong ethnicity was not among them. The following summer, the California Department of Education (CDE) declined to apply for the federal grant to assist in the disaggregation of Asian and Pacific Islander data within education (Ybarra, 2016). The story of how Mong began their arduous journey to become Americans starts 41 years earlier.

On May 14, 1975, two years after the US pulled out of French Indochina, General Vang Pao (Vang Pao) was evacuated by airlift from a remote airfield in Laos and taken to Thailand (Hamilton-Merritt, 1999, p. 342; Morrison, 2008, Chapter 8). By the time of Vang Pao's evacuation, Long Cheng² was in chaos ever since the arrival of the first American evacuation planes two days earlier (Morrison, 2008, Chapter 11). Vang Pao's exodus effectively ended

² Also known as Long Tieng and Long Chieng and is also known military as Lima Site 98 or Lima Site 20A

what was left of the final major resistance of pro-American Mong forces in what was the former Kingdom of Laos. Vang Pao along with five other rightists would be tried in absentia, convicted, and sentence to death in Vientiane on September 5th (K. Yang, 2015, p. 131). The soldiers and families of the pro-American Mong forces left behind in Laos would be responsible for finding their own way to Thailand (Hamilton-Merritt, 1999, p. 355). Once safely in Thailand, Mong were contained in refugee camps until the world decided what to do with them. My family was among the first wave (1975-1977) of Mong refugees to enter Thailand, where they resided in Souptong (Mae Charim) Refugee Camp in Nan Province, Thailand.

Mong served as proxy American combatants for the Central Intelligence Agency's secret military efforts against the communist intrusion in Laos (Kurlantzick, 2017, Chapter 4). Many of Mong's contributions to the American war effort were clouded in secrecy. After the fall of Dien Bien Phu on April 24, 1954, the major powers met in Geneva for a cease-fire in French Indochina (Anthony & Sexton, 1993). A series of complex events and failed agreements between opposing political interests eventually made Laos and Mong direct participants in the Vietnam War. In defiance of the 1954 Geneva Accords, the Pathet Laos did not withdraw from Laos (Langer & Zasloff, 1969). In December of 1959, the CIA recruits Vang Pao, the only Mong military officer in the Royal Lao Army, to help raise an irregular fighting force capable of fighting the communists in Lao's Military Region 2 (Kurlantzick, 2017, Chapter 1; Leary, 1995). Secretly, both sides were establishing a war effort that the Mong would soon find themselves at the center of.

To affirm Lao's neutrality, an International Agreement on the Neutrality of Laos was signed by 14 countries, including the US, North Vietnam, South Vietnam, and Laos (Czyzak & Salans, 1963). In Xiang Khoang, Long Cheng became the secret airbase for the CIA's air

operations and clandestine efforts in Laos during the Vietnam War. The neutrality of Laos did not prevent the US from dropping 2.1 million tons³ of ordnance onto Laos (Khamvongsa & Russell, 2009). In the end, a generation of Mong's best and brightest would be dedicated to fighting and dying in a losing American war effort. Individuals like Ly Lue, who at the time was among the handful of Laos' Mong teachers, left teaching to become an infantryman and then join the first group of T-28 Mong pilots (Hamilton-Merritt, 1999, p. 142). He would later be killed in the war. At the time of Vang Pao's airlift, over 30,000⁴ Mong, both military and civilian, had died in the pro-American war effort (Lindsay, 2002). Before the war, there was an estimated 300,000 Mong in all of Laos (Hmong Cultural and Resource Center, 2005). By 1977, the People's Republic of Laos would launch a large-scale final assault to crush any remaining Mong resistance with 30,000 North Vietnam Army troops. Meanwhile, during his first 8-year term, California Governor Jerry Brown publicly announced that California should not accept pro-American Southeast Asian refugees (Elliott, 2007; L. C. Thompson, 2010, p. 62). Travis Air Force Base would not be used to receive refugees from 5,000 miles away.

From 1975 to 1991, the Mong American experience was lived through the preoccupation of refugee problems and cultural shock (K. Yang, 2015, p. 69). As with most Mong families, under the Refugee Act of 1980, my family and I migrated to the United States through California as refugees. We were among the refugees who would use military bases in California (Travis Air Force Base or Hamilton Air Force Base) as the starting point of their American experience. Despite Jerry Brown's initial refusal, Travis Air Force Base went on to process 68,300 refugees from Asia (I. Thompson, 2014). By the time of our arrival, my family had spent three and a half

³ Comparatively, according to Theater History of Operations Reports, 394 thousand tons of ordnance were drop on Germany during WWII

⁴ The true count of the total Mong lives lost during the Secret War is unknown – estimates range from 30K – 100K

years in Soptuang Refugee Camp. We were eventually reunited with my father's Yang clan in the rural farm town of Linda in Yuba County in 1986. Among the forces driving the decision to settle in Linda was its collapsed real estate prices. This collapse was primarily caused by the devastating flood, which occurred in January of 1986 (Tobin & Montz, 1988). In Linda, my family and I, due to lax child labor law enforcement, worked annually in the peach and plum fields of Yuba and Sutter counties. Our Mong families would also be among those affected by the Lindhurst High School shooting and hostage situation. Luckily for my own family, my sister was in PE and was able to escape without incident. Overall, the local perception of the Mong in the community was positive and supportive, but there were always pockets of resentment and hate.

Some of my early experiences of life in rural Northern California consisted of hatred and misguided racism. It is worth noting, however, that most of the racism I experienced was confined to pockets of individuals with little or no institutional power. In the mid-'90s, the Office of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (OUNHC) and Thailand began the process of closing Thailand's refugee camps and repatriating Mong refugees. In the midst of the debate of relocating the last wave of Mong refugees to America, the leaders of Yuba County weighed in. In 1996, Yuba County Supervisor Al Amaro publicly declared Mong refugees unwelcome for resettlement in Yuba County (Kruger, 1996). By 2008, Thailand had forcibly returned the last of Thailand's Mong refugees back to Laos against international objections (Human Rights Watch, 2008; Mygans, 2009; UNHCR, 2008). Amaro was my county supervisor and his public opposition to the reunification of Mong families in Yuba County cemented my commitment to leave the area. Lindhurst High School would also contribute to my own missteps in human capital formation. Lindhurst failed to submit my GPA verification form, which made

me ineligible for the Cal Grant. The Cal Grant is the largest source of state-funded financial aid for California students for post-secondary education (Bettinger et al., 2019). Bettinger et al. showed that students without the Cal Grant were significantly less likely to achieve their bachelor's degree. By the end of the decade, I was firmly committed to Yuba County only returning as a visitor.

On November 25, 2006, my views about my community, which had been established during my formative years, had changed. During my visit home for Thanksgiving, I was asked to join an ad-hoc recovery team for a murdered Mong teenager's body. The ad-hoc team was comprised of ethnic Mong individuals who were the murdered teen's family, friends, friends of friends, and neighbors. A few days earlier in Sutter County, the teen's body had fallen in the bypass waterway during a drive-by shooting that claimed multiple lives (Sutter County Sheriff, 2006). Today, these murders remain unsolved. Shortly after the murders, Sutter County Sheriff sent in underwater search and rescue divers in the fast-moving water in an attempt to recover the body. Two days before the arrival of the Mong ad-hoc recovery team, the Sutter County Sheriff declared the recovery of the body futile and dangerous. The sole support for the ad-hoc team was a lone sheriff deputy to observe and provide security for the team. The ad-hoc team would send in their own untrained and ill-equipped swimmers into the fast moving waters. Before the afternoon was over, the ad-hoc team had recovered the body roughly 25 feet from where the body had originally fallen. The body would be recovered snagged up by a fishing line cast by the victim's brother. As the body floated across the water and was pulled ashore, chaos and anger were misdirected toward the lone sheriff deputy.

By the following summer, I would complete the decision to give up my childhood dream of being an automotive engineer, leave the automotive industry, and return home. Being an

automotive engineer was a dream that I had tirelessly fought for since I was 12; I was among the few Mong males who had successfully completed an engineering education. Even today, limited research suggest that four out of five Mong males who matriculate into the engineering education pipeline do not finish their education (C. Yang, 2017). Returning home shifted my understanding of misfits, community, and the small contributions required to vitalize under-resourced communities, such as those in rurality. The vitality of rural, semi-rural, small, and isolated communities is dependent upon the return of its community members. Within low resource localities, the best and brightest individuals must carve their own economic niches in order to survive. Rural-raised individuals are more likely to start a rural business and contribute to rural economic success (Artz et al., 2018). The return of these rural-raised individuals is an important contribution to the vitality of existing under-resourced demographics. While gentrification may generally improve a region's outcome, it does not improve the existing demographics – instead, it displaces them (Dai et al., 2017). There is limited research on the effects of gentrification and minorities in general. However, among black residents, gentrification has a worse effect as compared to white residents (Gibbons & Barton, 2016). This suggests that possibly poor Mong who stays in semi-rurality may face gentrification through urbanization may experience worse effects than their poor white counterparts.

If rurality is a shared experience of social constructs and cultural values, then the encompassing areas of Jefferson and the Mong American experience share a common theme of cultural hierarchy, invisibility, marginalization, and a search for a mythical identity. Within these themes of invisibility and marginalization is the story about how individual community members find their own place and utility as misfits in their larger societies. For some of these misfits, secession through the State of Jefferson is the answer. For others like myself, the answer

was joining rurality's human capital flight by leaving and never returning. I share my own experience of rural flight and return to rurality because it helps demonstrate the uniqueness of the rural/semi-rural experiences of Mong in Northern California. Mong's rural/semi-rural California experience is unique as they remain marginalized and lost in policy, research, the model minority myth, and their own minute differences towards access to human capital accumulation in their communities as perpetual minorities.

The Problem and Background

This research considers the formation of human capital and the human capital return of an ethnic group (Mong) and their invisibility in a larger pan-ethnic classification (Asian) within a mostly invisible and ignored geopolitical region (Northern California, i.e., Jefferson) through the lens of education attainment. Mong who live in rurality faces the socioeconomic challenges of finding economic relevance in the 21st-century global economy. The vitality of these small and remote communities is dependent upon the return of its most successful individuals, who can contribute towards the uplift of their communities. There is limited research on the development of human capital within invisible populations of more successful pan-ethnic classifications that inhabit invisible geopolitical regions. Mong differ from the larger Asian population because the majority of Mong-American immigrants were preliterate refugees, rather than economic migrants. Their experiences also differ. Much of the experiences of Mong Americans have been defined by their search for relevance as both Asians and Americans.

Definition of Northern California. There is not a formal definition for the regions defined as Northern California. Various definitions of Northern California exist based on various characteristics, such as politics, geography, or economics. For example, in a two-region geographic division – which uses a latitude marker, all 48 counties north of the 37-degree

latitude are considered Northern California. In the failed 2013 Six California proposal partitions, divided around economic interests, Northern California's definition consisted of 12 counties (Marinucci & Wildermuth, 2014). The proposed Six California regions separated the 14 farthest northern California counties into Jefferson. This research defines the boundaries of Northern California (i.e., Jefferson) within the contexts of political, educational, census, and social services regions as defined by movements or institutions. Northern California is defined as the upper 20 counties of California within the Jefferson movement. The defined Jefferson counties in this research have an estimated population of 1,779,039, of which approximately 76,104 or 4.2% are Asians. The 7,605 Mong would represent less than .5% of the total population and 10% of the total Asian population.

The boundaries of the Jefferson movement define within a political context. For geopolitical context, 18 Jefferson counties voted for Donald Trump in 2016 (Shulman, 2017) and 15 counties in 2020 (Lloyd, 2020). Two of the three congressional representatives are Democrats. At the state level, Jefferson's region is split in half in the Assembly (2 of 4) and in the Senate (1 of 2). It should be noted that in all cases of Democratic representation, no federal or state representative resides in Jefferson. The last California governor elected from Jefferson was James Gillett, a Republican who served from 1907 to 1911. The educational context uses the collection of regions defined by the now-defunct California Postsecondary Education Commission (CPEC). The CPEC divides the upper 24 counties into four regions: Upper-Sacramento Valley, Superior California, North Coast, and Sacramento-Tahoe. Comparing the Jefferson and CPEC regional divisions, CPEC's regions include Sacramento and Yolo's counties but exclude Calaveras. Within the census context, the California Census Office regional divisions for the Superior and North Coast regions are similar to the CPEC region (CA Census

2020, 2019). Comparatively to Jefferson, the 2020 Census Regions map includes the counties of Napa, Sacramento, Sonoma, and Yolo but excludes Alpine, Amador, and Calaveras. Within the social services context, the California Department of Social Services/Data Analysis and Publications Branch (CDSS/DAPB) breaks California into six regions of similar social service needs (CDSS, 2002). The two regions of the North and the Mountain and Central Valley regions share similar geographic boundaries with Jefferson. Comparatively to Jefferson's divisions, the CDSS/DAPB also includes Calaveras, Sacramento, and Yolo counties.

All four regional divisions consistently include the same upper 20 counties of Jefferson and Sacramento County. The three counties of Alpine, Amador, and Yolo are included in three of the four contexts. Other socioeconomic, political, and geographical factors were considered in determining the physical boundaries of this study. For example, using the Sacramento Valley region definition would exclude Mong students of Butte, Humboldt, and Eureka counties. Those counties would also be excluded if the California Farm Belt was used. Other counties with large communities of Mong enclaves, such as Merced and Fresno, were also considered. These counties were excluded due to their access to publicly funded doctoral degree-granting institutions. Merced County hosts UC Merced. Fresno is also a major urban population center, as it is the fifth-largest city in California.

Rurality and education. Rurality is defined as the characteristics of rural localities that are defined by either space or culture. Although normally defined by population and geographic lines, rurality is a construct along with cultural identity and experiences (Bright, 2018). It is known that, in general, rural students face different challenges pertaining to both economic and educational success than their urban counterparts. In general, the United States lacks a coherent vision for rural education policy (Schafft, 2016). The lack of a coherent policy negates

differences between different communities' strengths and weaknesses (rural vs. urban) for education attainment in education policy. Compared to their urban counterparts, rural students have higher social capital but lower economic capital and reduce access to an improved education system (Byun et al., 2015). The uniform national education policy does not acknowledge the differences of economic challenges in which rural students can apply their education. Rural students are less likely to have access to economic opportunities (Tieken, 2016). These challenges of economic and education attainment have similar results within URM's (M. J. Irvin et al., 2016).

Rural students are increasingly attending higher education institutions, and those students often choose to select colleges that are closer to home (Byun et al., 2017). Access to higher education through availability and proximity is an important factor for Jefferson since there are no publicly funded physically anchored higher education institutions that grant any form of doctoral degrees. Neither of the 4-year public institutions, California State University, Chico, which is located in Butte County, and California State University, Humboldt, which is located in Humboldt County, offers no form of a doctoral degree. Additionally, the four private accredited four-year institutions with physical presences in the three counties of Shasta (National University and Simpson University), Placer (Williams Jessup University), and Sutter (Brandman University⁵) do not offer research doctoral degrees. In terms of professional degrees within accredited institutions, Jefferson has no professional doctoral program granting degrees in medicine, dental, pharmacy, business, or psychology. There is a single private law school (California Northern School of Law). None of the available higher education institutions within Jefferson is considered a highly selective or R1 institution. Comparatively, the state with the

⁵ Brandman University offers an online-based Doctorate in Education.

smallest population, Wyoming (583,200⁶), has one doctoral-granting R1 rated research institution (University of Wyoming) while Jefferson has none.

Rural students are less likely to attend highly selective institutions (Byun et al., 2015). In a policy context, the top-performing (12.5%) students of Jefferson remain outside, in terms of proximity, of the California Master Plan because Jefferson do not host a University of California⁷. The University of California holds the mandate for research doctoral degrees, including doctoral degrees in medicine, dental, and law. Jefferson counties are also outside of the state's two California State University Polytechnic universities' educational proximity as well – as those two universities are located in southern California. The absence of these universities creates both a cultural and educational divide for access and opportunity including the ability to influence education research. Jefferson's rural students must decide whether to leave their homes and families, or attend the two available California State University⁸ schools to pursue their bachelor's or master's degrees. Rural students also have to limited access to the CSUs due to the small number of CSU campuses inside the vastness of Jefferson and their preference to stay close to home. Chico State's service area comprises of 11 Northern California counties (*CSU Local Admissions and Service Areas*, n.d.). As a result, rural students are more likely to attend a community college first because of its proximity to family (Byun et al., 2017).

Mong-Americans in Northern California. Since Mong's arrival to the United States, their success, or lack thereof, in education has been concealed by the model minority myth. The Mong's academic achievements and educational experience have been mostly on the margins

⁶ US Census, American Community Survey 2017 5-year estimates.

⁷ The closest UC is UC Davis which is categorized as "more selective" which is located in Yolo County.

⁸ California State University, Chico and Humboldt's service areas encompass the inland counties of Jefferson. California State University, Sacramento and Sonoma's service area covers adjacent counties such as Sutter, Placer, and Lake Counties.

(Ngo, 2006). Challenges on understanding the needs of the Mong community include the relative smallness of the Mong population and their contribution to the overall Asian category. Comparatively, within the Asians category, the population of Mong Americans in California is dwarfed by other Asian ethnicities (Y. S. Xiong, 2016, p. 184). Census data suggests that the Mong population may concentrate within specific community enclaves – especially in Northern California. Table 1 shows the percentage of Mong to Asians within communities in Northern California. In some cases, such as in Linda CDP, Thermalito CDP, and the City of Oroville, the Mong population makes up the plurality of the Asian population.

Table 1
Mong as a Percentage of Asian in Northern California

	Total Population (Asian)	Total Population (Mong)	%
California	5,261,978	91,705	1.7
Butte	9,591	4,318	45.0
Chico (City)	3,395	906	26.7
Oroville (City)	1,312	1,006	76.7
South Oroville CDP	1,178	797	67.7
Thermalito CDP	1,623	1,257	77.4
Humboldt	3,563	1,147	32.2
Eureka CCD	2,404	1,140	47.4
Yuba	5,277	2,140	40.5
Linda CDP	1,930	1,493	77.4
Olivehurst CDP	1,061	596	56.2

Source. 2015 American Community Survey

The high concentration of Mong families suggests that broad educational policies, which fit only the needs of the larger Asian community, may disproportionately exclude the specialized

needs of certain communities. Specialized needs are further supported by data, which indicates that Mong families have a higher percentage of their population living in poverty (27.0%) than any of the other Asian ethnic groups (NCAPACD, 2013). Using multiple measurements of income, data shows that Californian Mong fare worse economically than Californian Hispanics and African-Americans (AACAJ, 2013; The Campaign for College Opportunity, 2015). In Northern California, the high concentration of Mong families within specific enclaves suggests that only a small number of schools are responsible for forming Northern California Mong students' human capital. The majority of Mong families live in poverty and rarely have access to better-performing schools (Joo et al., 2016). Very little research exists on these schools' comparative performance within the Northern California counties, as defined in this research.

