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## **Spirituality and Awe Experiences in Second-Generation Minnesota Hmong: A Phenomenological Study**

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**Spirituality and Awe Experiences in Second-Generation Minnesota Hmong: A  
Phenomenological Study**

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**Dedication**

Dedicated to the Hmong people and Hmong communities around the world.

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**Abstract**

Due to the effects of relocation and acculturation, some Hmong may have lost touch with traditional spiritual practices, potentially limiting second-generation's access to spirituality's health benefits. Awe is an emotion linked to spirituality, shown to serve as a spiritual catalyst. Acculturation impacts how spirituality and awe are experienced, understood and expressed across the generations. To date, there are more than 81,000 Hmong people who live in Minnesota. Through a constructivist lens, the purpose of this study is to describe spirituality and awe experiences within the second-generation Hmong living in Minnesota. Utilizing a phenomenological approach and a holism framework, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis of nine semi-structured interviews shows that participants do in fact experience spirituality and awe. These experiences are intertwined, involve the senses and emotions, and result in a sense of interconnection, spiritual identity, purpose, and open-mindedness. This study emphasizes the importance of intergenerational dialogue surrounding spiritual and awe experiences to increase understanding of their own culture, religious practices, and spiritual identity. Spirituality should be included in health practitioner education and health care models to promote Hmong spiritual, mental, interpersonal and community health and well-being.

*Keywords:* Awe, spiritual, Hmong, second-generation, well-being

### Introduction

Spirituality is a pillar of the Hmong epistemology (Vue & Mouavangsou, 2021), and a core component of holism, the foundation of holistic health (Di Stefano, 2006). Spirituality is essential to overall health and well-being impacting mental, social, and physical health domains (Westgate, 1996), further, it's shown to offer protection from adverse health events.

*Modern medicine may be able to substitute for a soul-calling ritual as an effective remedy for a headache. But Western medicine can never satisfy the deep spiritual yearnings of the Hmong to participate in sacred dramas that make life meaningful.... Whether the sickness abates or lingers, the shaman's real accomplishment in every performance is that she or he establishes the world (Twin Cities PBS, n.d.)*

–Dwight Conquergood

Traditional Hmong are pantheists; their religious practices include shamanism, animism, and ancestral worship (Ceplina, 2016). Catholic missionaries first introduced the Hmong to Christianity in the 1920s (Windland, 1992). Since then, some Hmong converted, some maintained their native religions, and others intermingled religions (Ceplina, 2016). These religions have elements of spirituality, fear, reverence, and the capacity for *awe* (Ceplina, 2016; Her, 2005). Likewise, awe is an emotion that may involve elements of fear, reverence, or wonderment (Keltner & Haidt, 2003).

An individual exposed to a new culture may construct and experience emotions of awe from that culture, particularly with increasing exposure to the new culture (Silva Luna & Bering, 2020). Second-generation children of parents who have not fully acculturated into a new society may have difficulties balancing or making sense of their two different cultures. This can influence children's perceptions, experiences, or expressions of awe and spirituality.



Neuropsychologist Pearsall (2007) defines awe as "an overwhelming and life-altering blend of fright and fascination that leaves us in a puzzled apprehension and appreciative perplexed wonder" (p. 31). Cohen et al. (2010) say that awe is an emotion that has transformational qualities linked to spirituality; it may be elicited by positive or negative events, and further, interpreted with a positive or negative lens. Experiences of persecution or immigration may evoke a sense of awe.

Awe activates religious and spiritual feelings, promoting stronger belief in the supernatural (Van Cappellen & Saroglou, 2011; Vandeloso & Graham, 2014). Spirituality is essential for holistic well-being (Joseph et al., 2021), is experienced across cultures (Joseph, et al., 2001), and is protective against adversity, such as immigration and acculturation (Joseph et al., 2021; Hodge, 2000; Steffen & Merrill, 2011).

Hmong began immigrating to the United States in the 1970's. The largest concentrations of Hmong live in California, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. To date, there is no clear demographic data regarding Hmong religious practices in the United States or Minnesota. This gap disallows extrapolations about the presence or nature of Hmong spiritual and awe experiences, both of which can support well-being of second-generation Hmong living in these places. Researchers, community members and policymakers need to understand these things to best support the health needs of this community. While researchers have described the traditional Hmong spirit-centric religious practices and cultural values themselves (DeSantiago, 2020a; DeSantiago, 2020b; Her, 2005), no research yet explores the existence or lived experiences of spirituality and awe among the second-generation Hmong. Therefore, our research purpose is to describe spirituality and awe experiences within second-generation Hmong living in Minnesota.

To begin, we explore what is known about spirituality, awe, and well-being. Then, we review the relevant history of the Hmong people, culture, and varied spiritual practices. Following this, we describe the theoretical framework for this study, our personal and professional lenses, and how they influence the development, implementation, and interpretation of this research. Next, we describe our research methodology, including data collection and analysis. The results section qualitatively depicts the rich descriptions of spirituality and awe experiences in the adult second-generation Minnesota Hmong community. We end discussing our findings relative to the known literature, and offer implications of these results for holistic health, the community and future research.

## **Literature Review**

In this chapter, we review spirituality and its role in well-being. Similarly, we review awe, its connection to spirituality and role in well-being. We then describe the known relevant history of the Hmong people, their culture and their wide-ranging spiritual beliefs and practices. Finally, we arrive at the purpose of our research: to describe spiritual and awe experiences of second-generation Hmong living in Minnesota.

### **The Concept of Spirituality**

This section reviews the literature on spirituality, specifically exploring its implications for well-being. We begin defining spirituality. Next, we review experiences of spirituality, how spirituality affects self, the importance of spirituality for well-being, and briefly, what is known about Hmong spirituality experiences.

#### ***Spirituality Defined***

Elkins et al. (1988) define spirituality as “a way of being and experiencing that comes about through awareness of a transcendent dimension and that is characterized by certain identifiable values in regard to self, others, nature, life, and whatever one considers to be the Ultimate” (p.10). Through our understanding of the broader literature, we refine this definition to *spirituality is a subjective experience of connection with self and others that fosters feelings of purpose and meaning, and positively impacts well-being.*

#### ***Spirituality, Identity and Well-being***

Spiritual identity is a persistent sense of self that addresses ultimate questions about the nature, purpose, and meaning of life, resulting in behaviors that are consonant with one’s core values (Young & Koopsen, 2011; Kiesling et al, 2008).

Spirituality and healing are connected. Healing “occurs over time continuing through the individual’s life journey and becoming a way of living that flows from, reflects, and nourishes his or her spirit” (Young & Koopsen, 2011, p.17). Conversely, spirituality has a positive impact on well-being, something significant among marginalized or disenfranchised groups (Young & Koopsen, 2011; Hodge, 2007; Shields & Balboni, 2020). Religion and spirituality provide a sense of meaning that enhances physical and mental health (Monroy & Keltner, 2023). Rituals may help individuals reconnect with their spirituality and support their spiritual health (Young & Koopsen, 2011).

### ***Hmong and Spiritual Experiences***

The Hmong culture embraces spirituality at the cosmological or mystical level (Her, 2005; Postert, 2009). Their traditional religion, Animism, is the belief that all things hold spirit. Rituals maintain spiritual health and harmony within the individual and family; they honor and remember the ancestors and deceased family through offerings; they watch over the connection of the individual and their soul from life to after-life and from generation to generation (Her et al., n.d.). Rituals may help individuals reconnect with their spirituality and support their spiritual health (Young & Koopsen, 2011). Rituals such as praying, meditation, attending worship services, or having a walk in the forest and participating in ceremonies are part of awe experiences which can be beneficial to the mind and body (Young & Koopsen, 2011; Monroy & Keltner, 2023).

### **The Emotion Awe**

This section reviews the literature on awe, exploring its relationships to well-being and spirituality. We begin defining awe. Next, we review experiences of awe, awe and religion versus spirituality, awe and culture, and the connections between awe, self, and well-being.