There is conflicting and incomplete information within existing research that is specifically related to the lack of disaggregation of data for public discourse and policy formation. Second-generation Mong students within the enclave of south Oroville were not affected by the educational characteristics of rurality and were educationally successful (Paiva, 2016). Yet, of the Mong students who attended California State University, Chico, only 7% graduated in four years (Lum, 2014). Invisibility and marginalization of Mong students in education are often localized due to poor institutional data classification standards. Prior studies of Mong students' performance in K12 education in California showed that Mong students often performed worse than their peers – including Black and Hispanic students (S. Lee, 2014). However, these studies often exclude specific counties or school districts in which large populations of Mong students exist due to poor institutional data disaggregation. For example, in Lee's study, Marysville Joint Unified School District (MJUSD) located in Yuba County was excluded. Although, Lee's results may not have change with MJUSD's inclusion, it highlights

how various concentrated Mong student populations may become lost within the data. The lack of disaggregated data present challenges when using archival institutional data without the use of data pooling from multiple sources (Yoshikawa et al., 2016).

The lack of disaggregated datasets also presents challenges in refuting or supporting the economic and educational characteristics of rurality for Mong in Northern California. Available statistics on Mong in those counties are unreliable. The US Census' 2015 American Community Survey (ACS 2015) data only included data for three (Butte, Humboldt, and Yuba) of the seven counties where Mong families were living according to the 2010 US Census. Even within the available data, the margins of error provide no logical bounds for a reasonable conclusion. Yuba County's Mong median family income of \$48,309 has a margin of error of +/- \$27,263. The margin of error categorizes Mong families in Yuba County among either the poorest or richest families in Northern California. Due to the low quality of accessible statistics and datasets, it is unclear whether the wealth achievement gap exists for Mong families in rural and semi-rurality. The median family income is contradictory because it suggests Mong families are among the most financially successful ethnic groups in Yuba County. Yet, Mong are concentrated within the poorest locations of Yuba County – Linda and Olivehurst.

Human capital formation. The concepts of human capital are rooted in Adam Smith and his work of *The Wealth of Nations*. Smith's definition of human capital includes the development of the useful abilities of all members of society (Adam & Stewart, 1963). There are differing measurements of an individual's useful abilities. Human capital can be measured in terms of earned income (Becker, 1993a). According to its definition, human capital is an individual's economic worth given his or her skills. There is a strong relationship between education and strong cognitive abilities and one's economic worth (Becker, 1993b;

Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2007). However, the value of human capital is dependent upon wider social factors (Burton-Jones & Spender, 2011). This research recognizes that human capital extends beyond the neo-classical view of human capital and its relationship with labor. Human capital can be viewed as multi-dimensional to include knowledge, skills, and health (Keeley, 2007). For rurality, social capital remains the strongest predictor of educational attainment. Rural education remains peripheral to educational policies (Schafft, 2016). Existing research suggests that there is a positive relationship between how social capital contributes to the formation of human capital (Petrin et al., 2014). This research will focus on the formation of human capital through the education system – the completion of high school, career aspirations, matriculation to higher education institutions, and post-secondary education attainment.

It has long been known that higher education success contributes to higher human capital independent of race and location (Becker, 1993b). In general, family socioeconomic status remains the strongest influencer for academic success. However, family and community social capital plays a major role in academic success in rurality (Israel et al., 2009). It has long been known that social capital creates human capital (Coleman, 1988). However, family social capital plays a stronger role than school social capital in academic achievement (Dufur et al., 2013). For high school dropouts, the social capital between parent-child and parent-school interactions is related to the generation of human capital (Teachman et al., 1997). Other indicators for human capital formation were considered, however, education attainment and college enrollment were used in this research for three reasons. First, prior to their immigration to the US, Mong-Americans were primarily preliterate. Second, the attainment of education and English language skills are the most impactful influencers of success for individuals from preliterate communities. Pertaining to Asians and economic success, post-secondary academic attainment plays a key role

in poverty (Takei & Sakamoto, 2011). Third, previous research has suggested that successful Mong students often have well-educated fathers (J. K. Lee & Green, 2009).

Research Question

This research is broken into two relative and distinct parts. The first examines the human capital formation (i.e. K12 education and post-educational enrollment and completion) of Mong students compared to literature. The second section aims to understand why adults from those localities choose to return home after completing their college education. Each section has its own specific research question and methodology that will contribute to answering its respective research questions. Both parts of the research will be used to answer the following two questions.

1. What are the comparative differences in human capital formation for Mong students in these rural localities in Northern California compared to other rural ethnic groups?
2. What are the factors that contribute to educationally successful Mong adults deciding to stay or return to their rural localities?

Significance

This research has two significance, one on the research population (Mong) and another on emerging immigrant groups. Given the relatively young age, the low socioeconomic standing, and the low rate of education attainment status of the Mong population it is imperative to understand which policies will improve the human capital formation of all Mong students. Existing policies for Mong, much like education policy in the US, are primarily focused on the urban centers. The results of this research will help contribute toward informing policy by targeting the needs of the Mong community within small, marginalized, and under-resourced communities.

Rurality mostly composes of relatively homogenous ethnic groups. As America's ethnic demographics change in the 21st century new immigrant groups are arriving and settling into rural America. The results also help inform rural policy in creating and sustaining rootedness to these immigrant groups to encourage their migration back home. By returning home, these rural-raised can make positive impactful contributions to the vitality of those communities.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Due to the structure of this research, in which chapters three and four are standalone articles, two theoretical frameworks were used. The first article's framework is a multi-methodology approach that is based on human capital theory through education attainment alongside Glaser grounded theory (GT) (B. G. Glaser & Strauss, 2009) within computational grounded theory (CGT) (Nelson, 2017). Although a methodological framework is not normally employed in Glaser GT, this research uses a multi-methodological approach model. As the researcher is a novice researcher, Perna and Thomas' conceptual model for reducing the college success gap and promoting success for all is used to help initially construct and guide the open-ended unstructured interview questions (Perna & Thomas, 2006). The second article employs grounded theory, specifically computational grounded theory (CGT), to understand the factors of human capital return. Figure 1 shows the relationship between CGT and Glaser GT within the theoretical framework and methodology. The selection of these theories is based upon the uniqueness of the Mong experience in rurality. In both contexts, a novel method of data analysis was employed.

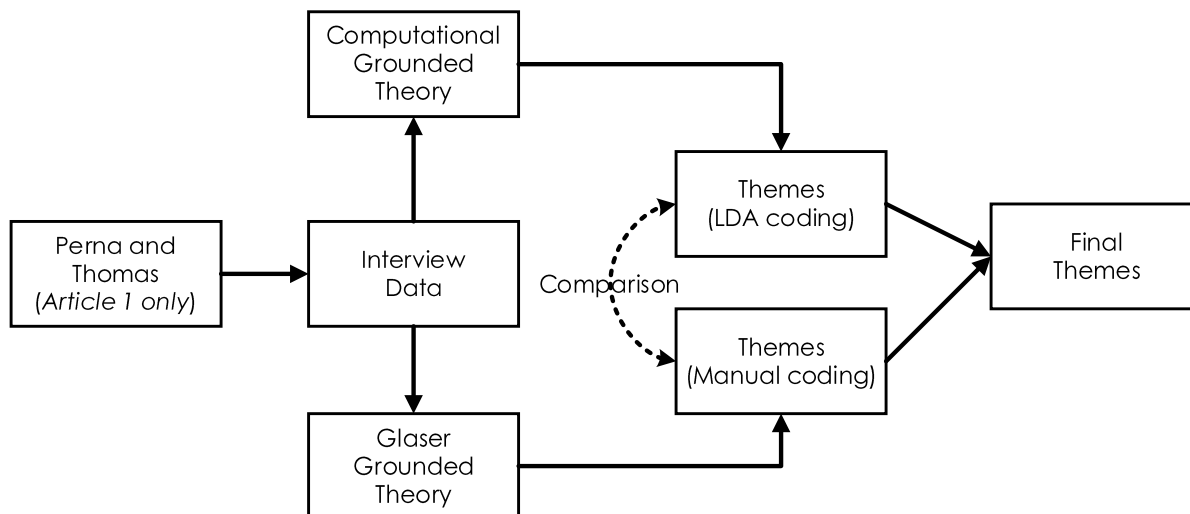


Figure 1. Theoretical framework and methodology.

Perna and Thomas' (Perna & Thomas, 2006) conceptual model proposes that the existing system of using socioeconomic, racial/ethnic, and gender gaps insufficiently explains the sources of the educational attainment gaps within specific groups, such as minorities. The framework uses four specific content layers: internal, family, school, and social/economic/policy--all of which affect student academic success and school choice. Within each layer, the educational, psychological, sociological, and economic indicators that drive categorical success are examined. Due to the framework's breadth of coverage, this research focuses on small pieces of the whole framework. Other pieces of the framework will be covered in the literature review section. The specific context layer and indicator will be indicated with the layer followed by a hyphen and the specific indicator.

Grounded theory was chosen for the second article, because it is the belief of the researcher that the rural Mong experience is unique, and therefore, a single theoretical framework would not sufficiently or fully explain their migration choices. Because of the scope and split nature of the research, computational grounded theory is used to understand the themes

that influence the decision of educated individuals from rural/semi-rural localities to either return or not return home. CGT is a process that uses Machine Learning (ML) with Natural Language Processing (NLP) to classify the themes in grounded theory studies. Nelson's three-step methodological framework for computational grounded theory is used (Nelson, 2017). The first step is unsupervised learning. The second step is pattern refinement through guided, deep reading. The last step is pattern confirmation using NLP. This research specifically uses The Natural Language Toolkit (NLTK) library for Python to NLP analysis (Bird et al., 2009).

Limitations

There are three limitations to this research. The first is the usage of a convenient and snowball sampling to identify potential participants may favor individuals who share a similar experience due to their social network. Although this is an effective way to recruit participants, it can result in a group of participants who are quite similar due to community bias. Individuals may refer others, who may have social connections through similar themes. This can result in a homogeneous group of participants. Such homogeneity can provide opportunities to draw comparisons across cases, which can be useful in constructing grounded theory. Second, the research relies on the personal memories of the participants' lived experience within recalled periods of 20-30 years, which may be possibly be distorted due to bias, anger, anxiety, politics, and simple lack of awareness (Patton, 2015, p. 580). And lastly, errors relating to the researcher's ability to supplement, compliment, and identify machine-based topical coding limitations may exist. To minimize the errors relating to a novice researcher in grounded theory, the framework provided by M. Alammari was employed (M. Alammari et al., 2019). The rich set of data reflecting each theme was provided to allow other interpretations of the data.

Definition of Terms

This section provides definitions for key terms used in this research which may not be in common use or may have multiple meanings. The definition improves accuracy for the meaning and usage of this research as it applies to the shared cultural experience of Mong, human capital, and rurality.

Caring agents or caring organizations: Individuals or organizations that provides services or assistance within educational needs of an individuals.

Culture values: The characteristics describing the shared traits, attitudes or behaviors of a group or organization.

Computational grounded theory: The usage of both human knowledge expertise and computer-based methodologies and approaches to categorize qualitative data into themes within the framework of grounded theory (Nelson, 2017).

Education attainment: The attainment of either a post-secondary school education, either through a college or technical education (Perna & Thomas, 2006).

Family ties: The relationship based upon personal ties through close bonds, connections, or relations to a family member defined by marriage, blood, or adoption.

Family obligations: A person's collection of expected norms, values, or behaviors to provide assistance or support to a family member.

Human capital: The classical definition as defined by Adam Smith – the human benefit within their society (Adam & Stewart, 1963).

Human capital formation: The development of the human talent within a society to maximize the human talent.

Human capital flight: The outmigration of human capital from one locality to another, which drains the human capital from the economy of the original location (more commonly known as the brain drain).

Machine learning: The process which computational methodologies and algorithms are used to learn about a specific topic

Model minority: The phenomenon in which Asian-Americans as an aggregate have a higher degree of socioeconomic and education success better than their ethnic minority counterparts.

Model minority myth: The phenomenon in which not all Asian-Americans ethnic groups do not perform on par with other successful Asian-Americans groups due to factors such as immigration circumstances, parental education, language, etc.

Mong: More commonly, known as Hmong. A mountainous ethnic group from Southeast Asia in diaspora in the United States due to their participation in the Secret War in the Vietnam War (Hamilton-Merritt, 1999). The term Mong is used to reflect the Moob Leeg dialect of the researcher.

Natural language processing: A technique in machine learning in which natural spoken words and sentences are used to construct themes or context.

Out-migration: The movement of residents from out locality to another.

Return-migration: The movement of residents back to their original locality.

Refugees: Refuge seeking individuals who flees another country due to war, political oppression, religious persecution, or natural disaster.

Rootedness: The state in which an individual is firmly established, settled, or entrenched within a particular place.

Rural: Physical localities which have the characteristics defined by rurality including those localities which are in transition between rural and urban

Rurality: The characteristics of rural of either isolated and remote spaces or cultural values.

Safety net: Programs, individuals, or things which provides security against misfortune or difficulty.

Semi-rural: Physical localities which have both the characteristics defined by rurality and urbanity in transition between rural and urban.

Social capital: The interpersonal goodwill gain through a shared sense of identity or value through the usage of networks or relationships (Coleman, 1988).

Success: Narrowly defined as economic attainment within the context of education, specifically enrollment to higher education, completion of education, and high income within the context of human capital theory (Perna & Thomas, 2006).

Urbanormativity: The characteristics of urban that are accepted as the normal and positive culture.

Vitality: The ability or capacity to economically grow or develop.

White supremacy: The concept of holding white racial characteristics to a higher value or esteem.

Chapter Summary

Much of the identity of rurality and Mong is the search for relevancy away from marginalization within larger group classifiers or populations. This study examines the formation of human capital and the return migration with a shared cultural identity of invisibility between rurality and the model minority myth. The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experience of an ethnic group within a mostly ignored geopolitical locality. This research contains two research articles which examines the experiences of Mong adults as students within

the rural/semi-rural counties of the proposed State of Jefferson in Northern California. The first article examines the human capital formation, in primary and secondary education, of Mong adults' experiences as students. The second article looks at the factors that drives human capital return migration of those same educationally successful Mong adults to stay or return home. This study will help identify investments and policies that are needed to improve the vitality of these small Mong and other small communities in rural/semi-rurality.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

“We did live in dire poverty, one of the things I did hate was poverty. Some people hate spiders, some people hate snakes, I hated poverty.”

- Ben Carson, M.D., Secretary of Housing and Urban Development (2017-2021)

Foreword

The number one reason that drove me to leave rurality was the lack of economic opportunities and the sheer amount of poverty surrounding me. In June of 1997, the month in which I graduated, the unemployment rate for Yuba County was 13.4% (BLS, 1997). Much like Carson, I hated poverty. However, my family had tricks for making poverty work. We were never hungry, but we never had luxuries. None of my siblings can remember celebrating their own birthdays because we only celebrated it once – when they were one. My eldest sister would bake the cake as best as possible and there would be no presents. One cake, one birthday. These early memories of the town of Linda and the Yuba-Sutter area were filled with anger because I focused on what we didn't have and who didn't want us there. We survived in part because we had unrecognized caring agents who saw us as part of the community and not as outsiders. Although we were not Christian, we would get used clothing, toys, and furniture donations from a local church, Emmanuel Faith Tabernacle. The same congregation would annually sponsor providing Christmas gifts for us as we couldn't afford any gifts. Tabernacle also co-sponsored my father's uncle and his family during the same period Supervisor Amaro declared Mong should not resettle in Yuba County.

My hatred of poverty drove most of my decisions and my academic performance in high school. I made plans to graduate as soon as possible and head off to college to escape rurality.

In my eagerness to escape, I would find myself working part-time, taking a seventh period, doing sports, and taking college courses at night during my high school sophomore and junior years. Those activities would take me from an exceptional student to an average one. The previous generation of Mong youths spent most of their formative years fighting a proxy war before rebuilding in a new world where they were unprepared for. As a result, my generation was tasked with blindly navigating and becoming successful in the new world without many of the indicators for success checked. One thing I knew for sure was, I would not earn my living in the agricultural fields of the Yuba and Sutter counties. I would choose Chico State over more prestigious schools because of its proximity to family. I would be poor and struggling in a new place; I didn't care because I escaped. I hated poverty but, also, I hated Linda and Yuba County.

Introduction

This literature review attempts to tie multiple concepts into the single problem of human capital formation and human capital stay or return migration to contribute to the vitality and sustainability of rural Mong communities within the counties of the State of Jefferson. The concept of rurality is the shared experience of cultural values that are bound by cultural hierarchy by their urban counterparts (Bright, 2018; Fulkerson & Thomas, 2019). Mong in rurality face the same challenges as other ethnic groups in rurality seeking relevance in the 21st-century economy. However, rural Mong are special in that their immigration experiences differ vastly from other ethnic, rural minorities. Rural Mong are also special in that they remain lost in invisibility and marginalization in the model minority myth throughout their search for relevance in educational research and policy.

This dissertation follows an article-based dissertation format that differs from the format of a traditional, five-chapter dissertation. Chapters three and four are standalone articles with

research pertaining to the two topics written in a manner to be submitted to peer-reviewed journals. Each chapter also contains its own literature review, methodology, and synthesis. The first article investigates the human capital formation through the educational experiences of Mong rural stayer or returners. The second looks at the stay or return migration of those successful Mong adults back to their rural/semi-rural hometowns. Chapter five synthesizes the results from chapters three and four. Due to this research structure, the literature review is broken into three major parts: challenging the rural and urban cultural hierarchy, Perna and Thomas' conceptual framework, and computational grounded theory (CGT). The three topics are discussed in the context of rurality, Mong, or both. In a traditional dissertation, chapter 3 is intended for the research methodology. Because this research lacks the methodology chapter, this chapter includes background literature on the computational grounded theory to provide a conceptual understanding of the topics. The methodology will be covered in each of the respective research articles. Table 2 shows the structure of chapters 3 and 4 and their theoretical framework, research methodology, and the type of data used.

Table 2

Breakout of Article Research Framework and Methodology

Chapter	Theoretical Framework	Research Method	Data
Chapter 3 <i>Article 1</i>	Perna and Thomas' Success for All Glaser Grounded Theory	Computational Grounded Theory	Interviews
Chapter 4 <i>Article 2</i>	Glaser Grounded Theory	Computational Grounded Theory	Interviews

Figure 2 shows the focus of each of the articles within the context of the creation of rural/semi-rural vitality through the usage of human capital formation and stay or return migration.

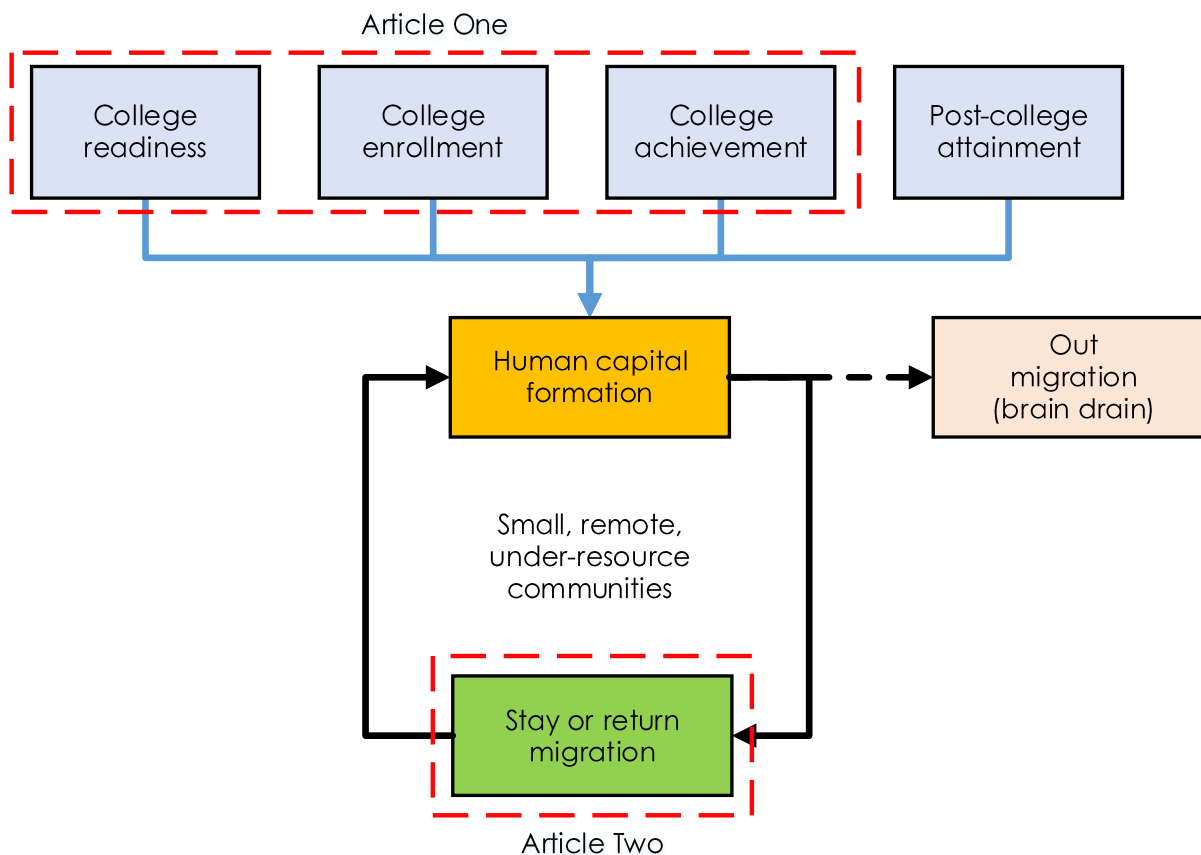


Figure 2. Rural vitality through stay or return migration.

An IRB approval was obtained prior to conducting the research. Participants were recruited through the usage of a convenient snow-ball sampling using social media (refer to Appendix A). Participants who responded to the posts were asked to recommend individuals. 20 participants were recruited and one withdrew due to scheduling conflicts. Prior to the interview, participants received and completed an electronic copy of the informed consent

document (refer to Appendix B). Participants were given a digital \$20 Amazon gift card prior to the interview regardless of whether they completed the interview. Interviews were conducted remotely using Zoom in accordance to University of Pacific's COVID-19 procedures. A demographic survey was conducted orally (refer to Appendix C) prior to the interview. As the interviews were unstructured and open-ended, Appendix D provides a series of examples of the questions asked.

The Rural-Urban Cultural Hierarchy and Education

Rural places are often oversimplified as physical spaces occupied by few people within large swaths of space (Fulkerson & Thomas, 2014b). This research looks at rurality through two lenses – cultural and physical spaces. Rurality is also a sense of shared values and shared cultural traits (Ching & Creed, 1996; Fulkerson & Thomas, 2014a). Those who live in rurality live in marginalization through urbanormativity. Urbanormativity describes the normative privileges that urbanity exerts on rurality through rurality's deviances and under-desirability (Fulkerson & Thomas, 2019). These privileges can take different forms, such as structural, economic, sociological, cultural, and political forces. In recent decades, rural America has experienced a "hollowing out" of its human capital and economic resources (Carr & Kefalas, 2009). Rurality's "hollowing out" has made rural America poorer and more socially isolated. Urbanormativity is often moralized in the rhetoric of the class structure (Richards, 2019). This urbanity class structure views rurality's values as failures and justifies rurality's subservience to urban policies. Urbanormativity drives authoritarian populism through politics and policies (Scoones et al., 2018). Global and cosmopolitan human capital also play a role in further isolating rurality. Global and cosmopolitan human capital are acquired through international experience, global mindsets, and shared global values (Ng et al., 2011). Urban cosmopolitan

chauvinism often casts rurality as a culture of backwardness, unsophistication, conservatism, and poverty that lacks positive values (E. C. Thompson, 2013).

Place-sensitive studies are rarely labeled as such in sociological studies (Gieryn, 2000). Gieryn (2000) suggests the usage of three types of features to define place – geographical location, material form, and investments and meaning. Rural geographical locations are often accompanied by isolation or remoteness from major metropolitan urban centers. Rurality's material form is built from a concentration of natural resources, usually either agriculture or mineral/resource extraction (Ulrich-Schad & Duncan, 2018). Rurality is also bounded within marginalization of prioritization of investments from the populous, in which rurality is viewed as a monolithic group. Ulrich-Schad & Duncan (2018) suggest three types of rurality – amenity-rich, transitioning areas, and chronically poor. This research primarily considers transitioning areas that are neither rural nor urban (i.e. semi-rural), and areas that have been chronically poor, in addition to being located in physically sparse spaces.

Three major conditions affect the sustainability and resiliency of rural development (Li et al., 2019). Li et al. (2019) suggest that rural economies focus on the following activities to promote new activities: 1) development of new economic activities, 2) support local entrepreneurship, and 3) leverage rurality's social capital strengths. Investing in new economic activities within rural communities remains challenging. Rural and small-town America is often viewed as an economic dead zone (Crabtree, 2016). Crabtree (2016) suggests three ways to improve the economic vitality in those communities. The first, and most relevant recommendation for Northern California, is to make small-scale investments that support entrepreneurs in those areas. High achieving rural-raised individuals who do return are most likely to have space-attachment, create their own niche, or start a rural business (Artz et al.,

2018; von Reichert et al., 2011). Those rural-raised individuals also have the strongest social capital and the strongest drive to improve their local communities.

Although the return migration of rural-raised individuals plays a vital role in rural America, there is very little data to support an understanding of their quantitative economic impact (Cromartie et al., 2015). Negative stereotypes of poor life success often afflict those who are stayers or return migrants. Rural high school students express perceptions that stayers and returners are the uncool, and among those with the least academic potential (Pedersen & Gram, 2018). These same students often express frustration over the lack of economic opportunities and overall economic viability in their rural communities. The perceptions of teachers and adults largely influence the formation of these beliefs in rural students (Pedersen & Gram, 2018; Petrin et al., 2014). Adults often speak of better opportunities in urban normativity. However, those who achieve educational success and return play an important role in fighting these negative stereotypes. Those same returners often need to carve their own niche, which may include self-employment (von Reichert et al., 2011). To return, rural raise individuals must weigh a combination of different factors that affect rural-raised individuals to return home, which in combination in their decisions to out-migrate or return (von Reichert et al., 2014). Economics and opportunities remain the most influential out-migration factors (Petrin et al., 2014; Vazzana & Rudi-Poloshka, 2019; von Reichert et al., 2014). Contrary to the stereotype that all returners are low-performers, it is those high-achieving students who return home are the ones in the strongest position to create the rural economic niche. High achieving, rural-raised individuals who do return play the largest role in forming and shaping rural students' post-secondary education aspirations (Petrin et al., 2014). There is no single factor that can explain why rural minorities return (Lei & South, 2016).

Perna and Thomas' Conceptual Framework

Most rural research agrees that the key to rurality's sustainability is investing in new economic activities. Part of those investments must include human capital investments by rural-raised individuals who return to their communities. Rural students graduate high school at the same rate as urban students, but they do not graduate college at the same rate (Mykerezzi et al., 2014). Those college-educated returners are most likely those who have built the strongest internal and external social capital through educational attainment. Perna and Thomas' conceptual framework is a multi-methodological framework design for achieving success for all individuals within an education attainment context (Perna & Thomas, 2006). The Perna and Thomas framework used here is an expanded framework of the original conceptual work first proposed by Perna (Perna, 2006). In classical terms, human capital is the use or utility of a member within their society (Adam & Stewart, 1963). It is well known that within the human capital theory, that a positive relationship exists between education and human capital (Becker, 1993b; Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2007). In alignment with Perna and Thomas, this research narrowly defines success in human capital formation as enrolling in college, completing a degree, and earning a high income.

There are four proposed conceptual layers in the framework. Each of the layers consists of four levels, including education, psychology, sociology, and economics. Due to the conceptual framework's breadth, this research only focuses and contributes to layers three and four. Layer three looks at the school context. Layer four looks at the social, economic, and policy context. Place drives most of the educational success of students in the United States. For rurality, place touches on two contexts. The first context is the limited availability of school

choices, resources, and opportunities due to smallness and remoteness. The second is the limited amount of funding due to the localized nature of education funding.

Because of this framework's extensive nature, each section of the literature review may include only a single research question that contributes to the individual context layers of either rurality or Mong students. The human capital formation section of this research contributes to the body of knowledge in layers 3 (school) and 4 (social, economic, and policy). Perna and Smith also propose ten major success indicators that contribute to academic success, as noted in Figure 3. The first article of this research looks at the educational experiences of rural Mong students using Perna & Thomas (2006) as a guide. The second article examines these same Mong adults who have achieved the success criteria (college enrollment, completion, and income) and return migrated to their original, rural localities. The findings of this research will help to determine whether these success indicators existed in rural Mong adults.

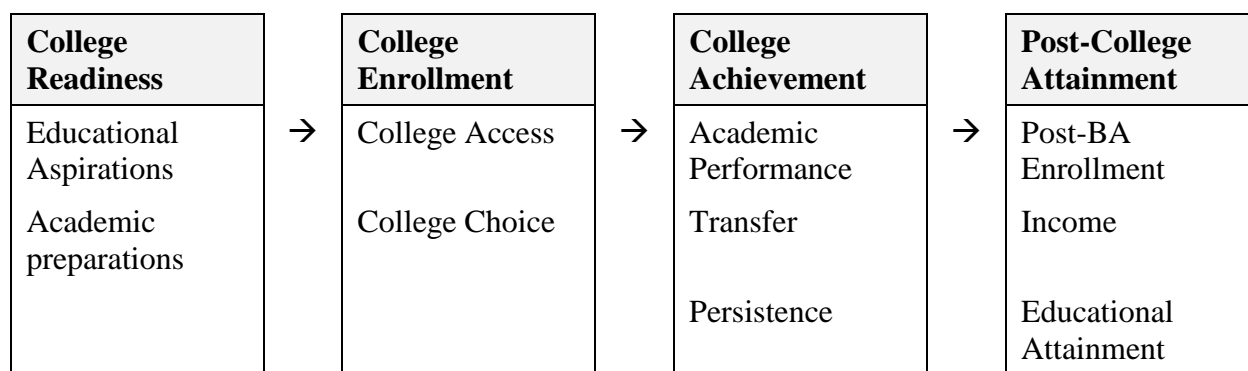


Figure 3. 10 success indicators as defined by Perna and Smith.

Layer 1 – internal context. There is a large gap in research that investigates the reason that Mong students achieve academic success. Much of the available research focuses on the racial discourse of Mong students and their affirmation or rejection of the model minority myth

and its stereotypes. Research suggests that Mong students see education as a path out of poverty (S. Lee, 2001). As a result of their invisibility and the model minority myth, the Mong population does not have their educational needs met (S. Lee et al., 2017). Stacey Lee et al. (2017) suggest that differences exist between the economic strata and the racial discourse. Middle-class Mong students have the challenge of highlighting the invisibility without contributing to the deficit discourse. On the other hand, low-income Mong students are critical of the model minority myth and base their critical views on the larger critique of white supremacy. Experiences inside and outside of school shape Mong students' perception of school (S. Lee, 2001). Stacey Lee (2001) observed that, when compared to East Asian students, Mong students were more often blamed for their academic problems, which were attributed to a lack of student motivation. Mong college students also express academic phoniness as they negotiate negative educational experiences (Lin et al., 2015; Sengkhammee et al., 2017). Differences also exist between the genders.

Since the early 2000s, Mong girls have mostly closed the gender achievement gap and now make up the majority of Mong students in college (S. Lee et al., 2016). Nevertheless, Mong culture and identity continue to suffer from negative perceptions that dominate the culture (Ngo & Leet-Otley, 2011). Mong girls perceive more gender inequality in Mong culture than Mong boys and use educational pathways to break those gender norms (Lo, 2017). Alternatively, Mong boys internalize negative stereotypes and others' perceptions of them. Mong boys saw themselves as "dumb," "lazy," "not smart," and "troublemakers" (Endo, 2017). Mong boys use sports to create their own space as empowered social actors (Smalkoski, 2018). Differences also exist between the various ways that Mong men have adapted to life in the United States (K.

Yang, 1997). K. Yang (1997) observed that older men tend to hold on to the past, whereas younger Mong individuals are more educated.

Layer 2 – family context. Rural and Mong students share many similarities within the family context. In terms of economics, both groups are likely to be living in poverty. With respect to education, rural students are most likely to be first-generation students. The support of friends and family is the most consistent factor impacting rural students' success in education.. Similarly, research indicates that family support is the strongest factor for Mong students and their attainment of higher education (Swartz et al., 2003). Education formation can also be achieved through a sense of family using shared stories and experiences (Ngo et al., 2018). Mong students, much like rurality, also exhibit differences in educational aspirations and academic performance along gender lines. Parental expectations play a larger role in rural female youths' educational aspirations (Agger et al., 2018; Meece et al., 2014). Mong female youths are often perceived as academically outperforming their male peers (Lo, 2017).

Similar to rural students, the educational success of Mong students seems to largely be influenced by their relationships and close ties with family (J. K. Lee & Green, 2009). However, there are differences between the family backgrounds of high-performing and low-performing Mong students. J. K. Lee and Green (2009) suggest that high performing Mong students are more likely to have well-educated fathers. Both the low and high performing groups of Mong students performed similarly, regardless of their mother's education. Even as Mong students transition to college, family continues to play a major role. Mong students attending college often seek help from family as their strongest relationships (S. C. Lee, 2007). Mong college students are often determined to succeed in order to help their families. Mong college students often believe that college success is a pathway back to their families (S. Xiong & Lam, 2013).

Similar to rural students and families, Mong students and families are less likely to have attended college or have the appropriate values for success. In general, educational attainment challenges persist because Mong families lack the necessary experiences for educational success. Mong families spent their first two decades in the United States searching and adopting educational values that would reflect success (S. Lee et al., 2016). Serge Lee et al. (2016) found that most of Mong's educational success only recently occurred in the 2000s.

Some major differences exist between other rural demographics, which makes Mong students unique. Mong students are likely not to be the dominant culture or ethnic majority. Asians represent less than six percent of the rural population (B. A. Lee & Sharp, 2017). Mong students often perceive a cultural gap between their dominant American culture and their parents (A. Supple et al., 2010). The perceived cultural gap leads to inter-generational conflicts, as Mong youth struggle to balance two cultures' demands. The pedagogical subtractive schooling creates a divide and estrangement between Mong parents and their children (Ngo, 2017). This cultural conflict also negatively affects the well-being of Mong students (A. J. Supple & Cavanaugh, 2013). A. J. Supple & Cavanaugh (2013) suggest that the conflict often leads to greater depressive symptoms in boys and self-depreciation in both genders.

Layer 3 – school context. Access to technology and curriculum also remains a challenge for rural schools. Rural schools continue to be a part of the larger digital divide, due to reduced access to technology and broadband coverage (Hindman, 2000; Parker, 2000; Townsend et al., 2015). There is also a gap in curricular access to critical 21st-century careers. Rural schools are less likely to offer advanced mathematics (M. Irvin et al., 2017). Access to advanced mathematics is critical to a student's success in mathematics-intensive STEM careers, such as engineering. Rural students also have less access to Advanced Placement (AP) courses (Gagnon

& Mattingly, 2016). AP courses provide a GPA advantage for students applying to selective and elite universities. These inequalities create a geographic educational achievement gap.

Collectively, rural students perform worse than their urban peers in high school graduation, and perform only slightly better than their inner-city peers. However, national education policies focused on educational attainment are often ill-designed for rural centers (Johnson & Howley, 2015). The purpose of education needs to be revisited in order to enhance rural vitality (Schafft, 2016). There is a strong link between education attainment and rural vitality (Thomson & Hertz, 2018). Rural schools play a pivotal role in educational attainment for rural students, but challenges associated with place remain problematic for education (Roscigno et al., 2006). These challenges, including smallness and remoteness, limit rural schools' ability to offer qualified and diverse teachers, access to technology, advanced curriculum, and funding. There are differences between minority students' and White students' academic performances in rurality.

In general, Mong students have reduced access to highly successful schools, even compared to Black or Hispanic students (Joo et al., 2016). There is limited data available about Mong students in rurality in California and their relative performance. As an aggregate, Mong elementary students in California perform worse than their minority peers (S. Lee, 2014). Although there are a large number of White students who attend poor, rural schools, minority students in rurality are more likely to be segregated into poorer schools (M. J. Irvin et al., 2016). M. J. Irvin et al. (2016) found that White students underperform their White urban counterparts and rural, minority students underperform their White peers. The limited research on Mong college students suggests that they have lower self-esteem compared to their peers. Mong students' perception of success is heavily influenced by their failure to meet the expectations of

the model minority myth. The perception of academic phoniness within Mong college students is a significant factor in college persistence (Lin et al., 2015; Sengkhammee et al., 2017).

Recruitment, training, and retention of qualified or highly qualified teachers remain a challenge for rural schools (Azano, 2016; Azano & Stewart, 2015; Monk, 2007). Teachers that choose rurality face considerable odds, such as isolation, inflexible and unfunded accountability, low wages, assignments outside their subject matter, and lack of courses (Jimerson, 2005; Lewis, 2003). Schools also find it challenging to hire culturally and ethnically diverse individuals for their staff (Anthony-Stevens et al., 2017). Limited research exists on Mong students and their performance based upon the student-teacher demographic match. Mong students were less likely to be presumed as having a learning disability when the teacher viewed the behavior through a cultural lens (V. Xiong, 2018). The existence of “Mong Culture Club” within schools also provides Mong students with a sense of belonging (Ngo, 2015). However, research on minorities and student-teacher demographic match suggest a positive link when the match exists. A student-teacher demographic match is when the student and teacher share the same demographics such as race, ethnicity, gender, etc. Black boys perform better when there is a student-teacher demographic match. On the other hand, white teachers were more likely to have lower expectations for Black boys, especially in mathematics (Gershenson et al., 2016).

Layer 4 – social, economic, and policy context. Although there are many ways to improve rural vitality, this research focuses on understanding human capital return migration. Human capital return migration is the opposite of human capital flight, where skilled and educated individuals return back to their original localities (Dustmann et al., 2011). Human capital flight, more commonly known as the “brain drain,” is a phenomenon in which skilled and educated individuals out-migrate to other localities, therefore draining the locality's human

capital from which they leave. Human capital flight is a persistent threat to rural communities' vitality (Sherman & Sage, 2011). There is a shared relationship between human capital and social capital. Improvements to rural communities can only occur when social capital is accumulated (Hanifan, 1916). Social capital can be defined as the value of the social connections and relationships between individuals (Burton-Jones & Spender, 2011). National and state education policies are rarely designed for rural schools, and their stated goals are unpredictable (Johnson & Howley, 2015). Rural locations have fewer resources and economic opportunities. Characteristics of labor markets remain a powerful predictor of poverty (Cotter, 2009).