### ***Awe Defined***

Early definitions of awe include aspects of fear, reverence, and dread. Merriam-Webster (n.d.) defines it as "an emotion variously combining dread, veneration, and wonder that is inspired by authority or by the sacred or sublime." Our reading of the literature refines awe to be *a complex emotion elicited from experiences of perceptually vast stimuli*. Experiencing awe results in an updated understanding of the world (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). Despite awe research being recent, Keltner and Haidt (2003) suspect awe to be a primordial emotion. They suspect depictions of awe in paleolithic era cave writings, amongst observers of the seven wonders of the ancient world, and within religious texts (Gordon et al., 2016; Keltner & Haidt, 2003; Keltner & Mossman, 2007; Shiota et al., 2015). The Bible is full of awe references as in the book of Genesis: "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it. He was *afraid* and said, 'How *awesome* is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.'" (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001, Genesis. 28:17). The Hebrew word for awe is "yirah," which translates directly to "*fear*" but can be interpreted as respect, reverence, and worship (FIRM, 2021). Awe translated to Hmong means dangerous or fear (*txaus ntshai*).

### ***Awe Experiences***

Western society describes awe as pleasurable; "this is awesome!" Researchers acknowledge art, music, cultural artifacts, collective experiences (natural disasters, pandemics, war, concerts, worship), mystical experiences, religious epiphanies, remarkably influential and powerful people, or conceptually vast stimuli (such as new experiences, new ideas, large numbers) as potentially awe-inducing (Gordon et al., 2016; Keltner & Haidt, 2003; Keltner & Mossman, 2007; Shiota et al., 2015).

Keltner and Haidt (2003) describe the awe emotion as an indescribable experience with profound meaning. Most research views awe as an aesthetic emotion; Western bias adds an individualism and positivity slant to this view. Regardless, researchers agree that awe arises from either positive or negative stimuli (Keltner & Haidt, 2003; Rudd et al., 2012; Shiota et al., 2006; Shiota et al., 2007; Stellar et al., 2015; Valdesolo & Graham, 2014; Van Cappellen, & Saroglou, 2012). Although research on awe through negative experiences is scant (Gordon et al., 2017), Cohen et. al. (2010) find adverse experiences hold potential for significant and longer-lasting spiritual transformation than positive ones.

### ***Awe, Religion, and Spirituality***

Awe's role in facilitating a sense of connection is significant in collective contexts such as cultures and religion. Awe activates religious and spiritual feelings and behavioral intentions (Van Cappellen & Saroglou, 2011) and promotes a stronger belief in the supernatural (Vandeloso & Graham, 2014).

There is ample historical evidence connecting awe to religion and spirituality (Mehar, 2018; Saroglou et al., 2008; Valdesolo & Graham, 2014; Van Cappellen & Saroglou, 2011). Kearns and Tyler (2020) correlate dispositional awe (awe-proneness) with greater spirituality and social-religious motives. Further, Van Cappelen and Saroglou (2011) advance a hypothesis of awe's transformative potential, setting it apart from other positive emotions, calling it a *self-transcendent emotion*.

### ***Awe and Culture***

While emotions transcend cultural and religious boundaries, culture has its impact. Culture influences emotion and our relative self-concept (Bai et al., 2017; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Markus & Kitayama, 1993, Razavi et al., 2016). Tsai (2007) suggests that culture may

influence how we want to feel based on the cultural valuation of any given emotion. Evolving language also plays a part. Awe definitions have changed according to culture. Today, awe has a more positive connotation (when studied from a Western lens). Such dialectical differences amongst cultures and across eras combine with the absence of literal translations or definitions between and within cultural groups, making definite meaning elusive. For these reasons, the impact of awe on self-concept varies among and between members of both collectivist and individualist societies (Bai et al., 2017; Razavi et al., 2016). We need more research to fully understand the phenomenon of the lived awe experience both within and across cultures.

### ***Awe, Self, and Well-being***

Experiences of awe are positively correlated with humility, collective engagement, generosity, creativity (Chirico et al., 2018; Piff et al., 2015; Stellar et al., 2018), and life satisfaction; it is negatively correlated with self-importance, daily stress levels, and materialism often resulting in the sense of connection to something larger than oneself (Bai et al., 2021; Rivera et al., 2020; Rudd et al., 2012). Researchers correlate awe with prosocial behaviors and enhanced well-being (Bai et al., 2021; Chirico et al., 2018; Piff et al., 2015; Rivera et al., 2020; Rudd et al., 2012; Stellar et al., 2018). One theory credits awe's influence on the self. Awe shifts focus off the self and towards interconnectedness with a greater whole. Awe enables a person to view themselves as smaller and less significant but does not lessen self-esteem or self-worth (Bai et al., 2017; Shiota et al., 2007). Awe influences self-concept, and as a result, experiences of awe influence behavior, life appraisal, and well-being (Bai et al., 2017; Piff et al., 2015; Preston & Shin, 2017). To put awe in a cultural context, we next explore Hmong spirituality, history, and culture.

## **Hmong Spirituality, History, and Culture**

In this section, we review findings about Hmong spirituality, history, migration to the United States and Minnesota, Hmong culture, and impacts of relocation and acculturation.

### ***Hmong Spirituality***

In this section, we review literature about Hmong religion, spirits, and spirituality. We define shamanism and animism as they pertain to the Hmong people. Next, we review the history of Hmong and Christianity and the resultant Christian Hmong spiritual practices.

Her and colleagues (n.d.) suggest the Hmong religion is family-centric and, in this regard, is critically different from other religions. It is not a religion practiced in a place of worship but instead practiced in individual homes. Religious practices vary from household to household, region to region, and clan to clan, with the Hmong proverb: “*Ib tsaab teb ib tsaab txuj*” meaning each region governs its traditions (Her, 2005). The study of Hmong religion is problematic as there is no formal religious text grounding Hmong religion (Her et al., n.d.-a; Her, 2005). Its traditions are passed down orally and through lived experiences within the home (Capps, 2011; DeSantiago 2020a; Her, 2005; Xiong et al., 2020).

According to DeSantiago (2020b) and Capps (2011), the Hmong people have a personal relationship with the spirit world, with spirits, and the spirits in nature. Postert (2009) describes, for example, a vital life force that is in the mist and rising from the ground. This vital life force is within the plants that become the food that nourishes the Hmong people. This life force is released from the food when cooked in the home. Through this process, the Hmong people, their clan ancestors, and their home itself inhale the life force. The vital life force is the essence that protects the Hmong people and *is* the Hmong people. The Hmong people honor the spirit(s) and life force through worship and reciprocal gifts (Postert, 2009).



DeSantiago (2020a) discusses spirits found within the home of Hmong people, ancestor spirits are in altars within the home and serve to protect the family and the home. Ancestor worship is foundational within the traditional Hmong family. One can appreciate the significance of ancestor worship by understanding the Hmong belief that upon death one of their three souls goes to the ancestor spirit world to be reincarnated, one stays with the body, and one stays to protect its descendants. Thus, Hmong worship their ancestors and revere them with god-like status (Nagai, 2015). Death is a collectively experienced spiritual event (Helsel et al., 2020).

### ***Animism***

Animism is prevalent among many Indigenous cultures and has existed as a religious and ontological perspective since early civilization (Swancut, 2019). It is the belief that all things have spirits with the capacity to help or harm us (Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1998). Traditional Hmong have a personal relationship with their *plig* or spirit, the spirits in nature, and animals (Capps, 2011). Hmong believe that land, soil, and plants all have spirits. Some spirits have dominance over a distinct geological landscape such as a lake, mountain, or forest. A region's dominant spirit, typically in a mighty tree, protects the village in that geographical area. DeSantiago (2020b) further emphasizes that Hmong are one with nature and, at the same time, fearful of the spirits in nature. For example, the Hmong fear harvesting plants in the forest lest they disrespect a spirit thus inflicting future harm upon themselves and their family. For the Hmong, the entire environment is composed of spiritual beings (DeSantiago, 2020b).

### ***Shamanism***

Hmong people practice shamanism, but it is not unique to them (Dance of the Deer, n.d.). Anthropologists recognize shamanism as one of the oldest religious practices, present since the beginning of recorded human history (Singh, 2008). A shaman can transcend to the spirit world

and intercede on behalf of the living by performing healing ceremonies (Her, 2005). It is the role of the shaman to communicate between the human and the spirit worlds (Capps, 2011).

Shamanic healing practices focus on spiritual causes of sickness, including methods to cure and protect an attacked soul (Vadala, 2019). The shamans enter a trance-like state of other consciousness during ceremonies and rituals connecting to an ancestral spiritual realm of knowledge (Capps, 2011; Her et al., n.d.-b; Nagai, 2015; M. Xiong, personal communication, May 12, 2022).