Mong students in rurality have intersectionality of both invisibility and marginalization. The lack of a cohesive, rural education policy marginalizes rural students to the fringes of urban education policies. Mong students within rural policy and in the context of Asians, Asians are invisible as they represent a small minority of the total population who live in rurality. The model minority myth cloaks differences in the success of the individual sub-groups from targeted education policy. Although Asians, as an aggregate, are more economically well-off than Whites, Mong are consistently the poorest Asian sub-group (Takei & Sakamoto, 2011). These differences play a major factor in Mong-American students' varying experiences and their challenge to the Asian model minority myth (S. J. Lee, 2007).

Grounded Theory

My own return to rurality was based on a sense of responsibility toward giving back to the Mong community, much like how my economic success weighs my own duty to my family. I watched the chaos that ensued the morning as the young man's body surfaced from the Sutter bypass. In the midst of the chaos, the sheriff's deputy yelled for me to retrieve the homicide kit

in his patrol vehicle as the deputy physically fought off the family from himself and the body. All of the family's anger towards their betrayal was focused on the lone sheriff's deputy. It seems that, at that present moment, I was the only person empathetic towards the deputy. After that day, I returned to my quiet middle-class life, removing myself from the extensive healing process between the Sutter County Sheriff's Department and the Yuba-Sutter Mong community. After all, it was no longer "my" community. My part was merely a fluke in timing. In my mind, I had not spent nearly a full decade working on escaping my hometown's problem only to return to them.

In truth, I remained straddled between conflicts of two worlds. I was firmly in the entryway of middle-class America, yet I was held back by the problems of my old Mong community. As I returned from Thanksgiving, I observed the stark differences between my co-workers and myself. The Mong community had to perform a dangerous water recovery for one of their own without the available resources accessible to everyone but them. In the following months, I reflected on how a group of untrained and unprepared misfits successfully recovered a submerged body in the fast-moving waters. I came to realize that their ignorance and stubbornness regarding the dangers and challenges of recovering a body resulted in their ultimate success. Rurality is often built around the shared values of self-determination and shared community self-reliance to improve their communities. The total incremental actions of each of these individuals who share common values for improvement ultimately contribute towards eliminating the problems within our communities. However, to solve these community problems, I had to be part of the community by working inside of it instead of merely being a spectator.

Because of the uniqueness of the Mong experience within the Asian sub-group, grounded theory (GT) was chosen as the epistemological framework for this research's investigation into the human capital return of migrants. GT is the use of inductive reasoning for the analysis of data through the use of coding (B. G. Glaser & Strauss, 2009). The use of inductive logic in which theory is derived from data could be identified as constructivist (Charmaz, 2006). There are some ideological and methodological divergences between Glaserian and Straussian GT (Thai et al., 2012). This section uses Glaserian GT, an objectivist grounded theory approach that is in line with my own positionality. As Perna and Thomas' framework focuses on educational success, it was inappropriate to use the framework to understand the factors that drive educationally successful Mong adults back home. However, Perna and Thomas' framework does provide ten indicators in defining what contributes to educational success (Perna & Thomas, 2006). This research utilizes Perna and Thomas' ten indicators as part of the descriptive guide in understanding how the participants' academic success was formed. Other theories were considered, such as space attachment theory, which states that the emotional bond through symbolism between an individual and his or her space may drive the individual back. Space attachment theory was not used because Mong-Americans are recent migrants and are refugees to the counties of Jefferson.

Computational Grounded Theory

The usage of computational grounded theory (CGT) in this research addresses a major concern about the lack of qualitatively rich data about the Mong community. The invisibility is exacerbated as research on isolated Mong communities (i.e., rurality) does not exist. Given Mong invisibility in education research, the collection of large and rich data helps researchers further understand Mong students' and adults' diverse experiences – both in urbanormativity and

rurality. CGT facilitates the collection of large datasets and requires far fewer resources than traditional grounded theory approaches. However, CGT is a relatively novel methodology in sociological research and is extremely limited in education research.

There are challenges to the usage of CGT in research. Existing computer coding techniques cannot supplant manual coding and is an effective approach to identify other themes which manual coding may leave out (Nelson et al., 2018). There are still challenges surrounding the usage and development of qualitative data analysis software (QDAS) within qualitative research (Evers, 2018). Careful attention is required when using QDAS within research as no technology is “neutral” (Paulus et al., 2018). There are some challenges to interpreting the information since multiple algorithms present different results from the same qualitative data (Baumer et al., 2017). QDAS are also not sensitive to cultural differences when auto-coding. Subtle patterns through racial and cultural differences may be ignored and require more time-consuming and intensive processes to unfold (Nguyen et al., 2019). Some qualitative researchers still distrust and argue that the QDAS assisted methodologies separate the researcher from the data. In general, there is a lack of transparency in the analytical process in the learning analytics analysis used in research (Paulus et al., 2018). Algorithm transparency is important to address issues regarding challenges such as ethics and internal bias. The usage of learning analytics in policy formation still lacks the proper formation of ethnics standards over its use (Slade & Prinsloo, 2013).

Machine Learning

There are advantages to using machine learning (ML) in qualitative research. When looking at complex, mixed evidence, and multi-faceted concepts, computer-assisted methods can complement traditional approaches, but not fully replace them (Nelson et al., 2018). ML paired

with GT can help develop novel and interesting new theories (Salam et al., 2019). ML can be used as a rational reconstruction in grounded theory (Berente & Seidel, 2014). ML can identify cultural differences that would otherwise be inaccessible due to the cost of human researchers. ML identified differences in cultural values through the use of designation photos between Western and Eastern tourists (Deng et al., 2019). Natural language processing (NLP) capabilities can construct validity in organizational culture (Pandey & Pandey, 2019). New and emerging techniques are being used to understand the predictability of ML in the context of education. ML has been used successfully to classify language as thought and predict students' six-year graduation outcome (Stone et al., 2019). Deficits of NLP and ML can be offset by employing different analytical strategies, such as using human verification of annotation through the use of semi-automatic systems to tune the ML model (Yan et al., 2014).

Two types of ML classification methods can assist in identify themes within data through topic modeling: supervised and unsupervised. Supervised learning requires labeled data, whereas unsupervised learning does not need labeled data. Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) is a popular unsupervised approach widely used for topic modeling developed by researchers Blei, Ng, and Jordan (Blei et al., 2003). LDA assumes independence between words, commonly known as “bag of words,” of each of sentences within the documents. The use of approaches that rely on the sentence structure or pre-trained data may have higher errors. Since English second language speakers may not have a good grasp of the structure of English grammar, word independence is essential. A lack of extensive pre-trained data on a specific ethnic group may bias the results toward the larger trained group's interpretation. Preprocessing of any document using LDA is required using three basic steps: tokenization, lemmatization, and part-of-speech tagging. Tokenization breaks up the large text-like paragraphs into useful and simple units for

analysis called tokens. Normalization transforms words into their base form, for example, “better” is transformed to “good,” using lemmatization. Lemmatization determines the “lemma” of a word based on its meaning. Popular preprocessing packages, such as genism, are available in Python for the English language using the Natural Language Toolkit (NLTK).

The use of a well-written ML can provide a high degree of consistency (Yu et al., 2011). However, literature suggest that the usage of ML, such as topic modeling, still requires contextual human insight (Baumer et al., 2017; Nelson et al., 2018). ML and NLP usage for text synthesis must be researcher-led and the results should be used to inform and provide insights (Haynes et al., 2019). There are two strategies employed in this research to address ML issues. The first is that the researcher is not solely dependent on standard QDAS or ML methodologies for analysis. The software package used will be Python in conjunction with the Natural Language Processing Toolkit library (Bird et al., 2009). Using an open programming language and ML libraries allows the researcher to hand-code differences in cultural context for the topic modeling. The researcher is both an insider and outsider of cultural lenses of his targeted research topics - rurality and Mong people. To ensure methodological robustness of the analysis, Nelson’s three step framework will be used (Nelson, 2017). Nelson (2017) uses both human-centered computational analysis and hypothesis refinement. Figure 4 shows the process map of the methodology used in this research.

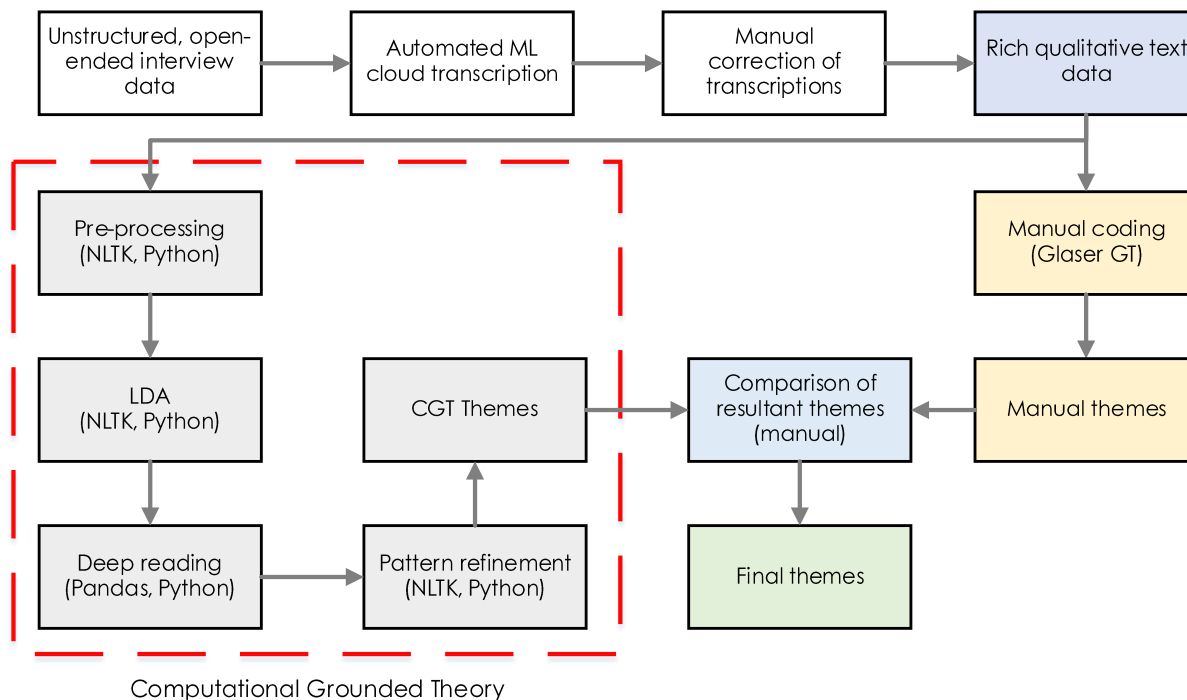


Figure 4. Process map of analysis for topical coding.

Chapter Summary

Mong and rurality shares multiple common characteristics of living in a class and cultural structure hidden in marginalization and invisibility to populism and urbanormativity.

Investments in new economic activities are critical to rural sustainability and vitality. In addition, the formation of the human capital of rural stay or return-migrants is critical to building new economic opportunities. Mong in rurality face the same challenges as its rural communities but remains in invisibility and lack policies targeting their needs. How well the Mong's human capital is formed in rurality is unknown. Much of the unknown can be attributed to Mong's place in aggregation in the Asian category, their relatively small population, and the model minority myth. Limited research exists on Mong's educational experiences within small or remote localities and why they return to those areas. This research uses computational grounded

theory to answer the research questions. The results can help create better policies by understanding how new refugees, like Mong, build their human capital and return to areas dominated by racially homogenous groups like rurality.

CHAPTER 3: ARTICLE ONE

THE HUMAN CAPITAL FORMATION OF MONG STAYERS AND RETURNERS IN
RURAL/SEMI-RURAL NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

Abstract

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2021

This study examines the experiences of the human capital formation of 19 Mong adults who stayed or returned to their rural/semi-rural hometowns of Northern California using computational grounded theory. Emerging themes include learning within isolation, lacking navigation capital, and finding resiliency through caring agents. Participants faced isolation early on in their educational experiences. Both participants, their friends, and families lack the required navigation capital to complete their education attainment within a timely manner. Caring agents through established institutional support programs, educational staff, and friends/neighbors who were knowledgeable were key factors enabling Mong students to navigate higher education. Implications apply to new refugees and how they obtain, create, and navigate social capital for human capital formation.

"A quality education is the closest thing to magic in America."
- Tim Scott (US Senator, South Carolina)

Foreword

My father never had the opportunity for education because he lost his father when he was four, and when he was six, his mother. In my father's society, the educational investment of orphans was frowned upon. His status as an orphan did not give him the social capital for economic advancement. My father never learned the dominant languages of the first two countries that he occupied. He was illiterate until 1979, when he purchased a Mong book in the refugee camp. By all accounts, he taught himself how to read and write Mong. The lack of education and literacy of the local languages made it difficult for my father to find his place in any new world he ended up in. He was among the many Laotian refugees heavily dependent on government welfare and social programs. Upon my father's arrival to Linda, California, his only useful skill was the manual labor in the fields of Laos as a subsistence farmer. My mother remained primarily illiterate until 2009 – three decades after my father. Starting at the age of five, my oldest sister would be the primary translator for both of my parents during the first half of their American experience.

Butte County Sheriff's deputy Randall E. Jennings would be killed on May 21, 1997 by Pao Xiong while responding to a domestic dispute. The Mong community in Oroville would issue a formal apology expressing its sorrow and deep hurt for the deputy's death at the hands of one of their Mong community members. As a result of this tragic event, the Mong students of Chico State would take on the task of becoming translators to fill the gap of the needed Mong translators in the county. I was among a handful of Mong male college students who provided unpaid translation services to court-ordered anger management classes for Mong men to prevent

future tragedies. My quality education was being eroded from all sides by two cultural taxes. Chico State saw me as unfit to receive additional engineering academic support, all the while my fellow Mong college students and I struggled to carry and navigate the burden of our community's unrealistically high expectations.

Nevertheless, it would also be these same poor and underserved rural and semi-rural communities who were given the daunting task of the human capital formation of a generation of pre-literate Mong refugees and their children. For much of my life, I would be under the misguided belief that my sub-standard rural education contributed toward much of the failures in my human capital formation. To be frank, my semi-rural education did not provide the necessary academic foundation for engineering academic success. However, upon reflection, it was the best quality education given its low price tag, resources, and abilities. For many of us, rurality successfully navigated the needs of a population of refugees it never saw, and it made us among its most successful community members. This chapter looks at the experience of those Mong adults, as students, in which rural/semi-rural Northern California gifted with the magic of education. This education became the magic ticket to transition a generation of Mong children from a pre-literate agrarian community to a source of meaningful contributors and future vitality in rurality and semi-rurality.

Human Capital Formation of Rural Mong Stayers and Returners

At the end of 2019, approximately 79.5 million individuals were forcibly displaced. Of those, 20.4 million fell under the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) mandate. The total number of refugees coming into the US has fluctuated with global events and priorities. Since 2002, California has resettled approximately 108, 600 refugees, which is the largest share of refugees entering the US. Even for Americans, the attainment of a post-high

school education remains the largest determinant of success (Becker, 1993b; Coleman, 1988). Minorities face many challenges to obtaining a secondary education. Between 1975 and 2005, virtually all Mong-Americans who arrived in the US came as refugees (Kula & Paik, 2016).

From 1975 to 1991, Mong would be preoccupied with refugee problems and cultural shock faced with enormous barriers to adjust and adapt life in the United States (K. Yang, 2015, p. 69). Mong refugees who arrived were overwhelmingly non-English speakers and preliterate. Many Mong opted for life in large urbanized areas of California, such as Sacramento or Fresno. Others opted for life in smaller, more isolated communities – communities that are either rural or semi-rural. At the start of the 1990s, four localities – Willows, Redding, Chico, and Oroville – had growing Mong populations and represented 60% of the Southeast Asian populations (Helzer, 1994). Both rural and urban students graduate high school at the same rate, and both groups fall behind in university (Mykerezi et al., 2014). Little research focuses on invisible minority populations struggling at the intersection of race/ethnicity and place.

For decades Mong children have struggled to navigate the educational system successfully. The model minority myth contributes to Mong students being an invisible minority population within education (Museus & Kiang, 2009; T. L. Thompson et al., 2020; Zhou & Bankston, 2020). The model minority myth claims that Asians are successful immigrants regardless of their origins. However, for Asian immigrants, the ability to master spoken and written English and home country support play an important role in attaining success (Jang & Brutt-Griffler, 2019; Kaida, 2013; Saad et al., 2012). Mong people had neither English mastery nor home country support at the start of their American journey. The pan-ethnic aggregation presents challenges to addressing the individual needs of the Mong students in the larger Asian ethnic classification (Ngo & Lor, 2013).

Rurality is the concept of isolation of either great space or cultural divide from major population centers (Fulkerson & Thomas, 2019). The definition of rurality varies depending on different specific measures such as population density, total population, or access to specific resources like health care. Rurality is often characterized by lower labor markets with fewer resources and economic opportunities (Cotter, 2009). Rural students face an educational attainment gap compared with their urban peers (Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012). Although historically, rural America has been mostly White, changing demographics show an increase of minorities in the rural lifeway (Lichter, 2012). Rural minorities are often poorer and attend worst schools than their White rural counterparts (Conger et al., 2016; Crockett & Carlo, 2016). Rural minorities also face different challenges and have different perspectives from their white peers (Conger et al., 2016). Among the challenges that rural communities face to finding rural vitality is the human capital flight, otherwise known as the brain drain, which remains a constant threat to the vitality of rural communities (Sherman & Sage, 2011).

Purpose of the Study

This research examines the lived experience of the human capital formation of Mong adults within rural/semi-rural Northern California who opted to return or remained in close proximity to their rural/semi-rural hometowns. The study was guided by the following research question: What are the comparative differences in human capital formation for Mong students in these rural localities in Northern California compared to other rural ethnic groups?

Limitations of the Study

Community bias may exist due to the usage of convenience and snowball sampling. The snowball sampling may favor individuals who share similar experiences due to their social network. The participants' age and experiences were skewed toward older and more established Mong adults; as such, their rural experience may not reflect existing educational conditions. The research relies on large recalled periods varying from 20-35 years. The personal memories of participants' lived experiences may possibly be distorted to personal bias, anger, anxiety, politics, and simple lack of awareness (Patton, 2015, p. 580).

Method

In order to answer the research question, a mixture of Glaserian grounded theory (B. G. Glaser & Strauss, 2009) and computational grounded theory (CPT) (Nelson, 2017) was applied on 19 two-hour unstructured open-ended interviews. The grounded theory method was deemed appropriate because little research examines the educational experiences of perpetual minority refugee populations within a rural or semi-rural setting. Unstructured open-ended interview questions were chosen to maximize the acquisition of non-force data. Perna and Thomas' conceptual framework for education attainment was used as a guide to constructing the initial questions (Perna & Thomas, 2006). Examples of questions included: Tell me about your educational experience in elementary school? What did you put down on your college application as your major? How did you know when to apply to college?

Manual coding from a human researcher was employed due to the limitation of existing computational tools and methodologies. Computational tools and methods can only provide an effective complement to manual coding (Nelson et al., 2018). Manual coding as outlined for novice researchers by M. Alammar et al. (M. Alammar et al., 2019) was used to minimize the

common pitfalls of a novice grounded theory researcher. CGT was employed to provide a rigorous and structured approach to single researcher led research to affirm manual coding with existing computational methods. The rich data from the interviews were included in the paper to allow other interpretation themes.

All interviews were done virtually using Zoom and digitally recorded. Digital audio recordings were transcribed verbatim using a two-step process. A major commercially available cloud-based machine learning transcription service was used for the initial transcripts. Results were then manually corrected and only the participants' responses were used. Existing research on the experiences of the different ethnicities with rural/semi-rural localities was used to compare the results of the Mong participants. Although all questions were unstructured and open-ended, Perna and Thomas' framework for college success (Perna & Thomas, 2006) was used as the guiding framework for human capital formation and questions were framed around specific parts of the framework. Questions involving factors that contribute to the participant's educational success, such as immigration status, parental/family socioeconomic status, parental education, perception of high school education formation, and educational/occupational aspiration, were asked.

Nelson's computational grounded theory was used as the framework for the computational portion (Nelson et al., 2018). The data was tokenized and stop words were applied using NLTK for the English language. Corpora was done using Genism version 4.0.0 (Řehůřek, 2020). A Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) model within NLTK was used for the categorization of each of the topics (Blei et al., 2003). Prior to applying LDA, common phrases such as "uh," "huh," "you know," "um," "yeah," etc. were removed. Pattern refinement using Python was used to help identify the responses that best represented each topic. Pattern

confirmation using WordNet (part of NLTK) was used to measure specificity and concreteness. The results of the manual coding and CGT were used to complement each other.

The author conducted all interviews as an insider. The author is a Mong-American, who has earned his graduate degree, and currently lives in the same rural/semi-rural locality in which he was raised. All interviews were conducted in English, with some instances in which responses or questions were given in Mong. Mong responses were translated into English by the author. Prior to conducting the research, permission was obtained from the Human Subject Review Committee. In order to protect the identities of the participants, pseudonyms were used. Due to the small size of the Mong community within Northern California, participants' professions, schools, and specific degrees earned are redacted in the quotes.

Research Site and Population

Participants consisted of 13 males and 6 females of Mong ethnicity within three selection criteria. The first consisted of being an adult Mong currently residing in one of the rural/semi-rural localities within the 20 uppermost northern counties in Northern California. All participants were from various small rural or semi-rural cities or townships from three Northern California counties: Butte, Sutter, and Yuba. Except for localities in Sutter County, Mong made up the plurality of the ethnic Asian composition in the localities in which the participants resided. Second, the participants should have completed their high school education and obtained any form of secondary school education, including vocational trade. Approximately 89.5% of the participants held a bachelor's degree and 21.1% held a master's degree. No participants held a doctorate of any kind. And third, the participants had to have chosen to stay or return-migrate back in close proximity to their communities. Individuals who left to pursue a post-secondary education for a period of time were counted as part of the out-migration population.

Approximately 68.4% of the participants were between the ages of 18-39 and the rest were between the ages of 40-55. Also, 68.4% were married and 78.9% of the participants had family household incomes above \$78K.

Results

The participants' responses were categorized into three major themes: learning in isolation, lacking navigation capital, and resiliency through caring agents.

Learning in Isolation

Sub-themes relating to participant's isolation were categorized under social isolation, academic isolation, and racism and discrimination.

Social and cultural isolation. Participants reported varying forms of social and cultural isolation among their rural peers. Participants were often excluded from the experiences of the expected cultural norms of the typical American high school or college student even though they made strides to participate in those activities. For example, Gaoseng made strides to act like her White peers:

It was the norm to try and be like my peers. So I was trying to do a lot of things that were like my White peers would do. ... Ultimately, there were times when I feel like, I was excluded that I wasn't White.

Even when participants were accepted by their White peers, they could not overcome the deficits in their socioeconomic class. For example, Cheng made the following statement:

I was voted, uh, junior prince for homecoming. My junior year. And, uh, I backed out. The reason why I backed out was because I didn't have anything nice to wear. I just had crummy ass t-shirts and baggy pants.

Participants' strong differences in cultural obligations to their families contrasted sharply from their White peers in forming their academic experiences. For example, Xong was initially attending his first university of choice, a highly selective university, but "once we found out that my dad had, uh, terminal cancer, I transferred back" to the university nearby. Participants also

made decisions to care for and ensure the educational success of their siblings. For example, Cheng took responsibility for providing a home for his parents and his younger siblings:

My parents live with me. My brothers lived with me. My sisters lived with me. They all live with me before they all went off and got married. My brother still lives with me.

Cultural obligations was not limited to a specific gender. For example, female participants who were married during their college years. Female participants who transitioned from their family to their husband's family gain additional cultural obligations. Tao reported these feelings:

I don't know like it's the same for your family, but, in my family and my husband's family being the oldest is like all the burden is on you. It was tough. Just because we were married. Even though we were responsible for ourselves ... we were responsible for them. We would come home on the weekend just to do stuff for his mom.

Academic isolation. Participants were often academically isolated from their White peers. When participants spoke of institutional academic isolation in their pre-college years, it was done through the usage of language. Early on, Fong was separated from his Mong peers and “in first or second grade, I noticed that like there are classes with a bunch of Mong kids. I was never in those classes.” Some participants were academically re-isolated to English second language courses even after they mastered English. Chi was with the English second language students, and “by sixth grade they removed me. But when I went to middle school, for some reason, they put me back in for almost one semester.” The academic isolation caused many of the misunderstandings over simple requirements for normal academic completion. For example, Cheng almost did not graduate high school because he failed the poster section of his senior project:

I almost didn't graduate, because of, solely because of the senior project. I failed because of even more petty things. Like, uh, I turned in my poster. My senior project was on Mong clothes. I turned in a beautiful poster on green Mong clothes. The teacher didn't accept it because I didn't turn in a rough draft.

Participants also experienced isolation within school-sponsored non-academic extracurricular activities. For example, Chi “wanted to play a sport in high school. I went with tennis, uh, just because I didn’t have to pay too much out of pocket for, uh, like trips and stuff like that.”

Even when the cost wasn’t an issue, parental disapproval affected participants’ abilities to fully participate in all of the extracurricular activities. Chi still struggled with her Mom’s disapproval:

We’ll want to stay for extracurricular clubs or anything like that. My mom was always really against it because in her eyes, it’s not really important. Kuv [my] mom use to always nag thiab [and] complain about having to pick us up. She’ll say I just want to pick all you guys up at three but why do I have to pick them up at three and come back and pick you at four.

When participants did participate in school sponsored non-academic extracurricular activities, they did so without parental involvement. For example, Cha had no parental involvement in his high school academics or extra-curricular activities, such as football. Cha shared that his “parents didn’t even go to my high school ceremony. Back in the eighties, parents didn’t do that.”

Even academically exceptional participants expressed being isolated within their selected post-high school academic fields. For example, Maikou was academically exceptional, received nearly a full scholarship, and graduated in a specialized competitive accelerated degree program with excellent self-reported grades. But Maikou expressed, “if we are being honest, I’m closer to the bottom. I would say I was in the bottom five.” Maikou did not participate within the cohort social support system because she was explicitly excluded from most outside classroom social activities. Maikou explained:

Our backgrounds were really different. A lot of my classmates were middle class. There were only one or two who came from a low income background. My cohort consisted of all white students except me. ... They did a lot of activities outside of school. ... They had a lot of access to resources that I didn’t have.

Racism and discrimination. Different forms of racism and discrimination played an important role in how participants form their educational experience. Participants expressed experiencing, witnessing, or hearing first-hand accounts of racism and discrimination during their educational experience. For example, Kongmeng remembered this from his elementary school experience:

It seems pretty diverse, with Mong kids, Mexican, uh, White people, and them. But, uh, the experience was pretty good. The teachers there did treat us really well, I guess. There was time when people did come across certain type of teachers that can be racist.

Kongmeng would clarify incidents of racism inside the classroom as:

They would tell us not to speak our native language. Like during that time, they would always tell us to speak English only. You're in America, so speak English.

Participants who did not experience first-hand racism or discrimination shared incidents of racial tension between themselves and their non-Mong peers. For example, Pheng went to a high school which had a “demographic [that] was also very different at [school name]. It was mostly white. ... I remember that one year when we had that racial tension with the white folks.”

Institutional racism and discrimination existed even into the university setting; participants shared incidents where they were denied institutional academic support based solely on their ethnicity or race. Most notably affected were Mong males who selected majors that had an overrepresentation of Asian males. For example, Tou struggled alone within his original major of computer science:

At the time I was struggling. I think I would have done better if I had help. I heard about the minority engineering program, and alright, I'm a minority, I think I'm a minority. So I went and applied to the minority program. I was denied. I was told minorities were Blacks and Hispanics.

Lacking Navigation Capital

Sub-themes relating to participants' lack of navigation capital were educational front-runners, career aspirations, navigating the educational requirements, school choice, and navigating educational cost.

Educational front-runners. Participants were often the educational front-runners being either first to attend college or first into their career aspirations within their family and Mong community. For example, while Tao failed her first attempt at college:

I was the first one in my family to graduate. I was still working at [work place] when I started school full-time. ... It was a huge relief. I finally was able to do this. My parents were really happy. I was still the first one to graduate.

Participants' position as front runners meant that they had limited access to examples of successful navigation of the education system.

Career aspirations. Participants expressed uncertainty about the careers they should pursue while in high school. Participants' choices in career were primarily influenced by their parent's aspirations or participants' own misguided perceptions of the careers. Two careers fields dominated participants' initial career aspirations: engineering/computer science (male) and medicine (female). Participants lacked meaningful exposure to individuals who had first-hand knowledge of their chosen careers. For example, in high school, Chou explained how he came to choose engineering:

I meet one of, the guy, Mexican guy, he went to [redacted] college too. And we were work together at the summer job, he was a college student. ... I'm going to be engineer. Engineers are those who design stuff. They take your idea and they pay you a lot of money. He said, my cousin in Mexico is a engineer and he makes a lot of money.

Others relied on their parents, even though their parents had no prior experience in the career choice. For example, Xeng's parents encourage him to become either a doctor or an engineer, and before graduation he choose engineering:

Well, yeah, they hinted to me that it was a good job to have, so that's why I went that direction. ... I think they talked to a lot of my cousins, and stuff like that, and they – maybe they had older kids that went into those professions. They just thought that was a good profession to go into.

Even when participants' had poor academic performance within a particular subject area, participants still attempted to complete their initial career aspirations' educational requirements.

For example, Gaoseng expressed:

Growing up my parents were always, be a nurse, be a nurse. So you try to live up to what they want. ... I would rather them [counselors] being realistic with me then just telling me that I can do it. ... I wasted my time taking core classes that I wasn't using so I felt further behind.

But Gaoseng never did well in chemistry and struggled in college:

I didn't like chemistry. I felt like no matter what. My teacher was really nice and was really supportive. I felt like no matter what she tried to teach me, I just didn't really get it.

Parental aspiration was not always a positive influence on participants' career aspirations. For example, Tao shared:

The shaming didn't work. Because they have always done that to me. They would always compared me to my cousin. I was pretty much done with it. ... If I didn't want to go to college and I didn't want to go to work. You can't force me to. I was just kinda chilling for a couple of months.

Navigating the educational requirements. Participants expressed the challenges of navigating the educational requirements. Misunderstanding of relatively simple requirements often contributed to long educational delays. For example, Yer was not able to take her SAT:

The day of the SAT, I showed up, and I forgot my ID. ... I was trying to call my parents, no one was picking up. So I left and I never took it. ... It was the last one before college applications.

Participants' heavily relied on Mong friends and family members who were often misguided in their own understanding of the educational requirements and support available. For example,

Nhia declared engineering:

I didn't know at the time. My uncle was like, hey, just put it there so you have a declared major so you'll have an advisor. ... He was a liberal studies major. ... I knew that engineering was hard. ... I didn't know what to expect.

Nhia never saw the proper academic support or guidance, instead, he struggled alone for the first couple of years. The lack of the ability to navigate non-academic related knowledge also played an important role for participants' educational success. For example, Xeng "thought it was just like an all-in-one package. You know, once you apply to school, everything would just come naturally with it." Xeng failed to turn in his housing application and had no housing arranged when he showed up to the university.

School choice. Participants' expressed their lack of understanding of the available choices of college or university while they were in high school. Due to their proximity, the community college, the nearest California State University, or the nearest University of California were often expressed as the post-high school education institution of choice. For example, Xong "applied only to two. I was pretty geared toward UC [university name]." Others like Cha "didn't think much about college. College was a way for me to get out. That's what it was. It was a way for me to get out of town." Participants' school choice was primarily influenced by their ties with their family, friends, or their educational opportunities. For example, Chi's chose the same university as her friends and "most of us went to [university name] together. We all stuck, even to this day, we still hang out."

Gender differences existed for participants' decisions about their school choice. Male participants often expressed their own cultural obligations to their families to remain close to home, especially if they were either the sole, oldest, or youngest son. For example, Xong was the youngest son, and he "kind of knew. My parents really want me to go down to [university name]" due to its proximity. Whereas female participants shared being pressured by the

protective nature of their Mong families to stay close to home. For example, Yer declined to attend a selective private art academy on a partial scholarship:

My mom would constantly remind me, you shouldn't go. You shouldn't go. I'm going to get murdered. I'm going to get pregnant. Because I was the oldest and if I had moved out. My dad would have made her feel guiltier that she was a bad mom. And so I decided to stay.

Navigating education cost. Participants expressed how various financial challenges threaten their success in education attainment while attending college. All participants came from families with income well below the poverty line for their family size and often needed to earn money beyond their financial aid or scholarships. For example, Nhia had to work full time during college:

At the time, I didn't have any money. Purely relying on financial aid and that's not enough. ... Might as well get a full time job.

Financial difficulties were not limited to educational activities. The participants often shared the financial burden to support their families during their educational careers as well. For example, Va stayed home in order to help pay for the family mortgage:

In my high school years, we were tired of moving house to house. And our landlord had lost his house ... to the bank. All of us brothers, you know, like Hmong style trying to survive in one household and trying to get educated and, you know, feed our family. We all pitched in and bought a house together with [brother's name] taking the lead as the eldest in the household at that time. We all kind of pitch in to cover the mortgage. ... I was in my [high school] senior year.

Resiliency Through Caring Agents

Sub-themes relating to participants' educational resiliency were categorized as caring agents, community college, and finding purpose through experience.

Caring agents. Participants identified and credited various caring agents and agencies, such as AVID, Upward Bound, Educational Talent Search, and Educational Opportunity Program, as instrumental to their ability to navigate educational requirements. Finding these

agents early determined participants' time to academic success. For example, Pheng earned his degree from a private, highly selective R1 institution:

The one, for sure thing, that was significantly different though was that. Uh. I got accepted into, in my junior year, I got accepted to this leadership program. They were recruiting at [high school name] high school. That program did get me into [university name].

Caring agents often provided needed insight and navigation for specific career fields. For example, Va expressed, "I failed my first java class. And uh. I remember. Uh. The second semester, I aced Java – different teacher." However, after not finding passion in his programming classes, he went over to a different college to explore different majors:

In the middle of the conversation. The advisor pulled out a form, the change of major form. Not really knowing, not being good at expressing what my thoughts were. I don't have a reason not to change. I just signed on the dotted line. The rest was history.

Participants' who did not find support through their academic institutions or faculty found it through their classmates. For example, Kongmeng attributed his friendship with a non-English speaking Vietnamese classmate whom he met at community college for helping him to be successful:

I had one friend. He actually came overseas. He's Vietnamese. Me and him graduated [college name]. He was older than me. Over in Vietnam, he already gotten his bachelors. We both kind of help each other out, he didn't speak English.

These caring agents or agencies were not limited to those in education. For example, Chou made two failed attempts in an engineering education. But Chou was not a typical student as he already had his "first kid in high school. You know, I should be – I don't know why. I went to [college name] college for, I think, for a couple of months. ... I did not do well." Chou made a second attempt at pursuing an engineering degree:

I applied, they called [university name]. I applied and I went there. ... It's not going well. It's not the school, it's just yourself. It's not going good. So, I just, I just dropped out.

However, it was a neighbor that helped guide Chou to his final career choice:

He comes over to my house. He says Chou, you want to be a [vocational occupation]? I saw you working in your yard. You are a hard worker.

Chou became a vocational apprentice, earned a vocational license, and became a small business owner.

Community college. Participants identified the critical role which various caring agents at the local community college played towards their education attainment. Participants who failed their first attempt at post-high school education found academic redemption at the community college. For example, Cheng “failed out of [university name], so I came back here to [community college].” In returning, it was an encounter with a community college staff member:

I always wanted to be a [occupation]. ... When I came back here. I spoke to [name]. ... She told me we had a [occupation program]. I didn’t know that. Growing up no one knows that. ... [Name] told me to speak to [second name] at [assistance program]. ... [Assistance program] paid for my books and classes because I was in a [career] program. ... By the time I came back, all my financial aid was done.

The community college also provided guidance to participants who excel academically in high school but struggled to choose the correct career path. For example, Kia wrote down Asian Studies in her college application. Kia was “not really sure what to do. There is a moment you were sure what you want to do and then there’s a time you don’t know what to do.” Before the start of the semester, Kia rescinded her acceptance to a highly ranked national university even though she “went to the [university name] orientation. I even registered for the class.” Kia eventually found her passion in medicine while in community college.

Finding purpose through exposure. Participants reported that they found academic resiliency once they found strong insights on their career purpose within their major of choice. For example, Tao had few plans beyond high school:

Honestly, I thought I would graduate from high school and go to work. I didn't apply to any community college or CSU or UC, I didn't take my SATs. I didn't do any of that. I just stayed at home with my parents and then shortly after that I got married.

After bouncing from various jobs for multiple years, she found focus in her children and working with children:

I worked at various jobs. I worked at [work place #1] for three months. Right after that, I worked at [work place #2]. Right after I had my daughter, I finally landed at [work place #3]. That's where I stayed for 3 years. That's when I started thinking about where my life was headed.

Tao re-enrolled at the local community college and earned her bachelor's degree at a highly selective public university.

Participants who found marginalization in their original major found a renewed focus in helping others avoid the same fate by become caring agents themselves. For example, Tou spent his first two years struggling in computer science with little support. However, a chance inquiry for employment at a non-STEM academic support program gave him purpose:

Her own personal secretary offered me a job. From there, I got the chance to work with a lot of [support program]. In my 3rd year I started to research a little bit more about [support program] and started talking to different [staff members] and explored different college which offered [support program] program. The moment I bought into it, school became easy.

Discussion

This research examines the lived experiences of the human capital formation of Mong adults who return to their rural/semi-rural Northern California communities. The themes of learning in isolation, lacking of navigation capital, and resiliency through caring agents describe how Mong students' obtained social capital within their communities. It has long been acknowledged that there is a positive relationship between higher education and human capital (Becker, 1993b). Rural-raised individuals who return to their communities play an important role in developing the career aspirations of rural students (Byun, Meece, Irvin, et al., 2012). The

selection of participants who opted to remain or return to their rural/semi-rural communities revealed that these students were not among the strongest academic performers in their high school groups. The plurality of the participants did not consider themselves the top performers of Mong students compared to those who chose to out-migrate. The choice of those who stayed or returned is important as it examines how their social capital was built as students; it also shows how they contribute their social capital as adults when interacting within their communities. Social capital played an important role in the human capital success of students (Coleman, 1988; Sun, 1999) and rurality (Byun, Meece, Irvin, et al., 2012; Israel et al., 2009; Petrin et al., 2014).