From a well-being perspective, shamanic rituals hold emotional and psychological meaning and provide a form of social support for Hmong patients (Capps, 2011). When an individual experiences an illness or a phenomenon, a shaman is called to perform a healing ritual to find the underlying cause of the sickness (Capps, 2011; M. Xiong, personal communication, May 12, 2022). Such shamanic healing ceremonies bring the family together. They provide healing not only for the patient but also for the extended family. Capps (2011) likens the healing ceremony to a family psychotherapy session.

There are specific shamans for different circumstances, and not all shamans are able to perform every ritual or ceremony. The Hmong shaman is called Shi Yis (Thao, 2006; Cha, 2003). For the Hmong, becoming a shaman means the ancestors have chosen the individual to become one, and the chosen one must choose to embrace the calling or reject it. Both choices come with implications for the person's well-being (Across the Mountains, 2022; Cha, 2003). The individual may have dreams that range from seeing spirits, receiving spiritual powers, or foretelling of an illness or death which may cause mental health problems. When an individual chooses to reject becoming a shaman, there may be health implications such as depression and other chronic health conditions that can occur to the person (M. Xiong, personal communication,

May 12, 2022). When the individual agrees to become a shaman, they must go through years of training, assisting, and shadowing their shaman master (Across the Mountains, 2022; Cha, 2003). A second-generation Hmong shaman describes the journey as lonely and complicated -- being objectified as a Shaman instead of who he is as a whole person (Across the Mountains, 2022).

### ***History of Hmong and Christianity***

Until the mid-20th century, the Hmong culture was passed orally (Vang, 2008) and figuratively, depicted in storytelling, arts, and crafts. When Christian missionaries visited Hmong villages, Father Yves Bertrais, also known as *Txiv Plig Nyiaj Pov*, helped create the Hmong written language. He was also integral to the Hmong Christianity movement (Chanson, 1993). In Laos, he spent nine years studying the Hmong culture and language, dialects, grammar, and phonetics (Chanson, 1993). With the help of others, Father Bertrais created the Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA) script or Hmong RPA, which the Hmong read and speak today (Chanson, 1993; Vang, 2008). In 1954, the first Hmong Christian, also a shaman, was baptized. Father Bertrais translated several books of the New Testament into the Hmong language using RPA (Chanson, 1993).

There is a symbolic connection between Christian and traditional Hmong beliefs (Her-Xiong & Schroepfer, 2018). Hmong legends include the story of a Fua Tai (Hmong king) who had abandoned the Hmong people (Vang, 2018); the Christian missionaries spoke of their God forsaking them (Her-Xiong & Schroepfer, 2018). The Hmong people tell of a shaman who foretold the coming or return of an all-powerful god spirit (Vang, 2018); the Christian missionaries spoke of prophets foretelling the coming of Christ (Her-Xiong & Schroepfer, 2018). It is through these prophetic connections that many Hmong converted to Christianity. Christian missionaries told the Hmong people that Yesu (Jesus Christ) represented the return of their

Hmong king and would protect them from evil spirits and corrupt power (Her-Xiong & Schroepfer, 2018). The Hmong, through finding similarities between their traditional creation stories and Christian beliefs, strengthened their ability to connect with Christianity (Quincy, 1998).

By 1949, more than one thousand Hmong people had converted to Christianity, and additional conversions continued after the immigration to the United States (Winland, 1992; Her-Xiong & Shroepfer, 2018). According to Religions in Minnesota (n.d.), a “significant component” of the Hmong community in Minnesota has converted to Christianity. It is important to note, as we seek to understand the basis of Hmong spirituality and awe, that while some Hmong have fully adopted Christian beliefs and foregone animistic practices, some hold a mixture of belief systems (Religions in Minnesota, n.d.).

### ***Hmong History***

The Hmong are a nomadic-tribal populace without sovereign land. The first documented Hmong Kingdom was in China around C.E. 400 to 900. Over the centuries, the Hmong have endured enslavement, persecution, and warfare with heavy casualties. With each major atrocity, they fled. Eventually, a large settlement came to reside among the mountainous terrain of Laos (Ceplina et al., 2016; Culas & Micraud, 1997; Lor et al., 2016).

The United States American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) ran an operation in Laos to fight against communism, known as the Secret War (Ceplina et al., 2016; Hamilton-Merritt, 1993; Lor et al., 2016). The CIA recruited Vang Pao, a Hmong General in the Royal Lao Army, to train Hmong men to fight alongside the United States as Special Guerilla Units against the Soviet Union and communist Pathet Lao (Hamilton-Merritt, 1993; Vang, 2010). Boys as young as 10 and men as old as 65 fought to protect their land and U.S. interests. At the end of the war, the

Hmong people seeking to escape communist persecution and relying on political promises made by the United States, fled to migration camps in Thailand and eventually emigrated to the United States (Ceplina et al., 2016; Culas & Micraud, 1997; Lor et al., 2016). Rairdan and Higgs (1992) note that many died along the way, and many families were separated. Churches sponsored the first Hmong immigrants to Minnesota with the last wave arriving in 2004 (Minnesota Historical Society, 2014; Quincy, 1998). As of 2014, approximately half of the Hmong population in America live in the Midwest: Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan (Minnesota Historical Society, 2014). Today, more than 300,000 Hmong people live in the United States'; Minnesota is home to 81,000, making it the second-largest Hmong population in the U.S. (Budiman, 2021).

The Hmong have survived oppression, wars, mass casualties, torn families, and subsequent diasporas. Yet, Hmong culture is one of resilience and independent spirit. Understanding this sheds light on their attitudes and beliefs on health as well as their help-seeking behaviors.

### ***Hmong Culture***

Within this section, we explore unique features of the Hmong language, clan structure, cultural arts, and other traditions that may impact understanding of Hmong spirituality and awe experiences.

### ***Hmong Language - Minnesota Dialects***

Hmong in Minnesota speak primarily two Hmong dialects: Green Hmong (*Moob Leng* or *Hmong ntsuab*) and White Hmong (*Hmoob dawb*). The two dialects can be confusing for those who are not fluent in both. Some words are pronounced the same, but have different meanings (Thao, 2006). For example, the word *nstab* means “rice grain” in Green Hmong, whereas the same word means “to grab” in White Hmong. We are accustomed to a given word lacking literal

translation between different languages. In the case of the Hmong language, the same word can have completely different meanings between dialects. This creates a language barrier, which can be critical in a healthcare setting equipped with Hmong translation services, or in understanding the meanings associated with spirituality and awe experiences as discussed among the broader Hmong community.

### ***Hmong Clans and Social Structure***

Clans serve the purpose of uniting, organizing, and supporting a group of people together as well as providing a sacred name for ritual purposes. There are currently 18 clan names. Of these, twelve are known to represent the original Hmong clans (Chang, Hang, Her, Chue, Khang, Lee, Moua, Song, Thao, Vang, Xiong, and Yang). Each clan has a sacred ritual name known as *qhua* (Thao, 2006). It is important for Hmong people to know their *qhua* because knowing gives them information about their kin. Clan life diversity mirror if not create the religious and cultural diversity found within the Hmong people.

### ***Hmong Arts***

Although distinctions exist between clans, the cultural significance of music, sung poetry, flower cloth, and story cloth is significant to the Hmong culture. Music, flower cloth, and story cloths are cultural representations of connection and emotion, and art is known to be a potential source of awe (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). In general, art is visually appealing, arresting, and breathtaking. Awe vistas and experiences have similar descriptives giving credence to the idea that artwork is awe inspiring (Katz, 2019).

Historically being a culture of oral tradition, sung poetry holds much cultural significance. Songs are passed down from generations and usually express physical life, beauty, and love. For the Hmong, singing relieves stress, serves as an accompaniment to farming, during

courtship and mourning. Various wind and string instruments are used to make music, as well (Thao, 2006). Music increases social connectedness and elicits positive emotion and feelings of arousal but, depending on the personality of the individual and the type of music, it may or may not elicit awe (Pilgrim et al., 2017).

The story cloth uses the same textile techniques as a flower cloth but shows stories of Hmong culture and history. The purpose of story cloths is to pass history from generation to generation, such as Hmong folktales, details of the Secret War, farming, and the history of the Hmong people (McCall, 1999).

### ***Cultural Intersection within the United States***

Migration to the United States created a cultural intersection between a strong-willed, collectivist Hmong culture and the dominant American individualistic culture (Lee, 1996). To keep the Hmong culture alive, the Hmong culture had to adapt and modernize, i.e., acculturate but not completely assimilate (Lee, 1996). This is most evident in adaptations in traditional religious practices. Hmong-religion is at the center of their culture, as such, the impacts of acculturation touches every aspect of Hmong life.

In America, Hmong were required to make concessions on how traditional customs were practiced, impacting birth, marriage, funerals, and healing. (DeSantiago, 2020a; Penzin-Perez et al., 2005; Xiong et al., 2020). These concessions impacts well-being, and spiritual and personal identity.

### ***Cultural Impacts of Relocation***

Hmong people who came to the United States faced many challenges, such as language barriers, culture shock, food insecurity, transportation barriers, and limited support and resources (Xiong, 2020). Traditionally, Hmong families lived in close communities, supporting one

another. However, due to the circumstances of government-sponsored relocation, many Hmong families found themselves isolated, living in cities far apart. Many experienced poor conditions in refugee camps, traumatic memories of the civil war and Vietnam War era, and experienced having to flee their homeland and separate from their families, resulting in generational fractures (Twin Cities Public Television, 2017).

Due to variability amongst Hmong clans, a single definition of Hmong identity and culture does not exist; however, retaining fundamental values and ethics clarifies what it means to be Hmong. The Hmong are strong-willed people that are fiercely independent as a collective community (Lee, 1966). Key culture characteristics are respect for ancestors, a belief in the collective, the importance of family, and resiliency (Lee, 1996).

In America, traditional Hmong beliefs are subject to significant acculturation (DeSantiago, 2020a). Acculturation is when two disparate cultures intersect. Acculturation influences how a person feels about traditional, culture-bound gender roles. Intergenerational conflicts arise and mental health suffers (Birman, 2011). Acculturation in the U.S. also impacts sense of self, as one shifts from a collectivist orientation to an Americanized individualistic identity (Lee, 1996; Tatman, 2004). American culture continues to affect the Hmong culture and blur the lines of what it means to be Hmong (Lee, 1996; Her et al., n.d.-c).

Asian parents who are immigrants often keep their traditional values, culture, and lifestyles while living in the United States rather than adapting to the American culture. In contrast, their children and young adults are more likely to acculturate due to the influence of peers, media, society, and school (Lee et al., 2008). Hmong adolescents struggle to keep sound relationships with their parents due to their different viewpoints. Intergenerational conflicts occur due to dissonance acculturation - when parents and children have different cultural expectations



from each other. This can cause family conflicts and result in lack of family support (Lee et al., 2008). This is seen in Hmong family and community behaviors where parents express concern that their children will embrace American culture and reject their own culture and traditions (Lee et al., 2008) and Hmong children born in the United States are less likely to seek their parents for cultural and life skills support. Instead, they are more likely to seek emotional and nurturing help from their peers due to their parents' strict nature (Lee et al., 2008).

Acculturation impacts religion too. Hmong communities across America are limited in their ability to perform traditional cultural activities due to regulations that do not permit animal sacrifices or other landlord-tenant restrictions. This has led to mental anguish and ill health (DeSantiago, 2020a). If traditional healing practices (shamanism and animism) are discontinued or assimilated, the Hmong elders are afraid the traditions will slowly die (Her et al., n.d.-c). This acculturation is compounded by conversion from traditional Hmong Animism or Shamanic religious practices to Christianity, resulting in further cultural shifts (Religions in Minnesota, n.d.).

Several studies look at the intersection of traditional Hmong healing practices and the doctrines of Western medicine (DeSantiago, 2020a; Nuttall & Flores, 1997; Sparks, 2014). Many Hmong will only utilize Western doctors as a last resort if traditional medicine does not cure or heal the body (Sparks, 2014). Surgery is avoided to prevent soul-spirit escape and evil spirits from entering the body (Nuttall & Flores, 1997). Collier et al. (2012) suggest that acculturation results in PTSD, anxiety, social stress, somatoform disorders, and depression. A change in spiritual beliefs may result in cultural psycho-spiritual conflict as the Hmong confront forming a new cultural identity (De Santiago, 2020a; Her et al., n.d.-c; Tatman, 2004). Today, Hmong living in America have higher rates of being diagnosed with depression, the lowest help-seeking

behaviors (utilizing Western medicine), and the lowest average of “happiness” compared with the general population (Lee & Chang, 2012).

### **Spiritual and Awe Experiences in Second-Generation Hmong**

The interplay between generations and cultures influence how spirituality is understood and experienced among second-generation Hmong (Vang, 2001). Similarly, Lee (2016) finds that varying religious practices and degrees of acculturation among second-generation Hmong influence their perceptions of spiritual health, and attitudes of health overall.

Cultural norms also play a role in experiencing awe. Silva Luna & Bering (2020) find that an individual raised in a tradition where experiences of awe are present will likely find the same experiences to elicit awe. Researchers have not investigated if or how second-generation Hmong experience spirituality or awe. This limits collective understanding about whether this population can access this phenomena’s holistic well-being benefits.

### **Summary and Research Question**

Acculturation in America complicates Hmong people’s lived experiences of spirituality and awe; the myriad of intergenerational Hmong religious, language and intercultural practices complicate their meaning. Based on studies of spirituality and awe, we suspect that Hmong people may have experienced awe with a negative valence from their lived experiences of displacement, relationship with war, during certain spiritual shamanic rituals and with a positive valence through their close connection to nature, and religious and spiritual practices that reinforce connection to ancestors or God. We know that experiences of awe can be spiritual catalysts, and that spirituality is essential to well-being. Some Hmong have lost touch with traditional spiritual practices through the effects of religious conversion, relocation, and acculturation, potentially limiting how second-generation Hmong access spirituality’s benefits.

Researchers have not yet investigated if or how second-generation Hmong experience spirituality and awe. Therefore, through post-positivist constructivist lenses, our research question is to describe the lived experiences of spirituality and awe among second-generation Hmong in Minnesota.

## **Lenses**

This chapter defines and describes the theoretical framework and pertinent personal and professional lenses that have influenced the design, implementation, and interpretation of our research. We review our professional and personal lenses to include our personal paradigms, epistemologies, ontologies, and axiologies. Within these lenses we highlight assumptions, implicit biases, and potential limitations that influence this project's design, implementation, and interpretation. As researchers, we must share this information so that our audience can better understand the study design, methodology selection, data analysis, and interpretation.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Hmong epistemology incorporates the physical, internal, and spiritual levels to encompass love, ritual, compassion, and gratitude (Vue & Mouavangsou, 2021). There are three parts to Hmong epistemology: The first is a spirituality epistemology which includes life, art, and culture (Vue & Mouavangsou, 2021). The second is that Hmong identity, Hmong culture, and Hmong politics are diverse and fragmented due to various oppressions throughout history. Lastly, is the overarching importance of spirituality (Vue & Mouavangsou, 2021). The theoretical framework of holism, with its emphasis on the spiritual component of our lives, helps frame Minnesota Hmong's lived experiences. Holism provides a framework for exploring spirituality and awe experiences among the Hmong people.

### ***Holism***

Holism is an approach where the whole body, individual, mind, and universe are important because each part interconnects with the whole (Cmich, 1979; Jörgenfelt, 2019). Erickson (2007) defines holism at the individual level as an integration of the mind, body, and spirit, and that these components are inseparable. Holism embraces the tenet that as humans we

are interconnected with each other and all things universal (Cmich, 1979; Erickson, 2007; Jörgenfelt, 2019).

This theory influenced the development of this research project by helping the researchers understand the Hmong's views on spiritual interconnectedness (Erickson, 2007; Jörgenfelt, 2019). The principles of holism are traceable to Taoism (older contemporary Confucious), where entities and systems are interdependent (Cmich, 1979). Hmong share the ethics of Confucious valuing the interconnectedness of community and family; thus, the components of holism lend themselves well to Hmong cultural values (Chanson, 1993).

By tapping into this overarching holistic concept, that we are more than the sum of our parts, we can more openly approach another culture's lived experiences, better analyze and interpret such experiential data, and understand how these experiences influence our overall well-being.

### **Personal and Professional Lenses**

Our team brings together an array of personal and professional experience to this research. Each brings strengths, limitations, experiences, and biases that impact the design, implementation, and interpretation of this project. As we approach this study through a constructivist lens, here we acknowledge the impact that our individual personal and professional lenses have on the entire research process.