The results of this research suggest that the isolation of Mong students as minorities within the rural community weakens the strong social capital support that White rural students enjoy. Mong students, like other refugees, had strong experiential differences from their Anglo peers (Colvin, 2017). Race and ethnicity plays an important role in the experiences of students in rurality (Conger et al., 2016). Racial, class, language, and cultural barriers among the Mong students' rural White-dominated communities contributed to their weak social capital in their communities. The weak social capital in their communities threatens Mong students' educational resiliency. The findings suggest that the Mong's strong cultural capital and various caring agents eventually overcame their initial rural social capital deficit. The findings build on previous findings of Mong children and young adults that the persistent 30-year struggle of higher education attainment within the Mong community (S. Lee et al., 2017; Ngo, 2017) applies even within rurality.

Characteristics that contributed towards the rural-urban education attainment gap that apply to rural/semi-rural students also apply to Mong students. Mong students in rurality/semi-

rurality also exhibit the same school choice characteristics of rural students, which means the selection of less prestigious colleges that are closer to home (Byun et al., 2015, 2017).

Participants expressed the dilemma of attending the local community college or the nearby California State University even though they were admitted to highly-ranked national universities. Additionally, rural students must choose to remain close to home or attend a university outside their communities (Tieken, 2016). Similarly to rural students, all participants were first-generation college students. Rural Mong students had few models for career aspirations; they also had few first-hand models of success within education. Even without models, the Mong parents had high aspirations for their children. The findings were consistent with existing literature on South East Asians (Maramba et al., 2018). However, the finding found stark differences exist that contrasts the academic success of rural students against the type of social capital available within their communities. Mong students lack strong community-level social capital but have strong family-level social and cultural capital.

Periods of isolation created a social capital deficit between Mong students and their White peers and their White-dominated communities. Rural Mong students were isolated early on in their academic experience through the use of language similar to rural Hispanic students (Sizemore, 2004). Those who were able to overcome their language isolation still experienced isolation through class and culture throughout their teen and early adult years. Very few participants retained their White friends past their middle school years. Mong adults in their college years remained isolated from their peers within their educational career choice. Differences between culture, class, and race, also played a large role in Mong students' lack of participation in the expected social norms of the college experience. Almost all participants could not recall participating in college campus-sponsored socialization activities. Support from

their minority ethnic peers dominated when participants did talk favorably about their college peers and their support. These periods of isolation contributed to a poor sense of belonging. Sense of school belonging has long been seen as a positive role in high-poverty communities (M. J. Irvin et al., 2011).

Cultural and academic isolation, paired with racism and discrimination, diminished the community social capital for rural Mong students and affected their ability to navigate the educational system. In lieu of community support, participants often looked inwards within their own family and the Mong community for support and guidance. The isolation led to long delays for participants as they attempted to navigate educational success as front-runners within their community. Very few participants graduated within the original major in which was chosen at the onset of their post-high school educational experience. For Mong students who did not find initial success in university life, the community college played a key role in providing their academic guidance and redemption. Mong students who were successful overwhelmingly identified various caring agents in providing the much-needed support and navigation for success. Limitations of both parental and student knowledge of the education system and career pathway was remedied by those various caring agents. Although not a focus of this research, Mong families' strong cultural obligations revealed how the educational front-runners in the Mong community contributed to the uplift of their siblings, family, and community. Even those who did not find success in their initial choice of careers pivoted to careers that contributed to the additional formation of social and economic capital for their families. Many of the participants restructured their educational experiences to ensure the best success for their poor and underserved families and communities.

Two fields of study dominated participants' initial career aspirations: medicine and engineering/computer science. Female participants expressed interest in medicine, whereas male participants expressed interest in engineering/computer science. No female participant who originally majored in medicine graduated in medicine. Only a single male successfully graduated with an engineering degree. Both genders equally expressed the feeling of learning in isolation from their non-Mong peers within their academic fields of choice. However, only male participants shared experiences of being rejected and marginalized from institutional support programs from which they sought support. Mong males who did not major in an Asian male overrepresented major did not express rejection from any support services. Mong males' struggle in education remains unrecognized and invisible (Endo, 2017; Smalkoski, 2018). Both state and federal education equity policies, through race-based exclusion and the model minority myth, was a major factor in these Mong males' educational experiences. These findings may provide insight to understanding the widening educational gap between female Mong students and male Mong students within the university setting (S. Lee et al., 2016; Lor & Hutchison, 2017).

Recommendations

Based on the lessons learned from pre-existing studies and this research, the following are recommended:

1. Include the educational experiences of Asians within the discourse of higher education attainment. The research shows a gap in rural educational research, which examines the role social capital within students who do not have large community social capital.
2. Expand the availability of doctoral-level higher education institutions within Northern California. Rural students are more likely to remain close to home. The availability of higher education institutions increases rural students' attendance at highly selective universities and decreases rural communities' academic isolation.

3. Expand research on community colleges and their role as safety nets in the educational attainment of rural students during their second attempts in human capital formation.
4. Further research is needed to understand the educational impact of exclusionary policies on traditionally low-performing Asians within academic fields which have a high representation of Asians.

Implications

As America takes in more refugees from war-torn, pre-literate, and impoverished populations, the existing narrow ethnic or race standards for support may be inadequate for equitable support programs. The educational attainment of these refugees within small or isolated communities plays an important role in their vitality. These refugees may be disproportionately affected as they may not exhibit the characteristics of success in the larger pan-ethnic classification. In communities where social capital plays an important role in education attainment racial, class, cultural, and language isolation puts their education at risk. As these refugees may never reach a sizable representation within their communities, their educational success remains at risk, and their needs unidentified. The status of perpetual minorities hides their individual support needs from the larger population. Mong arrived in California when Asians were openly discriminated against within California's higher education system. The lived experiences of these Mong students can provide better insight into creating a more equitable education system for the incoming groups of refugees.

CHAPTER 4: ARTICLE TWO

THE MAKING OF PLACE AND HOME FOR EDUCATED MONG STAYERS AND
RETURNERS IN RURAL/SEMI-RURAL NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

Abstract

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This study examines the experience and factors that contribute to educationally successful Mong adults within rural and semi-rural Northern California to stay or return to their hometowns. Participants consisted of 19 Mong adults from various localities within three counties that have large communities of Mong families. Computational grounded theory was used to find emergent themes. The three themes: rural acceptance and discrimination, family as factor for stay or return migration, and contributions as minorities describe Mong adults' social capital towards their place affinity. Family was the strongest factor for participants to remain or return to their home communities. Political contributions remain the largest barrier for rural Mong adults' contribution to their communities.

"What can I say? To us it's a slime pit, but to them it's home."

Lt. Commander Geordi La Forge (fictional character, Star Trek – The Next Generation)

Foreword

In 1987, when *Star Trek the Next Generation* premiered, I was instantly hooked with space exploration and engineering. The Enterprise's chief engineer, Geordi La Forge, inspired me to pursue a career in engineering. A career which had few opportunities in my hometown. In the first 15 years of my professional career, my business card would contain the word "engineer." In my return rurality, I had to find resiliency within the problem of rurality's lack of economics and opportunity.

Exactly 20 years after I began my educational pursuit to become an engineer, I would complete the professional pivot to a passion I found while in high school – education. In choosing to flee Linda a year early, I would spend many nights wandering the halls of Yuba College, earning the missing courses to cover my missing A-F requirements⁹. At the beginning of my junior and senior year, I optioned an early childhood education course at Yuba College in lieu of senior English. The course would allow me to find my passion at the intersections of technology and education. When I graduated, my classmates would vote me as most likely to become a teacher and return back to Lindhurst High School. Nevertheless, I held on to my dream of escaping Linda. I opted not to follow their career advice and pursue my childhood dream of engineering.

By the time I return to Linda, I would be roughly the same age as my father when he chose Linda to be his home. The difference was that our human capital within that “slime pit”

⁹ A-F requirements were the minimum courses needed to be considered for standard admission into the UC or CSU university school systems

would be in vastly different places. But my human capital was formed for a different world in which my education did not prepare me for. In finding my professional passions, I would combine them to find digital resiliency in the limited opportunities of my semi-rural hometown. The experience has shifted my own misguided views of the “slime pit” shaped by urbanormativity. In working towards being part of the community – as opposed to working towards fleeing it I came to see the positives of rurality. This chapter examines why some educationally successful Mong adults choose to either remain or return back to their Northern California’s “slime pits” to be part of the contributors of rural vitality.

The Making of Place and Home in Rurality

There are three defining sociological features that define rural place – geographical location, material form, and investments and meaning (Gieryn, 2000). The concept of rural space is often oversimplified as physical spaces occupied by few within large swaths of space (Fulkerson & Thomas, 2014b). Rurality’s material form is built from concentrated natural resources, usually either agriculture or mineral/resource extraction (Ulrich-Schad & Duncan, 2018). Rural economies are often viewed as economic dead zones (Crabtree, 2016). Three activities can affect the sustainability and resiliency of new economic activities in rural economies (Li et al., 2019). Li et al. (2019) suggest the development of new economic activities, supporting local entrepreneurship, and leveraging rurality’s social capital strengths to improve rural vitality. These three activities are challenging as they focus on rurality’s ability to hold on or gain new human capital. For decades, rurality has experienced the “hollowing out” of the human capital and economic resources (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Sherman & Sage, 2011).

Rural-raised stayers or returners face negative rural stereotypes of poor life success through urbanormative values and privileges. Rural high school students express perceptions

that stayers or returners are “uncool” and are among those with the least academic potential (Pedersen & Gram, 2018). These negative perceptions of stayers and returners are influenced by teachers and adults (Pedersen & Gram, 2018; Petrin et al., 2014). Yet, the return of high-achieving rural-raised individuals plays the largest role in forming the post-secondary education and aspiration of rural students (Petrin et al., 2014). Within human capital theory, it is well known that human capital increases as education increases (Becker, 1993b; Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2007). Returnees must weigh the different combinations of factors to return home against those to out-migrate (von Reichert et al., 2014). Influential factors in rural out-migration are often related to either poor economics or low opportunities (Petrin et al., 2014; Vazzana & Rudi-Poloshka, 2019; von Reichert et al., 2014). Challenges to both economics and opportunities play an important role in stayers and returners’ rural economic security. Returners often will need to carve out their own economic niche, such as self-employment (von Reichert et al., 2011).

Most research on return migration focuses on the majority White population or large minority populations such as African-Americans or Hispanics. For rural minorities, no single factor can explain why they return (Lei & South, 2016). Little research is available on the return or stay migration of small ethnic groups such as Mong refugees, who represent a tiny fraction of the overall rural community. Mong are a mountainous ethnic group from Laos. After the withdrawal of US military forces in French Indo-China, pro-American Mong in Laos would become refugees after the Secret War in Laos (Hamilton-Merritt, 1999, p. 371). By 2019, approximately 299,000 Mong who are either refugees or descendants of refugees called the United States home. Many of those Mong refugees opted for life within large urban centers such as Fresno or Minneapolis. However, small enclaves of Mong refugee communities exist in

California's rural or semi-rural Northern California communities. These enclaves of Mong communities represent an Asian ethnic plurality for their respective towns or cities.

These Northern California rural and semi-rural communities are often politically isolated from the rest of the state – often voting overwhelmingly conservative. The area often holds an identity in contrast to the rest of California. For example, some of these counties have adopted formal resolutions to succeed and join the State of Jefferson. The State of Jefferson is the movement to separate the most upper northern sections of California and the southern section of Oregon to be its own state. Yuba and Sutter counties were among the first two counties to openly defy and challenge the legality of Governor Newsom's stay-at-home orders during the COVID-19 pandemic. These areas have experienced periods of large influxes of Asian immigration and out-migration. Marysville, CA (located in Yuba County) once held the second-largest Chinese population in the United States during the California gold rush period. Marysville once held a sizable Japanese population in Northern California. Yuba City (located in Sutter County) holds one of the largest concentrations of Sikhs in the US.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to examine the factors which contributed to educationally successful rural/semi-rural raised Mong adults to stay or return migrate to their rural/semi-rural Northern California hometowns. The study was guided by the following research question: What are the factors that contribute to educationally successful Mong adults deciding to stay or return to their rural localities?

Method

Grounded theory (B. Glaser, 2008; B. G. Glaser & Strauss, 2009) along with Nelson's three-step methodological framework for computational grounded theory (CGT) (Nelson, 2017)

was employed. Manual coding using the constant comparative method from the grounded theory approach was employed to complement CGT. Manual coding was employed because existing computational tools and methodology cannot replace the human researcher and only provides an effective complement (Nelson et al., 2018). A grounded theory approach was appropriate for this research as few studies examine the experiences of Mong individuals in the context of place. This approach allows the emergent themes of the experiences of rural-raised Mong adults without prior preconceived theories (B. G. Glaser & Strauss, 2009). Frameworks and theories involving other minorities in rurality were deemed inappropriate for Mong-Americans as they differ in the relative population size (Hispanics), the historical American experience (African-Americans), or immigration context (Indian, Chinese, and Japanese). The usage of CGT was employed to allow a single researcher to provide a rigorous repeatable methodical approach to affirm the analysis of large datasets such as large unstructured open-ended interviews within grounded theory.

Unstructured open-ended interviews were employed to maximize authentic responses. Although this research focused primarily on stay or return migration, questions also included participants' migratory experience into rurality, educational and community experiences, and participant and other community members' perception of each other. The author conducted all interviews as an insider, being a Mong refugee having earned his master's degree and returned migrated back to close proximity to his semi-rural Northern California hometown. Interviews were conducted virtually online using a major commercial meeting application. Participants were provided an electronic \$20 gift card to Amazon prior to the interview and were given the opportunity to withdraw at any time. Interviews were conducted primarily in English with

occasional usage of Mong questions or responses. Interviews lasted approximately 2 hours and were digitally audio recorded.

A major cloud computing machine learning transcription service was used to initially transcribe the audio recordings. English responses were manually corrected to verbatim. English translations done by the author were substituted for portions that contained Mong. All CGT data analysis was done using Python and the Natural Language Toolkit (NLTK). Preprocessing of the data through the removal of punctuations, stop words (using Gensim), and common phrases such as “yeah”, “um”, “uh”, “you know”, etc. was done prior to applying the Nelson’s (Nelson, 2017) framework. Pattern detection (step one) was done using unsupervised topical modeling with latent dirichlet allocation. Pattern refinement (step two) using guided deep reading based on the results of the topic model data using Pandas. Pattern confirmation (step three) for specificity and concreteness was measured using WordNet (part of NLTK). For the manual coding, interviews were coded separately and compared with previous interviews within different codes. Specific sub-categories were used to organize the different codes. Results of the manual coding was then used to confirm and complement the results from CGT.

Participants

Participants were identified using a convenient snowball sampling. Advertisements in social media were used to find participants who met the following participation criteria: post-secondary-educated Mong adults who were raised and stayed or return-migrated within towns or cities within the 20 uppermost counties in Northern California. After each interview, the author asked for referrals until 20 willing participants were collected. One participant withdrew due to timing. No attempt to provide either age or gender balance occurred. Participants were invited either using email, social media messaging, or direct phone calls depending upon the referral’s

communication method given. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the participants. Items relating to the participant's universities, final degrees, professions, and hometowns are redacted in the quotes in order to reduce the ability to be identified due to the small size of the Mong community.

Self-reported demographic data regarding age, education, and family income was collected prior to the interviews. Participants consisted of 19 (13 males and six females) Mong-American adults living in or close to their respective rural/semi-rural hometowns who completed their post-secondary education. All participants were either refugees or children of refugees. Thirteen participants' ages ranged from 18 to 39 and six are 40 to 55. Eight participants were single and 11 were married. Four participants earned their master's degree, 17 earned their bachelor's, 4 earned their associates, and 1 held a technical trade license. Five participants had family incomes in the 5th quintile (\$128K+), ten were in the 4th quintile (\$78K-128K), two were in the 3rd quintile (\$48K-78K), and two were in the 2nd quintile (\$25K-48K). Three participants worked in the private sector, 12 worked in the public sector, three were full-time students, and one was retired.

Research Site

Participants were from multiple small rural or semi-rural cities or townships from three Northern California counties: Butte, Sutter, and Yuba. With the exception for Sutter County, Mong, consisted of the plurality of Asian ethnicities in which the participants resided.

Limitations

The usage of a mixture of convenient and snowball sampling may cause community bias. Community bias within the snowball sampling may exist in the data as it may favor individuals who share similar reasons for their return to their rural communities through their social

networks. The reliance on personal memories may also possibly distort the responses due to personal bias, anger, anxiety, politics, simple lack of awareness, and subjected to recall errors (Patton, 2015, p. 580). The interview relied on recalled periods of between 20-35 years as participants collected their experiences in navigating rural lifeway. Additionally, the researcher is a novice to applications of grounded theory and this research heavily relied on CGT. Errors relating to novice research's ability to supplement, compliments and identify limitations in machine-based topical coding may exist. To minimize the errors relating to a novice researcher, steps to avoid common pitfalls from novice researchers outlined by M. Alammar et al. (M. Alammar et al., 2019) was employed. To allow for other interpretations of the themes the rich data was included.

Results

The participants' responses were classified into four major themes: rural acceptance and discrimination, family as stay or return migration, factors for rural flight, and meaningful contributions as minorities.

Rural Acceptance and Discrimination

Under rural acceptance and discrimination are the sub-themes relating to participants' experience of racism, gender differences in racism, racial discrimination, racial and cultural isolation, and caring agents.

Experiences in racism and discrimination. Participants reported having either experienced, witnessed, or heard second-hand accounts of racism and discrimination. At the initial arrival of Cheng and his family "had swastikas spray painted on my, our van. We had our house egg a lot. We had dead cats at our porch." However, Cheng's racial altercations were not only limited to his White neighbors. But for Cheng, "growing up, I don't, I don't ever remember

any fights against White Power people. We got into fights with the Mexicans.” Participants’ exposure to racism included both their community and their schools. For example, Kongmeng, in reflecting on his elementary school experience:

The experience there was pretty good. Um. The teachers, actually, during that time treated us pretty well I guess. I know there were incidents where people did come across certain teachers who were kind of racist. However, from my experience the teachers there had been great to me.

Participants reported being often mistaken for other Asian ethnicities. For example, Cha stated the following:

School environment, there was times were racial did come into play. There were times, not in the classroom, where kids would bring that up. Because they classified me as Chinese. And a regular Chinese slur like chink would come in too.

Even as adults, participants reported having the feelings of facing discrimination. For example, when Xeng is “out in regular American society. I feel, I keep getting discriminated, because I’m Asian.”

Gender differences in racism. Female participants did not report being in physical racial altercations whereas Mong male participants did. For example, Ka just felt that everyone just didn’t like each other:

Growing up and going through high school. There was a lot of racial issues with the Whites. I don’t think I’ve been in a confrontation before. It’s just that we didn’t like each other.

Racial and cultural isolation. Participants recognized and expressed that they were different from their rural community peers. Cha had a large group of multi-racial friends but knew he “was different. My home environment was totally different.” Those differences led to participants reporting being implicitly or explicitly isolated due to those racial or cultural differences as participants matured. Gaoseng had a large number of White friends prior to entering high school:

Yeah, it changed. From mostly White to sticking with my own kind. I think, mostly, because I wasn't doing a lot of the same thing they were. They just kind of just slowly and slowly stop inviting you. So you don't hangout.

Caring agents. Participants mentioned various caring agents or agencies who played an important role in forming the acceptance of the participants into the rural lifeway. Ka credits an African American school staff member in helping negotiate racial conflicts:

When we went to high school ... she was a African-American women. She was the advisor for the Hmong club. Advisor for the African-American club. For me, I felt like she kinda protected everyone ... of the racism that happened. Between Asians and African-Americans, and the White people, and even the teachers because, you know, we weren't being treated fairly. With her there we didn't have much issues.