### ***Mai***

I am Hmong and my family practices animism and shamanism. I believe that knowledge can be gained through experiences. It is from the positive and negative experiences that we gain a deeper understanding of ourselves and the world around us. I look at life through a social lens meaning that every person has their own thoughts and interpretations of life based on their own

experiences. I get to learn different perspectives and embed their words of wisdom into my life. Sometimes I ask questions about my own existence in life. There is free will to a certain extent and that everyone agreed to their own life contract before reincarnation. These beliefs are from my upbringing and religious beliefs. I value meaningful discussions about life and experiences, equality, and honesty. These morals have informed my research methods following the ethics of research. I am a methodological person who likes to organize things in an orderly way which fits with the data analysis portion of this research. I process information more slowly than others and that is okay too. I tend to overthink and sometimes the thinking draws itself like a piece of artwork. My thoughts are like stars; so many ideas and emotions that words cannot describe. Through my constructivist views, these thoughts are fascinated by experiences. I feel I can grow spiritually by learning about people's life experiences.

Spirituality is like a close friend to me; it has always been around me throughout my college career. Being away from home while studying in college has given me a chance to reflect on my life, myself, and my spiritual beliefs. I relied on my intuition and my ancestors for answers in the search for truth and my vocation. My own life experiences - from every experience of solitude, every sadness, and happiness - have contributed to the development of my epistemological views. Throughout my time as an undergraduate in college, I always wondered about my own culture and spirituality. My undergraduate research papers about the Hmong culture sparked my interest in learning more about my own culture and the Hmong traditions.

Throughout my professional experiences, I have observed and experienced awe in many different forms. I have been working with children at an Early Learning Center for a few years now and had the honor of working with many people from different walks of life. We encourage

young students to explore, have wonderment, enjoy life, and to have respect for all forms of human spirituality. The kindness from others, the laughter of children, different facial expressions of joy, and simple gestures give me feelings of wonderment. I have practiced mindfulness meditation during my times of loneliness and found contentment in nature. Through these beautiful experiences, I have learned to nurture my self-compassion. Once I gave myself compassion and love, I viewed the world differently and more spiritually.

After being introduced to awe experiences from Megan, thoughts came back to me as if knocking on my door: My father telling us stories about how my shaman grandfather would have to travel to cure the sick and help those who lost their souls in the spirit world. I have so many questions about the soul, but my grandfather is no longer here with us. I recall my mother's stories of when she was younger: Whenever she heard the leaf being blown (tshuab nplooj), she would tell me how much it reminded her of Grandpa and how much she missed him, her childhood back in Laos, and sewing story cloths (paj nstaub). Do Hmong people find tshuab nplooj or story cloths healing, and do they elicit feelings of awe? I often look at my parents wondering how they felt about spirituality and what an awe experience is like for them. My father never spoke about his emotions. It makes me wonder how he really feels inside. What makes him feel awe? This is how I became interested in this research project: my thirst to understand Hmong spirituality and awe experiences.

I have contributed my knowledge about the Hmong culture to a certain extent. I was super happy when my research colleagues wanted to do research about the Hmong people and their experiences. I have been feeling ashamed of myself when I knew so little about my people. This was an opportunity for me to learn more about Hmong people and myself. Bias may come from my own experiences. Some of the things I have learned about the Hmong culture is through

personal experiences and previous research studies, but something tells me I have much more to learn. History is so important because it is part of who we are. To learn about one's history means appreciating what we have at the present moment and that is exactly where I am right now. I want to be the melody from the blowing sounds of the leaf and guide the healing winds into the ears of my Hmong people. I want to let them know that it is okay to have a mind of their own and interpret life in their own way, unrestricted by culture or traditional beliefs.

***Megan***

As a researcher, I don't believe that perfect knowledge is possible in human form. Humans often have difficulty discerning truths, we are vulnerable to emotional thinking that interferes with an unbiased, honest picture of reality. Further, cultural, ideological, and political contexts influence our perceptions and judgments of reality. We must rely on multiple ways of knowing: rationalism (reason), empiricism (sensory data), and subjectivism (intuition, personal experience). There is, however, an ultimate Knower, an ultimate truth and I know this is possible by faith. Knowledge exists on the continuum of objectivism and subjectivism. It is incomplete and subject to revision. Ultimately, we choose what to believe.

As a researcher, my emerging epistemology is a paradoxical blend of rationalism and empiricism, it takes the wisdom of a village to build confidence in what is knowable. My ontology is a balance of idealism and realism and fits most adequately between the post-positivist and constructivist paradigms. My axiology is Biblical and influenced by the gospel of Jesus Christ; I value love and understanding and seek to serve others with their healing.

As a nurse, I recognize the importance of human connection and purpose. The search for meaning and purpose is life's greatest undertaking. A lack of purpose or meaning impacts the whole person and their quality of life. In my collaboration with spiritual care providers from



various religions, I understand the universally vital role of spirituality for holistic well-being, and especially during adversity. Spiritual pain can be manifested emotionally and physically. This type of pain is exchanged intergenerationally and held on a collective level until it is acknowledged and healed. This understanding falls in line with my biblical beliefs of spiritual battles and with Hmong cosmology in that we are all influenced by a spiritual realm.

I brought this perspective into every aspect of the research design from how I interpreted the literature review, the purpose of the research question, to data collection and analysis. Leaving room to discuss data and reflect on the deepest possible intention of meaning, yet always searching to find the good in all circumstances. God works all things out for our greatest good, even when we do not understand, and even when we endure suffering. Ultimately, humankind are descendants of a single common ancestor, literally brothers and sisters; this transforms how I exist in this world. It influenced the theoretic lenses chosen to frame the research and the elements of study design; opting to seek first to understand. Interpretation and proposed implications were further impacted as I listened with spiritual ears, I was resistant to perpetuating division by class, race, or religion etc.

For this project, I offer a sincere curiosity for the emotion of awe, spiritual and religious experiences and holistic health. As far as awe, I know the Holy Spirit, which gives a sense of peace and an innate knowledge that I am eternally loved and God is always working. This reverence for God, and my identity in Christ are impossible for me to bracket. This influenced all areas of this project as I view us all to be soul and body, woven together, interconnected as a humanity, the sum no more important than each part.

Like the Hmong culture, I have a deep appreciation for my ancestors and strive to make choices that will honor them. My experiences have enabled me to empathize with the

experiences of broken families, lost identity, and rejection. I believe in the supernatural power of God. While I remained careful not to impose my personal lens onto the experiences of others, I do view adversity from a strength-based perspective. I approached this research humbly, leaving room for revelations and revisions that will last far beyond the project's completion.

*Sheri*

My ontology is that reality is socially constructed. I believe that we each live in a different reality because we each experience the world differently. We interpret the world differently because our social environments and contexts differ. My epistemology is that I gain knowledge by building upon previously learned social experiences. I base my axiology upon my social upbringing and culture, a blend of low socioeconomic status, Catholic, Midwestern, White, and feminine. My lived experiences influence my axiology. I interpret my values from my social construct. They are different from the values of my research colleagues because our contexts are different, and our realities are different. As a constructivist, I value that research is subjective; nothing is ever truly objective. These personal insights informed how I interpreted and analyzed our research data. When I reviewed the data, I highlighted key words or phrases that resonated with me; I pulled out direct quotes that were spiritually impactful to me; I searched for new knowledge to grow my construct of the meaning of awe and spiritual experiences.

I bring my Western interpretation and lived experience of awe and spirituality to this project. I do believe we are all spiritually interconnected. These beliefs and experiences attracted me to this project. It has been vital for me to be conscious of these beliefs throughout our data collection and analysis to remain as impartial as possible. These potential implicit biases were part of the debate that molded the questions crafted and the design of our semi-structured

interview. I was aware of my cultural biases while refining the instrumentation questions, during data collection and analysis, and drawing conclusions from the results. Without this awareness, our results may have had significant flaws.

I brought my professional experience as a qualitative researcher to this project. Thus, I brought some experience as an interviewer providing trustworthiness and credibility to our data collection process. I acknowledged that, as an interviewer, I am also an instrument. I brought my professional experience as a surgeon that has filled me with many awe-inspiring moments. They were life-affirming, life-altering, and transformative moments compelling me to explore the intersection of awe and spirituality.

## **Method**

This chapter will describe the constructivist paradigm, phenomenological culture of inquiry, and semi-structured interview method that we used to answer our research question: *What are the lived spirituality and awe experiences within second-generation Hmong living in Minnesota?* First, we will provide a rationale for our paradigm, culture of inquiry, and interview method. Next, we will delineate our sampling method, instrumentation, data collection, and data analysis. To follow, we discuss design rigor, protection of human subjects, and assess the strengths/limitations of our overall study design.