Family as Stay or Return Migration

Contributing factors on why the participants either stayed or returned back to their hometown were categorized under family as the anchor.

Family as the anchor. When participants mentioned staying or returning, family was universally reported. Participants mentioned cultural obligations, closeness to, and the various safety nets provided by their families. For example, Xong felt "that there is that responsibility in coming back and helping them out as well." Xong's obligation to his family intensified when he became the "head of the household. Once we found out that my dad had terminal cancer, I transferred back." Participants' obligations to family were not restricted to incidents of family tragedy. When Fong got married, he to return home "for the traditional marriage, in the sense I bring her back home to my parent's home." As the oldest son, Fong expressed obligation to his parents:

Being the oldest too and moving away from home. You know, like moving back, and not staying with my parents. That's definitely. There is a lot of like, uh, I guess, hard, not hard, I mean, insults.

Participants' strong relationship with their parents played an important role outside of family obligations. For example, Pheng returned home to maximize the time left as his parents entered their golden years:

The family was definitely part of it too. Because, I have travelled to so many places. I've been to 15 countries at that point. Now I started thinking about what was more important to me. We've lost a number of aunts and uncle and my parents' are much older.

Families also provided various safety nets for participants to return to once they completed their college education or failed at their first attempt. After completing his degree and working and living for over a decade outside of his hometown, Xeng returned and commuted:

It would depend on certain things. If I could find childcare somewhere else, like [city name]. We probably have moved to [city name]. But, like I said, her parents was probably the reason why we stayed in [city name].

Cha who was married, in college, and astray in his first college attempt "was a professional student. I came back. I figured, it looks like I'm a profession student. ... I'm not getting anywhere. I'm going to leave." As result, Cha returned home and completed his associate's degree at the local community college.

Factors for Rural Flight

Sub-themes relating to rural flight are negative place affinity and limited rural economics and opportunities.

Negative place affinity. Participants did not report positive place affinity to their rural towns at the onset of their adult lives. Ka "wanted to spread my wings and fly. I wanted to see the world beyond [hometown]." Ka was among the stayers and never left her hometown. Ka "was a bit jealous. But I was content." Others, like Fong, could not recall any good memories outside of his friends and the Mong community. For Fong, "there is not a lot, I would say, of

this town, where I would say, oh man. Those were some good memories here, this spot. There is nothing, really.”

Participants who did leave and were employed elsewhere made little plans to return. For example, Tou was employed and was living in a major metropolitan area:

I was very happy with my job. I happened to see a posting on [board posting]. And I applied. They offered me a job. ... I told my wife, you know what, maybe, we can go home. You don't have to work. It's a smaller town, we can raise our kids. ... It was one of the better decisions I made. ... I had no plans.

Positive place affinity was mentioned after participants were well settled back in their hometowns or after a brief period in larger metropolitan areas. For example, Ka now has a favorable view of her hometown, especially when “think[ing] about raising a family, yes, I believe [city name] is the place to raise a family because you avoid all those conflicts.”

However, she sympathizes with families who make their leave:

A lot of the families that move away, they moved because they couldn't get a job. ... In the past couple of years, between the flood and fire. It surprised me that they haven't left earlier.

Limited rural economics and opportunities. When participants mention why they considered leaving rurality, economics and opportunities were universally reported. Participants expressed making the cognizant choice to remain close to family in exchange for less economic security and opportunities. For example, Fue remains underemployed working in two part-time jobs: “It's funny, we talk and we are all doing the same thing and for us it's a choice. For us, [city name] is home.” The desire for rural flight remains especially for participants who did not choose to voluntarily stay or return. The closest major metropolitan city dominated where participants would out-migrate to. For example, the quality of schools based on property tax drove Xeng's desire to leave:

I want to move to [city name]. I think because, uh, the house from there is a little bit higher. And with that, there might be more opportunities with schools. They would have connections with people in higher position of society.

Even though Kia was economically successful in a professional job, she expressed urbanality's better opportunity for employment growth:

It doesn't have a lot of opportunity for growth otherwise it's a ok place to live. If you stay here you have to commute to other places for jobs. ... It's a bigger a city, they have other stuff.

Meaningful Contributions as Minorities

Sub-themes surrounding participants' perceptions of the Mong community's contributions from their stay or return migration are positive economic contributions and lack of political contributions.

Positive economic contributions. The ability to convey the Mong community's positive contributions to rural vitality depended on the relative "life experience" of the participant. For example, Tou's experience in his professional and life experiences reinforced his belief in everyone's positive contributions:

Absolutely, I mean I work in [job field] and living here, moving away, coming back. I can see Mong and others contribute to this community. Yes. I think that we have contributed a lot in this community.

Participants perceived being part of the rural tax base as the most meaningful contributor. For example, Cha, believed "those that stay[ed] found jobs in the community. Yes. They're taxpayers now. I think, in the minds of the Whites, that's what they see too." Participants recognized that their family's consumer activities contributed to local revenues towards local jobs and taxes. For example, Xong recognized the positive role of education attainment as key to the Mong community's contributions: "All it took was our education and we came back and worked in the county and the community." But even without an education, Xong expressed his

“parents never work. They had assistance the whole time. They shopped locally. They built things locally.”

Lack of political contributions. Participants expressed the Mong community’s lack of the ability to genuinely participate in their rural community’s political system as their least meaningful contribution. Initially, Fong could not identify any contributions from the Mong community to their rural/semi-rural communities:

No. I don’t think there is an avenue or a way to be a contributing part of this community. To give back. I can’t think of any group or any program. I don’t know how to get involve to tell you the truth.

In clarifying what “contributions” meant to him, he remarked: “You know, like making, like voting. Politics, like policy. Being part of the government.” Participants view political participation as the remaining barrier for meaningful contribution when compared to other ethnic groups. For example, Kia shared that: “They [Mong] do volunteer in community service. But I think that Mong people are not as active in politics then other people.” Participants expressed the lack of the ability for Mong individuals to get meaningful recognition for their community service towards political offices. For example, Fue did not think that the Mong community’s efforts could be recognized:

We get a lot of that [non-recognition], for the things we do. At the same time, uh, it’s such a short thing, it happens so quick. Um. People don’t recognized it until way later and it’s already five or ten years down the road. Oh, they were like, this person did this but it’s already too late to bring it up. It’s not up to date anymore.

Participants felt a sense of high standards and expectations for any Mong individuals capable of running for rural political office. Kia shared, “they have to be exceptional” when asked what it took. Others like Cha could not see that any Mong individual from their generation could become a political “equal” to their White, Indian (Sikh), or Hispanic peers, including those with exceptional community standing: “The word is equal. We’ll never be equal.”

Discussion

This research examined the experience of the most educationally resilient Mong individuals who chose to remain or return to their rural/semi-rural Northern California hometowns after their post-high school education. Participants of this study were either refugees or children of refugees. Refugees who achieve same-level English proficiency have higher human capital than economic migrants (Cortes, 2004). The out-migrations of rural-raised human capital threatens rurality's sustainability and economic development (Dustmann et al., 2011; Sherman & Sage, 2011). Rural-raised individuals' choice to stay or return plays an essential role in navigating the rural lifeway and creating new economic opportunities (Gladwin et al., 1989). Rural-raised refugees can contribute to a vital role in the community and economic development of their rural communities. However, there are significant differences in the rural experiences between non-Anglo ethnicities (Colvin, 2017).

Social capital plays an essential role in rurality's vitality and resiliency (Besser & Miller, 2013). Participants' experience of social and community isolation suggests that Mong individuals have low community social capital. The lack of community social capital threatens well-educated Mong individuals' place affinity towards their stay or return. The feeling of rootedness plays an important role in rural-raised individuals' stay or return (Morse & Mudgett, 2018). Participants did not express the initial experience of rootedness at the onset of adulthood. The results suggest that the out-migration of well-educated rural-raised Mong adults remains a constant threat. Isolation, discrimination, racism, economics, social stratification, and opportunity contributed to their low place affinity and lack of community social capital.

The results suggest a strong perception of community and political isolation and racism and discrimination as undermining Mong community's social capital to form positive place

affinity for stay or return migration. The theme of racism and discrimination dominated the early experiences of the participants. Consistent with previous studies on rural out-migration, economics and opportunities dominated the results for why Mong individuals consider leaving rurality. Community and political isolation (outside the Mong community) dominated why the lack of place affinity formed. Unlike other rural immigrant populations, which developed some form of place/space affinity, these rural-raised Mong adults expressed very little affinity for place or space. On the contrary, the findings suggest that well-educated first-generation Mong-American adults formed little affinity or attachment to their place or space at the onset of their adult life. Negative views of rural life under urbanormative lenses remain even for Mong families who remained or returned. However, strong Mong family and community values overcame either the concrete or perceived negative tradeoffs of the rural lifeway.

Family dominated why rural/semi-rural raised Mong adults chose to return back to their rural/semi-rural hometowns. In contrast, positive features of rurality, such as low housing cost, low traffic, etc., did not factor in Mong adults' decision to return or stay without family considerations. The results suggest that family form the anchor for Mong stayers or returners to remain in their rural or semi-rural Northern California communities. Mong families' strong family social capital overcame the community social capital and place affinity deficit for participants to stay or return. The result of family remains consistent with prior findings for both White and minority rural-raised adults. No singular family-related factor existed for each participant's decision to stay or return. Factors included family obligations, ties, and safety net. These family factors drove either voluntary or involuntary return of these educated Mong adults' stay or return. Strong family obligations often invoked involuntary stay or return whereas,

family ties invoked voluntary return. The results suggest that lack of community rootedness in rural communities can be overcome by a strong family structure and bonds.

Rural-raised Mong adults are contributors to rural Northern California's tax base in various forms. Mong, adults or otherwise, are also contributors outside of economic lenses through different aspects of their community involvement. Few participants expressed the Mong's contributions in the Vietnam War effort in Laos as contributions. However, the lack of the Mong community's political voice and representation through political isolation overwhelmingly dominated the results on why the perception of the lack of goodwill of their rural contributions exist. The Mong community's relatively small size and social/cultural isolation contributed greatly to their reduced standing in political voice. The results revealed an educational gap (and opportunity) for Mong adults and their perception of the Mong community's contribution to their rural communities.

Recommendations

As this research focuses on the vitality of rural communities on returning human capital of overlooked populations, three recommendations can improve stay or return-migration of all human capital in which rurality help raised.

1. Additional research is needed on how these well-educated Mong adults successfully navigated the rurality's limited economic and opportunities without strong community social capital ties. The results may provide insight into innovative practices for emerging rural economies which may improve rurality's vitality.
2. Rural communities need to work on reducing the community and political isolation of the Mong individuals. Increasing recruitment, outreach, and membership of Mong individuals into existing community-based organizations and charities such as Habitat for Humanity, Salvation Army, Lion's International, and Rotary International.
3. Further research on the rural flight of overlooked rural ethnicities remains. Little research exists on the outward migration of the previous Asian ethnic groups (Chinese and Japanese) in Northern California; the Mong's social and community isolation paired

with the lack of economic and opportunities provides a practical framework for their rural flight as well.

Implications

As America's demographics rapidly change in the 21st century, the results reveal an important insight on needed research on rural community members whose populations' size are not the dominant ethnicities. The finding shows that members who are part of small ethnic groups within rurality are faced with challenges, such as lack of community social capital, economics, and opportunities. The community and political isolation negate the advantages of rurality's social capital benefits for those minorities that stay or return. Those rural-raised individuals that do stay or return only do so because of strong family values outside of the rural community. For these Mong adults, home is home because of family.

CHAPTER 5: SYNTHESIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

“Among refugees are relocated in a manner to allow them the best chance to succeed and become contributing members of their community in as short a period as possible.”

- Al Amaro, Yuba County Supervisor (1995-2003)

Foreword

I spent most of my academic and professional life within the applied quantitative domain of science. In choosing a qualitative study, it allowed me to reflect on my own journey through rurality. I came to better appreciate all of rurality’s contributions and those in rurality who helped develop my human capital. It is often perceived that both the State of Jefferson and the Mong people are the wrong type of community members for their respective larger communities. The State of Jefferson remains a political outcast and mockery for those outside of it. At the beginning of this chapter, is the excerpt from former supervisor Amaro’s letter explaining why Mong refugees should resettle elsewhere. The human capital formation of a country’s best and brightest with the utmost resources is easy. The human capital formation of the “rejects” of those from another country inside a “slime pit” with the bare minimal resources is hard. Amaro's concern was that Yuba County did not have the resources to support such heavy, economically dependent individuals (Kruger, 1996). While Amaro and his supporters were looking to exclude us, others in rurality were looking to help us achieve our human capital in as short a period as possible.

In 1990, a near-deadly armed altercation involving our racist White Power neighbors and the Mong neighborhood caused my family to seek other housing locations. Although discrimination due to family size was illegal, my family found it challenging to find housing as a

result of our family size. Kadie Bradley allowed us to be the renters of her 3-bedroom double-wide trailer rental property next door to her mother. We had met Kadie and her mother two years prior at Emmanuel Faith Tabernacle. Nevertheless, our family's relationship with Kadie and her mother would extend beyond being landlords and renters. Kadie and her mother would be key to helping us navigate the economic pressures of American life. By urbanormative standards, she would be an economic and educational failure. She was relatively uneducated (by urban standards), deeply Christian, politically conservative, and made her living as a beautician. She would lose her husband to cancer and become a single parent. Kadie and her mother remained a major part of our lives until my family moved to a better neighborhood in 2003.

Kadie would be pivotal in my understanding of how impoverished (by urban standards) rural white folks' community values help shape how they live and give back. Even under the most crushing financial and tragic situations, they remain committed to being part of improving their communities for those less fortunate. Even before we became renters, Kadie sewed a promotion dress for my oldest sister because we could not afford one. She also gave me my first pair of brand-name sneakers during my 8th-grade promotion. At the time, I did not understand the sacrifices she made to fulfill those countless good deeds. Kadie, and others caring agents like her, did much of the unrecognized heavy lifting in the rural/semi-rural communities that contributed to the human capital formation of a generation of preliterate Mong refugees. My wife would also become a recipient of the Robert J. Brens Memorial Scholarship – a scholarship established for Lindhurst graduates who intend to become teachers. The very teachers, who are entrusted with the task of human capital formation. The very same task that Brens was prevented from completing at Lindhurst.

At the time I returned to Yuba County, I was among the few well-educated Mong adults who, against all advice, chose to return to stay to contribute towards solving the problem of vitality in rurality. When I turned 30, I felt ashamed that I have given up my big dreams to return back home to work on the minor problems of the “slime pit.” The shame stemmed, in part, from the feelings of helplessness that resulted from trying to determine what a single individual could do to contribute to, and improve, his or her community while attempting to overcome the economic challenges of living in isolation. It was a challenge that I was not prepared for, having spent the first part of my life hating and fleeing rurality. However, the shame is no longer the case. After spending over a decade working on staying, I recognize that I am among a group of dedicated individuals who are working towards improving each of our “slime pits.” Our slime pit is only a slime pit because we allow others to dictate how we see ourselves through their urbannormativity and their own standards of success. In my return to rurality, I find that those who are the most committed to improving our “slime pits” are those who share the same common sense of community with their community’s misfits regardless of where they came from and how they made it there.

Formation of Human Capital and Return Migration

The purpose of this study is to examine two points within the continuum of vitality and sustainability of rurality through the creation and retention of rural-raised human capital through their stay or return migration. The research focuses on the experiences of Mong adults’ human capital formation and stay/return migration within rural/semi-rural Northern California communities. This study adds to the body of research by providing better insights on how rurality creates human capital and prevents its human capital drain within often ignored small ethnic populations.

This study utilized computational grounded theory within the Glaser grounded theory approach to form descriptive themes. The researcher interviewed 19 Mong adults who held a post-high school degree or certification who opted to either stay or return migrate back to their Northern California hometowns. A convenient snow-ball sampling was used to recruit and select the participants. In-depth unstructured, open-ended virtual face-to-face interviews with the Mong adults provided the rich data.

The research consisted of two research articles using computational grounded theory within the Glaser grounded theory framework to report the results. Open-ended, unstructured in-depth interviews were employed to maximize the responses of the participants. The first article examines Mong adults' experience in human capital formation within both their Northern California hometowns and in post-high school education. The second article examines their rural experiences and reasons for return or stay migration to their Northern California hometowns. The chapter's conclusions are derived from the findings in the two research articles located in Chapters 3 and 4.

Summary of Major Themes

The findings of this study are organized into two sections structured around two research questions.

Question 1. *What are the comparative differences in human capital formation for Mong students in these rural localities in Northern California compared to other rural ethnic groups?*

Learning in isolation. Participants experienced social and cultural isolation from their larger rural communities while forming their human capital. Participants expressed experiencing or hearing first-hand accounts of racism and discrimination throughout their educational experiences. Those who had White school friends in their early years saw a gradual separation

into their teen and adult years. Even academically exceptional participants learned within the margins and in social isolation. The model minority myth also played a critical barrier in isolating Mong students from their educational completion time. Participants who selected Asian male-dominated majors found themselves denied institutional support.

Lacking navigation capital. The participants' common barrier was their lack of ability to navigate the education and career pathway while in high school and college. Participants were either refugees or children of refugees and could not rely on their families or Mong community for prior experience in the navigation of higher education attainment. All participants did not have first-hand experience in their initial career choice when they matriculated into higher education. Advice from friends and family was often misguided and contributed to long delays in participant's educational attainment. Participants were also either the first to go to college or major in their degree of choice. Two disciplines dominated the career and educational aspirations: engineering and medicine.

Resiliency through caring agents. Participants' shared that their resiliency was tied to caring agents or caring organizations. Caring agents were critical in how participants were able to navigate their major and school choices. Few participants completed the first degree of choice in which they enter the post-educational institutions. Caring agents such as teachers, counselors, mentors, friends, and neighbors with knowledge played a critical role in participants' time to degree completion and career choice. Caring agents helped participants discover their final career aspirations and provided a safety net for support. For those who failed their initial higher education attempt, the community college played an essential role in their academic redemption.

Question 2. *What are the factors that contribute to educationally successful Mong adults deciding to stay or return to their rural localities?*

Rural acceptance and discrimination. Participants experienced racism and discrimination at the onset of their arrival into rurality. Incidents varied from direct physical assaults to implicit racism and discrimination. Racial tension and conflict were confined to not only their white peers but other rural ethnicities. Those who had White friends early on saw a gradual shift from their White peers as participants matured. Differences in expected social norms, language, culture, and socioeconomic stratification contributed to how participants were slowly detached from socialization with their White peers.

Family as stay or return migration. Family dominated the reason why participants returned to their rural/semi-rural hometowns. Family obligations, ties, and safety net were stated as reasons for participants' decisions to return or stay. No participant expressed the feeling of connectedness to place, including the feeling of rootedness, at the onset of their adult lives.

Factors for rural flight. At the onset of their adult life, participants expressed very little place affinity. All participants expressed some form of desire to leave and those that did not, felt jealousy and negative emotions. Participants could not initially identify, outside of the Mong community, positive place features of their rural experience. Participants gained place affinity only after a long period of adulthood in rurality or urbanality. Those who gained place affinity had sharp differences in rurality views compared to their early adult life and as long-term stayers and returners. Poor economics, low opportunities, and urban-chauvinism remain the largest threat of out-migration among these Mong adults who stayed or returned to rurality.