### **Rationale for Constructivist Paradigm**

We approached this research through the constructivist paradigm lens. The constructivist paradigm's epistemology asserts that what is knowable is subjective and relative to interactions between the knower and that which is to be known. Meaning is derived from individuals and groups (Lincoln & Guba, 2000), with the understanding that we make sense of the world within the context of social and historical perspectives (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The constructivist paradigm's ontological and epistemological base is subjective relativism, with only consensus therein forming shared realities. Bullock, Stallybrass & Trombley (1977) further posit the view that "beliefs and principles, particularly evaluative ones, have no universal or timeless validity but are valid only for the age in which, or the social group or individual person by which they are held" (p. 736). Rather than apply a broad understanding to a complex topic like present-day spirituality, the constructivist paradigm offers the possibility for a current and relevant understanding of how second-generation Hmong experience spirituality and awe from their perspectives and in this era.

We recognize that people may hold both similar and disparate views about the nature of reality within and across cultural groups. For example, it is impossible for researchers to fully set aside their individual and cultural biases, and not all researchers conducting this study are second-generation Hmong. Nor is this setting aside necessarily desired. Within the constructivist paradigm, researchers interact with subjects, access multiple views of reality and together co-construct data and sometimes the meaning itself. This can be seen as both a limitation as to the purity of subject data but a strength resulting in co-constructed meaning. Another limitation of constructivist research is its relative, intangible, internal nature; the researcher's interpretation of the participants' reality is subject to the same limitation (Appleton, 1997). Therefore, research designed through the lens of this paradigm must select a culture of inquiry and methodology that provides adequate rigor.

### **Rationale for the Phenomenology Culture of Inquiry**

Phenomenology is the study of an individual's lived experience as they interact with the world around them (Neubauer et al., 2019; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Individuals experience and interpret the world around them within the context of their lived experiences (Neubauer et al., 2019; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The flow of everyday existence leads to the formation of experience - or phenomena; such phenomena and memories or it can be described, recalled, or reflected upon. Phenomenological research questions the essence of such phenomena, asking for example, *what is the experience of spirituality and awe* through the participant's lens (van Manen, 2014; Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, phenomenology is an ideal culture of inquiry for describing second-generation Hmong adult's lived experience. Employing phenomenology, we can examine the subjective experiences of the phenomena, and the subjective meanings derived

from these experiences (Barrow, 2017; Chan & Chein, 2013; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; Neubauer et al., 2019; van Manen, 2014).

While phenomenology has its strengths, there are some weaknesses. Participants may be unable to express or articulate their experiences about spirituality and awe due to age, cognitive factors, and other barriers (van Manen, 2014 & Barrow, 2017). Using this method to focus on the experience of phenomena may result in a need for more information about what caused the experience, the outcomes or consequences of the experience, and other factors associated with the experience (Barrow, 2017). Due to the amount of qualitative data gathered, analyzing the data can be difficult and interpreting the data may become time-consuming and labor-intensive (Barrow, 2017). As researchers, we believe it is impossible to truly suspend one's judgments and preconceptions through bracketing (descriptive phenomenology). Thus, we will implement Heidegger's interpretive approach to phenomenology (Tuohy et al., 2013). A limitation of interpretive phenomenology is knowability, i.e., the inability to know the validity of the data. These studies may have limitations secondary to the naivety of the interviewer, incorrect questions being asked to frame the topic, and literal moments being lost in translation or transcription (Galletta, 2013).

### **Rationale for the Semi-Structured Interview Method**

Our culture of inquiry, interpretive phenomenology, lends itself well to data collection through conducting interviews (Galletta, 2003; Wengraf, 2001). Our research question is about the participants' lived experience, therefore conducting semi-structured interviews can help us gather information about the individual's personal experiences and beliefs about a phenomenon simply by asking them questions relative to that experience (Dejonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). The interview method poses questions in the form of a conversation to obtain new information

from the subject's perspective. The strength of utilizing a semi-structured interview design allows us to begin with a topic of interest and, through open-ended questions, allow the conversation to evolve. A conversation is a social experience. It allows for the possibility of new, not-as-yet theorized descriptions of lived experiences that may lead to new questions. It demands an open mind and respect for the process. Semi-structured interview method aligns with the constructivist paradigm (Wengraf, 2001) that frames our research. The interview structure may grow as more interviews are conducted to confirm the original data obtained, adding a level of validity and trustworthiness to the inferences made from the interview responses (Wengraf, 2001).

The semi-structured design allows for improvisation, which may result in unintentionally asking the wrong questions, this may cause some interviewees to withhold answers or refrain from answering questions, and some may be difficult to engage throughout the entire interview (Dejonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). However, improvised questions also allow for the possibility of gleaning a richer descriptive quality of the responses. The multiplicity of interviewers adds another layer for errors and biases to be mixed into the data collection and analysis (Wengraf, 2001). Some interviewers may be more skilled at asking improvised questions, while other, more naive interviewers may bring a more open-minded freshness to the interview dynamic. As researchers, awareness of these factors is paramount during the interview and during data analysis.

There are limitations to using Zoom for a semi-structured interview. Our body language and facial expressions may influence how the participant responds (Johnson et al., 2020). The interviewer's prior knowledge, misinformation, expertise, ignorance, and implicit biases may limit the conversation (Wengraf, 2001). The naivety of the researchers as interviewers adds an

unknown dimension of social and cultural differences, age and gender differences, and the ability to build rapport (Green & Thorogood, 2004). The interviewee in a semi-structured interview also has limitations, such as recall bias and social desirability (Green & Thorogood, 2004). Other more basic limitations are time constraints, access to subjects, as well as the cost of transcription (Galletta, 2013).

### **Sampling**

To ensure that the participant data addresses the research aim, participants must be second-generation Hmong living in Minnesota. To do this, we used a non-probability convenience sampling with snowballing. The reasoning behind using both methods is to reach a broad range of second-generation Hmong within the Twin Cities metro area. To reach a broad and diverse participant pool, we recruited via our flyers (Appendix A) posted within the Hmong cultural center, Hmong stores, and Hmong Churches located within the Little Mekong District in St. Paul and the St. Catherine University campus. St. Catherine University students were not the target population; however, our flyers were posted on the campus to reach a broad audience of potential participants. A benefit of recruiting through Facebook and bulletin board marketing is the ease for potential subjects to share about the study and increase the number of prospective participants. Our flyers indicated the study's purpose, our contact email address, the QR code, participant requirements, and incentives. All participation was listed as voluntary.

The target subjects were 18 years or older, English-speaking, and identified as second-generation Hmong willing to share their experiences of spirituality and awe. The ability to speak English and understand the language was part of an inclusion criteria. We chose not to translate the interview due to differences in dialects spoken and the limitations in the literal translation of certain words such as “awe.” Second-generation refers to children or adults born to



at least one foreign-born parent or who immigrated to the United States before the age of 10 (Portes et al., 2001). A strength of our selection process is that the Minneapolis-St Paul metro area is home to the largest reported Asian-alone demographic: Hmong. In the Twin Cities metro, the Hmong account for 81,132 people (Budiman, 2021).

A snowball sampling method is used to find eligible subjects through recommendations made by other individuals who know about the study (Crouse & Lowe, 2018). Non-probability sampling and snowball sampling can help researchers find participants who may be difficult to trace in a short duration of time when needed (Crouse & Lowe, 2018; Qualtrics, 2022). While non-probability sampling may be inexpensive, it may result in an imbalanced sample as participants refer from their circle (Qualtrics, 2022). In our study, Hmong adults who identify as second-generation may be difficult to pinpoint unless a snowball sampling occurs.

Non-probability convenience sampling and the snowball sampling methods were effective in gathering participants. A limitation of this sampling method is that potential subjects may refer friends and family members of the same socioeconomic status, inadvertently biasing the research and diminishing the validity of the results (Crouse & Lowe, 2018; Qualtrics, 2022; Given, 2008). Researchers recruited participants until thematic data analysis reached saturation (Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

Potential participants scanned the QR code on the flier, which took them to a Google interest form (Appendix A). On the Google interest form, we asked for their name, contact email, and phone number. Once we received the interest form, we emailed an informed consent form for the participants to review on their own. We then scheduled a Zoom session to review the informed consent. After this session and a 24-hour waiting period, interested participants signed the consent form and emailed it to us. The consent form contained an option to receive a \$25 gift

card. The gift card was given upon completion of the research interview. The offering of remuneration risks the possibility of swaying our subject pool to specific socio-economic strata. We limited this issue by keeping the gift amount modest, optional, and available at the time of the interview rather than holding it until the end of transcription.