Contributions as minorities. Participants saw themselves as positive economic contributors to their local economies even though their families heavily depended on social services at the onset of their lives. Participants expressed how education attainment played a critical role in their ability to contribute economically to their rural communities. However,

participants expressed the lack of political contribution as the remaining major obstacle for the Mong community. Participants expressed their lack of ability to gain recognition and goodwill from the Mong community's community services for political office. Participants felt that any Mong individuals who could overcome the political deficit would need to be exceptional compared to their White, Indian, and Hispanic peers.

Discussion

The seven themes describe how Mong individuals acquire, create, and navigate their social capital towards their education attainment and stay/return to rurality. The lack of community social capital threatens both the educational attainment of Mong students in rurality and their return/stay migration after they have completed their education. A large body of literature documents the positive influence between social capital and education attainment (Coleman, 1988; Sun, 1999) for rural students (Byun, Meece, Irvin, et al., 2012; Israel et al., 2009). Findings from this study suggest that social and cultural isolation from the larger community weakens Mong students' social capital within rurality. Mong students in rurality differ in educational experiences from their rural peers as they learn from the margins. The study's results reinforce the view that race and ethnicity matter in rural educational studies (Colvin, 2017; Conger et al., 2016). Mong students' racial/ethnic, model minority myth, linguistics, population size, and immigration history played an important role in how Mong students build social capital towards educational attainment. Figure 5 shows how family and community social capital contributes towards the human capital formation and return migration within the context of rural vitality.

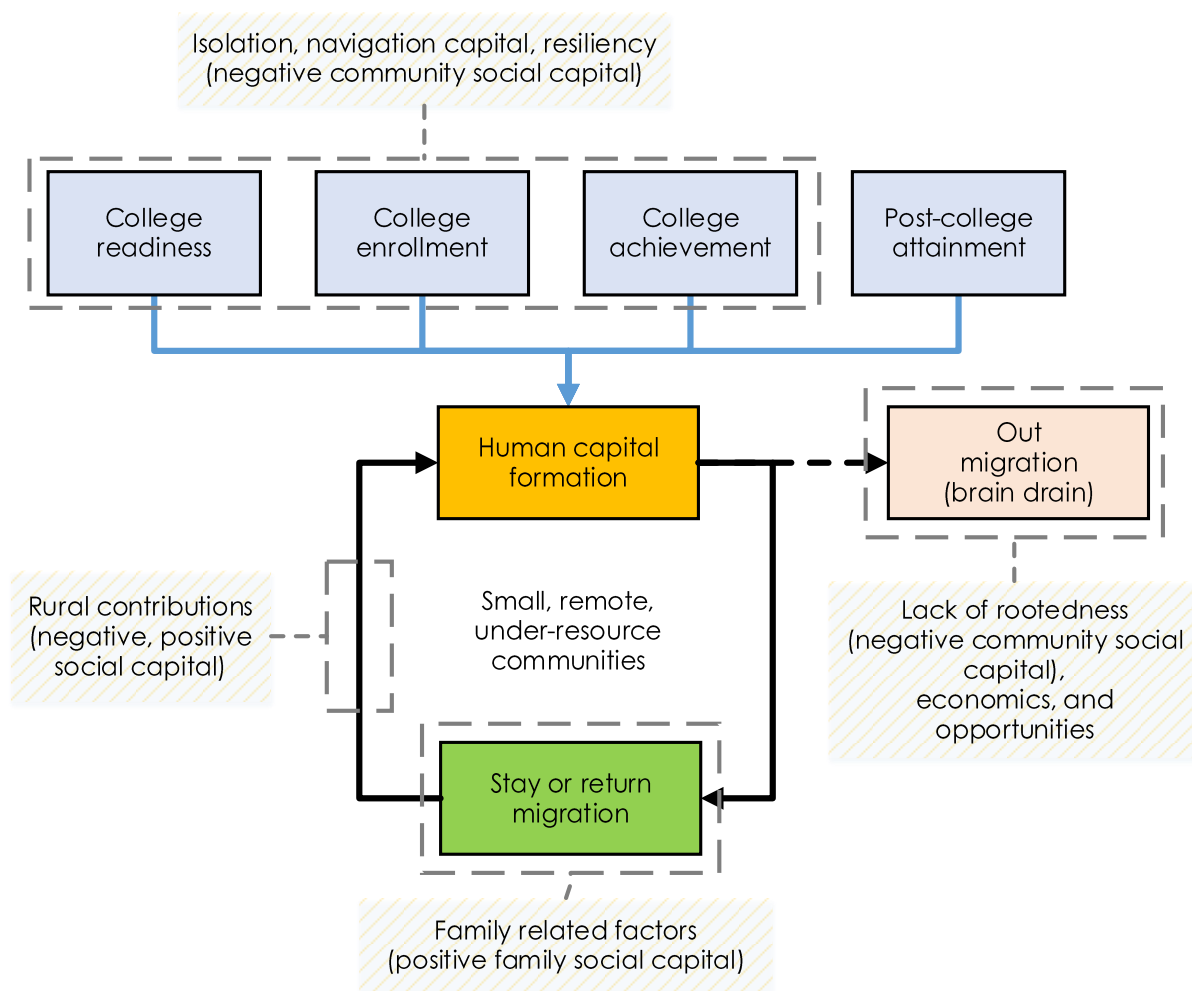


Figure 5. Social capital effects on rural/semi-rural Mong's human capital and stay/return migration.

Perna and Thomas' framework on college for success for all (Perna & Thomas, 2006) was used as the guide to constructing the initial interview questions for human capital formation. The findings suggest that rural Mong students, at the onset of their college careers, did not have the first five boxes: educational aspirations, academic preparations, college access, college choice, and academic performance fully met due to, in part, their community social capital deficit. The findings are consistent with existing literature on Mong students and their educational isolation (Smalkoski, 2018), educational choices (Lo, 2017), college achievements

(S. Lee, 2014; S. Lee et al., 2016), family support (Her & Gloria, 2016; S. Xiong & Lam, 2013), experiences of the model minority myth (S. Lee et al., 2017), and academic support services (S. Xiong & Lam, 2013). Participants' educational experiences supported prior findings of the strong differences in refugees' experiences in rural Anglo-dominated areas (Colvin, 2017).

Participants' lack of meaningful community social capital threatened their ability to obtain their post-high school education. The sense of school belonging played an important role in rural students' positive educational outcomes within high-poverty communities (M. J. Irvin et al., 2011). Participants often spoke of the lack of inclusion and positive school sense of belonging outside of their small Mong peer groups. Even within institutionalized cohort systems, participants spoke of isolation through language, cultural, and socioeconomic differences during social activities. The results were similar to rural students who depended on various influences, such as family, teachers, counselors, and friends, to help develop their post-high school plans (Azano & Stewart, 2015; Griffin et al., 2011). Although participants heavily relied on friends and family to navigate their higher education choices and attainment, few acknowledged that the advice was of high quality. Mong students' friends and family did not have appropriate prior experience to navigate the higher education system or understand the requirements for the various career choices. High-quality advice came from various caring agents or caring organizations within the participants' career fields of interest.

Consistent with existing literature, participants exhibited similar characteristics to rural students and some minority ethnic groups in rurality. Participants' educational aspirations were similar to rural students' educational aspirations driven by family-structure social capital (Byun, Meece, Irvin, et al., 2012; Meece et al., 2014). Family overwhelmingly dominated the results of participants' career and educational aspirations. Participants, similar to rural students, selected

lower-ranked schools to remain in proximity to home and family (Byun et al., 2015). The selection of schools near family is especially problematic for all ethnic groups as there are no University of California universities situated north of Sacramento. The University of California holds the mandate for research-based doctoral degrees and many professional degrees, such as medicine and law. Three universities, CSU, Chico, CSU, Sacramento, and UC Davis, dominated the participants' school choice and attendance. Consistent with rural students, participants face the dilemma of remaining home or leaving to pursue education outside their communities (Tieken, 2016). Participants spoke of strong family obligations requiring them to stay or return to their communities. Like Hispanic students in rurality, mastery of English played an important role in inclusion and exclusion within the rural community (Sizemore, 2004). Participants were separated early on in their educational experiences based upon their ability to master English.

Family-related factors dominated the stay and return migration decisions of the participants. Previous studies found that key drivers influencing a person's decision to stay in rurality are linked to that person's fondness of rural place attributes or family ties (Morse & Mudgett, 2018). Participants of this research did not express fondness for rural place attributes at the onset of their adult life. Prior studies suggest for returners, three broad context shapes returners back to their rural hometowns: employment, family, and social and community ties (von Reichert et al., 2014). Participants universally expressed the trade-off between employment opportunities and maintaining family ties. However, participants of this research rejected long-held features of return migration for rural and transnationals. None of the participants expressed feelings of rootedness or ties to social and community networks outside their own Mong networks at the onset of their adulthood. The results suggest that participants eventually

overcome the negative aspects of the rural lifeway, including past negative experiences, primarily due to strong family ties.

Because this research is focused on the most educationally resilient Mong individuals, the results most likely reflect individuals with less dependency on the characteristics of the rural lifeway. Participants' experiences most likely also describe the first experiential encounters of a smaller immigrant group within a larger relative homogenous community. As refugees, the participants' abilities to successfully navigate the education system as first-generation Americans within isolation suggest that these individuals could accumulate enough social capital to navigate the obtainment of their higher education. Refugees who accumulate the same-level English skills have better labor market outcomes than economic immigrants (Cortes, 2004). Rural-raised Mong adults who could not successfully form their human capital who stay or return may be more dependent upon rural life's positive aspects such as lower living costs. Understanding whether differences exist is essential to identify factors that contribute to the education attainment challenges of all Mong students and other non-English speaking minorities in rurality.

The Mong odyssey to become Americans can be characterized into three periods: the refugee years (1975-1991), the transitional period (1992-1999), and the Mong American era (1999-present) (K. Yang, 2015, p. 69). A large number of the participants' educational experiences spanned the first two periods. K. Yang (2015) describes the first two period as a period of pre-occupation of refugee problems, cultural shock, and emerging college graduates taking active leadership within their communities. The sentiment of isolation (cultural, social, and political) and the lack of goodwill from this study may not reflect the current conditions. For instance, by 2013, Yuba County's former supervisor Dan Logue recognized September as Mong history month in California (ACR-78. Hmong History Month, 2013). The participants'

experiences highlight the challenges facing new immigrant groups within social capital dependent communities; their social capital deficit can be applied to two contexts. The first context is the larger homogeneous groups' resistance and rejection of the new smaller ethnic group's initial arrival. The second context is the gradual erosion of the larger group's resistance to, and rejection of, the smaller ethnic group's existence over time due to the minority groups' gradual achievement of acceptance. Part of this erosion of the rejection can be attributed to the stay or return migration of relatively "exceptional" community members of those immigrant groups.

Recommendations

Prior to this study, there were few studies available on the educational experiences of Mong students from a place perspective and their choice to return to place. The results of the study help illuminate the experiences of a minority population who lack strong community-level social capital within rurality. The findings further reinforce existing beliefs for the inclusion of the educational experiences of all Asians, outside of a monolithic view, in the discourse of education attainment within place. Recommendations for this research are divided into two parts: policy and research to improve education attainment and place affinity.

There are three policy-related recommendations:

1. The inclusion of the educational experiences of Mong students, outside of the pan-ethnic classification, should be part of the discourse in high education attainment, including the experiences of exclusionary race-based educational policies.
2. Because rural/semi-rural Mong exhibit the same school choice selection as their rural counterparts, the expansion of highly selective and research-based public universities is critical for Northern California. This recommendation included the expansion of the availability of doctoral-level higher education institutions within Northern California to improve rural students' attendance at selective and highly selective institutions. The existence of these research universities can help create research that can focus on the needs of the population within the communities and population which they serve.

3. Rural communities need to improve the inclusion of the Mong communities in their outreach, social and community service organizations, and policies to improve stay and return migration.

There are three recommendations for future research:

1. Further research is needed to understand the experiences of the exclusionary educational policies and their impact to unrecognized low performing groups, such as Mong males within Asian dominated disciplines.
2. Further research on how individuals, such as Mong adults, who lack strong community level social capital was able to successfully navigate the rural lifeway. The results can help contribute to new and innovative practices to improve rurality's vitality.
3. Further research on rurality on why specific ethnic groups choose to flee or remain can contribute to explaining other additional factors of rural flight. The results can help rurality form better policies and practices to retain a more diverse and larger pool of their human capital.

Summary

This study identified seven themes that provide insight into the experiences of Mong refugees' human capital formation and return/stay migration within rural/semi-rural communities in Northern California. The themes contribute to the understanding of Mong students' accumulation of social capital within rurality. The lack of community social capital threatens Mong students' educational attainment and place affinity. Strong family social capital overcame both the weak community and school social capital for educational attainment and return/stay migration. Out-migration of the best educated Mong adults remains a constant threat as Mong in Northern California remain politically isolated and ignored.

The findings have implications for practices and policies within rurality when small groups of refugees are resettled into a mostly homogenous community and face exclusionary educational policies that affect them. Rurality's vitality and sustainment depend on the return of

the human capital, which it helps raise. These newcomers' human capital formation and return play an essential role in rural America's vitality and sustainment in the 21st century.

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APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT FLYER

Are you Hmong and live in the same area that your grew up in?

Research Study

Who?

- Hmong adults (18 and older)
- Who earned a post-high school certificate or degree
- Who either never left or returned to their original hometown or area
- Hometown is located in one of the 20 uppermost Northern California counties (in **brown**)



What?

Study participants will participate in a 1 to 2 hour interview in regards to their experiences in education attainment and their hometowns.

Why?

This study examines why some Hmong adults choose to stay or return to their hometowns or area.

How?

Interviews will be audio-recorded and take place at a time and accessible location at a mutually agreed location. If you are interested please contact **Chong Yang** using one of the contact information below.

UNIVERSITY OF THE
PACIFIC

Chong Yang
Benerd College
c_yang22@u.pacific.edu
530-301-4238

APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Informed Consent

My name is Chong Yang, and I am a doctoral student at University of the Pacific, Benerd College. You are invited to participate in a research study seeking to understand of the why some Mong adults return or stay within their hometowns or region in rural/semi-rural Northern California. You either volunteered or were referred by a person familiar with this study to participate as you fit the demographic requirements for this study: Mong adults living in Northern California (within the upper 20 California counties) who lives within the same region in which they grew up. The participation will include providing background information of your educational experiences and why you choose to live in your hometown or region. The interview does not have pre-defined questions will take approximately from 1 to 2 hours.

With all research, your participation involves some risks. There may experiences of anxiety and discomfort as you share your viewpoints and personal experiences. Memories of either emotional or traumatic experiences maybe recalled. In order to minimalize these risk, you may request to pause the interview and reset the interview at any time. As there are no pre-define questions, you may also choose to not provide a response or elaborate on a different topic or question. You are also allowed to stop your participation at any time and request any data collected from you to be remove from the research. Stopping any part of your participation will not result in penalties or loss of any benefits. As the Mong community is relatively small, there may be risks that the data collected may be associated to you. No identifiable data will be tied directly back to you. Your viewpoints and experiences will not be shared with anyone outside of the research group. All audio recordings will be destroyed after completion of transcription.

Employment, family income, and place will not be associated to any single participant.

Pseudonyms will be used for quotes and no identifiable data will be disclosed as part of this research.

Your participation is entirely voluntary and there is a small compensation (\$20 gift card) for your participation. If you have any questions about this research, please contact me at 530-301-4238 or my dissertation co-chairs, Dr. Robert Calvert at (916) 903-8013 (primary) or Dr. Brett Taylor at (916) 325-4627 (secondary). If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in a research project or wish to speak with an independent consent, please contact the Human Subjects Protection in the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, University of the Pacific at 209-946-3903 or by email at IRB@pacific.edu

Your signature indicates that you have read and fully understand the information provided above and that you willingly participate. Please check the box below if you want a physical copy of this document. By default, you will only get a scanned copy of this form. Please include an email contact for me to email you the copy. If you would like to also receive an electronic copy of the final research results, please check the box below.

I would like a physical copy of this document

Email: _____

I would like a copy of the results of this research

Signature

Date

APPENDIX C: DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Demographic Survey

Check all that applies

Gender

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary

Age

- 18 – 39
- 40 – 55
- 56 – 74
- 75 and up

Household Composition

- Single, never married
- Married or domestic partnership
- Widowed
- Divorced
- Separated

Education

- Trade/technical/vocational training
- Associate Degree
- Bachelor's Degree
- Master's Degree
- Doctorate/Professional Degree

Employment Status

- Employed for wages (private)
- Employed for wages (public)
- Self-employed
- Out of work
- A homemaker
- Student
- Military
- Retired
- Unable to work

Gross Family Income

- \$0 – \$25,000
- \$25,001 – \$48,000
- \$48,001 – \$78,000
- \$78,001 – \$128,000
- \$128,001 +

APPENDIX D: EXAMPLE QUESTIONS FOR UNSTRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

1. Tell me about how you and your family came to the United States and ended to _____.
2. Where were you born?
3. How many years did you spend in the refugee camp?
4. How old were you when you came to live in ____?
5. How long have you live in _____?
6. Did you like growing up in _____?
7. Do you think the Mong community in _____ is close nit?
8. What do you think some of the problems in the Mong community in _____ are?
9. Can you name the cities that you live in and which one did you like the best?
10. What was your view of the _____ growing up, was it good, bad, ok? And what made you feel that way?
11. How much involvement did you have in high school?
12. Did you play sport, in clubs, or volunteer?
13. Did you ever plan to live in _____?
14. While you were living outside of _____ did you ever imagine coming back home?
15. Why do you live in _____?
16. If _____ no longer here, would you leave or still stay?
17. Did you wife/husband/partner grow up here as well?
18. What do you think the biggest problem here is?
19. What do you think the best thing about living here is?

20. Would you say, of your friends and family, many of them as still here or have they moved?
21. What do you think was the main driver in people moving away?
22. Do you think you are respected because you live in ____?
23. What do you think the perception of ____ is?
24. Do you identify yourself as conservative or liberal? Or something else?
25. Do you think that the issues of rural northern California is being heard?
26. How do you see yourself in the community? How about the Mong community here?
27. How much involvement are you in the community activities?
28. Growing up, did you believe that you were going to go to college?
29. What is the biggest economic challenge that you see here?
30. What is the biggest personal challenge living here?
31. If you can change something about ____ what would you change?
32. Did you see yourself doing the job that you are doing now?
33. How good of student were you growing up?
34. Relative to your classmates how would you have ranked your academic performance?
35. Did you think you were academically prepared prior to going to college?
36. Did you think you were academically prepared after to going to college?
37. Economically, how do you think you are comparatively to the Mong families living in ____? In California? In the United States?
38. Do you think you would do better economically or socially if you were living somewhere else?
39. How many college did you apply to?

40. How many colleges did you get in?
41. Did you apply to a college that you didn't think you were going to get in?
42. Do you have a graduate degree? And what school did you get it from?
43. Is your education the original education that you planned in high school?
44. What did you want to grow up to be?
45. Where did you go to college and why did you choose it?
46. Tell me your experience in college
47. Was college hard or easy for you?
48. What school does your kids go to now?
49. Would you send your kids to ____? (if the school is different)
50. Would you want your kids to stay here in ____?