### **Instrumentation**

A semi-structured interview guide was our instrument of choice. Researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the phenomena using interview guides to set a comfortable tone, create a safe environment for participants, and ask about personal experiences of spirituality and awe (Peoples, 2021). Our Interview Guide (Appendix B) contained semi-structured interview questions and definitions of awe and spirituality developed based on our review of the literature. Researchers began the interview defining awe experiences and spirituality. After this informational warm up, we asked participants to reflect on and share: (a) their experience(s) of awe, (b) their experience(s) of spirituality, and (c) if there is any significance that these experience(s) hold for them. The interview guide was pilot tested with three volunteers from within the population sample to ensure that the questions were easily understood and that they were phrased in such a way as to prompt reflections on the desired phenomena. We adjusted the guide accordingly before use in data collection. This pilot testing added to the reliability and trustworthiness of the instrument and data outcomes.

Researchers are also instruments in this study as they actively analyze the data, review transcriptions, and obtain the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Pezalla et al., 2012). We engaged with our participants through non-verbal cues, went off script to ask more detailed probing questions from participant to participant to elicit the desired phenomena. We brought our own cultural and historical experiences to the conversation, whether we were cognizant of them or not

(Pezalla et al., 2012). Thus, researchers must continually employ reflexivity to bring awareness of how we directly affect our research participants and processes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). We pursued personal self-reflection throughout this entire research journey by reflecting together as a group on the interviews and transcription process and reflecting individually on our research logs. It was critical for us to find meaningful outcomes from our data during the data analysis phase; we employed reflexivity and restraint, looking to the participant's words and meaning to construct our findings.

We understand there may be some issues with being instruments to the study. During an interview, interviewers may be unsuccessful in probing or asking for follow-up questions, not actively listening, using an interview guide that lacks open-ended questions, and asking insensitive questions (Dejonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). To maintain a balance between the rigor of research and the focus of interviewing, we emphasized active listening, using clear language, demonstrating empathy, and maintaining open-mindedness in accepting the participant's beliefs and experiences (Dejonckheere & Vaughn, 2019).

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Once consent was given and our forms signed, we arranged one-on-one Zoom interview appointments with each participant. Consent was verbally reinforced immediately before the interview started. We reminded participants that participation is voluntary, they can end the interview at any time, and all interview transcripts will be confidential. We then proceeded with the interviews, which ranged in time from 15 minutes to an hour. After recording the Zoom meeting, and transcribing the interview through OTTER, researchers reviewed the transcription. We contacted the participant with an offer/option to schedule a meeting to review the

transcription to ensure accuracy or clarify any items during the interview. Finally, a \$25 gift card was emailed to participants who elected remuneration.

### **Data Analysis**

We employed interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to analyze participant data. IPA is a methodology for analyzing qualitative data that derives strength from its ability to explore and describe participants' lived experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2015). We selected IPA as an approach to data analysis for its ability to bring respect and meaning to personal lived experiences. It allows us to make sense of others' lived experiences in a methodical way to produce a quality result (Smith & Osborn, 2015). We focused on the participants while acknowledging that we, as the interviewer, are also part of the equation (Smith & Osborn, 2015). The process of IPA requires us to continually self-reflect and have transparency with the final product. In interpretive phenomenology, we do this by use of the hermeneutic circle which results in ongoing revision and upgrading of our interpretation of the data (Peoples, 2020). We utilized the hermeneutic circle method of analysis that Heidegger's interpretive phenomenology uses where there is continual review and analysis between the parts and the whole to offer a deeper understanding (Tuohy et al., 2013).

A way to employ the hermeneutic circle is through journaling and ongoing discussion with co-researchers. With each revision of a preconception comes new meaning(s) (Peoples, 2020). The actual steps follow the basic principles of inductive research, searching across a data set to identify, analyze, and report repeated patterns. It is a methodology for describing data, but it also involves interpretation in constructing themes. Interpretative phenomenological analysis, as put forth by Alase (2017), provides an ideal alignment of this methodology with the purpose of our

research. The article is a guide for novice qualitative researchers. This method of interpretive structural thematic analysis consists of several steps:

1. The researchers self-reflect, describing their personal lived experience of the phenomenon to be studied - an awareness of the inability to completely bracket.
2. The researchers need a baseline appreciation and respect for the phenomenon.
3. The data needs to be transcribed verbatim.
4. Researchers then familiarize themselves with the data, which entails repeated reading through the data.
5. Identify meaningful and non-overlapping statements.
6. From these statements, search for meaningful units or themes that group the statements.
7. Write *what* the participants experienced.
8. Write *how* the participants experienced the phenomenon.
9. Ensure the trustworthiness and validity of the process.
10. Write up the final data analysis and description of findings for public dissemination, providing an active narrative of the research journey.

We followed the aforementioned steps of IPA to arrive at the resultant themes describing second-generation Hmong's lived experience of awe and spirituality.

### **Design Rigor**

Rigor is the *trustworthiness* of a research study and can be achieved when “the research design, method, and conclusions are explicit, public, replicable, open to critique, and free of bias” (Johnson et al., 2020, pg. 145) and the results can be trusted to be both reliable and valid. To establish trustworthiness in our research study, we describe the various ways we exercised

rigor throughout our study processes: reflexivity, triangulation, member-checking, and explanation of researcher bias.

### ***Reflexivity***

Reflexivity is when researchers reflect and are aware of their knowledge, biases, and how their role in the study, interpersonal, and personal experiences influence the direction of the study (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). We demonstrated reflexivity by journaling our thoughts and documenting any concerns and reflections throughout the research to reduce threats to validity. We held group meetings to discuss our reflections. Journaling helped us critically reflect on our interviews and throughout the data analysis and interpretation process (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Johnson et al., 2020).

### ***Triangulation***

Triangulation involves using multiple sources of information, methods of data collection, and multiple researchers in the analysis to bring about a deeper understanding of the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). We have embraced this concept during our literature review approaching our topic of interest from multiple sources. In data analysis each researcher independently reviews each transcript searching for themes. Notes were compared as a method of triangulation and themes further refined. In our discussion section, we compared and contrasted our results with others in the academic community to demonstrate either coherence or important aspects of dissonance.

### ***Member Checking***

Member checking is another form of reflexivity. We strengthened our rigor by offering participants the option to schedule an appointment to review their transcript after they completed the interview. Olmos-Vega et al. (2022) believe collaboration with participants is done by

including them in the reflexivity process. Doing so validates the accuracy of their interpretation of a phenomenon.

### ***Explanation of Researcher Bias***

Confirmation bias is often an implicit bias. It underscores the possibility that researchers will only find meaning in results that align with our preconceived notions or hopeful anticipated research outcomes. As the interviewers, we are part of the study instrumentation and bring our own experiences of spirituality and awe to the conversation. Confirmation bias was a topic of awareness during our data analysis group sessions. It has a profound ability to impact our data collection and data analysis. It was vital for us to not discredit results that did not conform to expected outcomes and keep an open mind to unexpected findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

### **Protection of Human Subjects**

#### ***Risks and Benefits of Participation***

There were no direct benefits to the study participants other than the knowledge that they are contributing to the academic literature regarding second-generation Hmong experiences of spirituality and awe. At the same time, there was minimal risk to the participants. However, the researchers acknowledge that the interview questions could elicit unexpected emotions and spiritual connection. To minimize these risks, informed consent delineated this potential risk. At the time of the interview, the participants were reminded of the potential for emotional and spiritual triggers. The subjects were also reminded that their participation is entirely voluntary. They had an option to end the interview at any time and decline to answer any or all of the questions. They were able to withdraw their data until February 21, 2023. At the end, we offered mental health resources to address any mental health concerns that inadvertently arose during the interview.

***Confidentiality***

Participant data was kept confidential. Recorded interview sessions were securely stored digitally on St. Catherine University's approved Box web platform. This data was auto-transcribed through the OTTER application: OTTER utilizes 2-factor authentication, TLS encryption, and AES-256-bit encryption to maintain the security and confidentiality of data. The researchers reviewed the transcribed data with participants that requested this option via a non-recorded screen-sharing Zoom. We removed all potentially identifying markers after the final transcription. The de-identified data were stored on the St. Catherine University Box application and on St. Kate's password-protected Google Drive. We will permanently delete identifiable data from the Box application no later than April 29, 2023.

***Incentives***

Researchers worked with Sponsored Programs, Research & External Engagement (SPREE) at St. Kate's to distribute the incentives. SPREE follows IRS regulations and supports researchers in maintaining participant confidentiality. Each subject was given a choice (yes or no) on the consent form to receive an electronic incentive of a \$25 Target Gift Card. Subjects were given the gift card after they completed the interview. Based on SPREE's policy, researchers filled out the participant incentive log form to keep track of those who chose to receive the incentive. To protect participant privacy, a participant's name or identification number was assigned to each incentive identification number with initials. The log was maintained throughout the study, and SPREE kept a copy on file.

***Design-Specific Strengths and Limitations***

Every research design has strengths and weaknesses. In this section, we reflect on the strengths and limitations of our research design.



***Strengths***

We purposefully crafted this research to create a strong alignment between the study question and the design framework, methodology, and instrumentation. We situated the research within the theoretical framework of holism as it integrated our constructivist paradigm and phenomenological culture of inquiry with our desire to describe lived spiritual and awe experiences. The semi-structured interview, as an instrument, allowed for an in-depth personal conversation with the study participants as they described their experiences surrounding awe and spirituality. The unity of these foundational components brings design rigor to this project embedded within the background of a cohesive logic model.

We used member checking with the optional review of the transcript. This adds another level of trustworthiness to the outcome of our results. Providing the participants with the ability to verify the veracity of the transcripts ensures that, as researchers, we are not analyzing flawed data. This added credence to the themes that emerged from data analysis.

***Limitations***

This project required the development of a new interview instrument, a semi-structured interview guide. Our Western implicit biases potentially created a language barrier that we limited by adding introductory definitions of awe and spirituality experiences. Our research team members ranged from having some-to-no experience with semi-structured interviews, limited experience working with people from the Hmong community, and faced challenges during the interview, such as language barriers. We, as researchers, understand that we are instruments, which may pose some limitations to the research design.

Our inclusion criteria limited subjects to those who were conversant in English leaving out the possibility of including a second-generation person who may be more heavily immersed

in their culture and prevent their voice from being represented. Our research design relied on technology, limiting subject participants to those comfortable and proficient with Google, Zoom, and QR codes or those with access to the technology. We recruited and interviewed participants during February 2023. This timeframe may limit our ability to find a more diverse participant pool.

These primary weaknesses were reduced by pilot testing the interview. This allowed us time to reflect on and improve our interview skills as well as hone the questions to improve the reliability and trustworthiness of the results. Consequently, we desired to add brief demographic optional questions. This interview modification required an amendment research approval by the IRB which was obtained prior to interview execution.

## Results

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the results of our study, which asks: *What are the lived experiences of spirituality and awe among second-generation Hmong living in Minnesota?*

The results of this qualitative study begin with a description of the participants and relevant demographic data. Next, we present observational data. Finally, we present each of the themes that emerged from the data along with supportive documentation.

### Description of the Participants

We collected the following demographics on our participants: age, gender, and religious/spiritual affiliation. Our study consisted of nine second-generation Hmong participants between the ages of 18-31, two male, and seven female, all who live in Minnesota. Five of the nine participants disclosed their religion as Animism, and of these five, two identified as Shaman. Four of the nine participants identified as Christian, and of these four, three specified themselves as Catholic. When asked about their religious or spiritual affiliation, several participants used the word “Shamanism” to interchangeably describe Animism. We de-identified each participant, assigned them a number, and correlated them with their self-disclosed spiritual affiliation to offer context to the supportive quotes within our findings.

### Observational Data

Interviews were conducted entirely online and ranged from 15 - 60 minutes long on Zoom. Participants expressed interest in sharing their experiences from their own point of view. Many expressed gratitude for exploring the subject; explaining that few people desire to talk about the subject. Participants also noted that they had not deeply reflected on spirituality and awe experiences prior to the interview. All the participants answered the questions. When asked if they'd like to share anything else, two participants shared additional information about

spirituality and awe experiences. Beyond the observational data analysis, we arrived at a meta-theme expressing our participants' essential experience and four major themes.

### **Essential Experience and Main Themes**

In analyzing our data to describe the lived experiences of spirituality and awe among second-generation adult Hmong living in Minnesota, we arrived at four major themes and a meta-theme or, *essential experience*. In the following sections, we describe this meta-theme, followed by major themes 1) *spirituality, connection, and purpose*, 2) *spiritual identity development*, 3) *senses and emotions*, and 4) *open-mindedness*, and offer supporting evidence in our participants' own words.

### **Meta theme: Essential Experience**

Our participants expressed an essential experience that spirituality and awe experiences are intertwined, often involve sensations or strong emotions, and may result in a sense of interconnection, spiritual identity, purpose, and open-mindedness.

*[Awe] created such emotion in me - sadness initially, but then there was so much happiness [it] invigorated my spirituality. (Participant 5, Catholicism)*

*[spirituality is] something that is experienced through the soul and held within the heart...it's something that you have to assess and understand and be open, open minded to without criticism. (Participant 1, Shaman; Animism)*

*spirituality is what helps me move forward with life - of knowing my purpose. (Participant 2, Shaman; Animism)*

*[awe experiences] kind of deepens connections [and is] linked to spirituality. You have a feeling like interconnect[ion]. (Participant 9, Christian)*

This meta theme emerged from the following four themes. Combined, they provide a rich account of our participants' lived experiences.

### **Theme 1: *Spirituality, Connection and Purpose***

Spirituality is a personal experience that involves connection to something larger than oneself and is meant to serve a higher purpose. All nine participants described spirituality as a personal experience that involves connection to something larger than oneself and is meant to serve a higher purpose - whether that be God, ancestral, or other spirits. To our participants, spirituality was experienced during times of worship at a church, traditional shamanic ceremonies, or when alone.

*Spirituality is more like your belief and what your connection with the higher power. (Participant 2, Shaman; Animism)*

*...we also have a soul, a spirit. And then there's more than just this physical world...spirituality is connecting with my soul, to other spirits, to God. (Participant 7, Catholicism)*

*...my [awe] experiences, it's like viewing the ocean, or just watching those waves come crashing, and I find I can link that to God... and just finding that I can fit in, in this bigger picture of this community of this world. And I connect that definitely to my spirituality. (Participant 6, Catholicism)*

*...because spirituality is more of like your growth in path on your connection with I guess what with oneself and your higher power; spiritual experiences, like your experience with spirit or this presence... (Participant 2, Shaman; Animism)*

Participants explained that the purpose of experiencing spirituality is to reach their highest self.

There was emphasis on the interconnection between others and the desire to help others reach a higher level of well-being.

*I experienced spirituality by seeing what my family does with shamanism and seeing how they tend to take care of their spirit and how they can help other people take care of their spirits. (Participant 3, Animism)*

*Through those spiritual experiences of my own, spirituality is what helps me move forward with life too of knowing my purpose. (Participant 2, Shaman; Animism)*

*How do I get in touch with my deepest self, my highest conscience, my greatest inner demons? How do I address them? And what do I do about them to bring balance? (Participant 2, Shaman; Animism)*

## **Theme 2: Spiritual Identity Development**

Spiritual or awe experiences each inspired reflection, causing one's spirituality or spiritual identity to feel strengthened, or developed. Experiences of awe also impacted spiritual beliefs. Participants described their awe experiences as heightening, deepening, or strengthening their spiritual beliefs. For some, awe was described as a transformative moment, taking them from skeptic to believer. Overall, awe experiences were impactful moments that had spiritual connotations. These moments often resulted in a deeper understanding or appreciation for cultural traditions.

*[Awe experiences] help me understand who I am as a person. Also, a little bit of my culture and my religion, and it's also brought me a lot closer to my parents. It helped me understand why they do the things that we do or why they talk the way that they do. (Participant 3, Animism)*

*I dreamt that a cat had visited me. It was very vivid, like the cat was gray with stripes, kind of like a tiger. And so that morning, I woke up, and I told [my dad, who is a Shaman] this happened to me, it was kind of creepy. And he goes, Oh yeah, that cat visited me too. He said he [the cat] was just visiting. And then he proceeded to describe in detail what this cat looked like in my dream. And I was just awestruck. I was like, What the hell? Before that, I wasn't sure if I believed in everything about shamanism, but then my dad just described the thing in my dream to the detail. So, I was like, okay... all right. I guess it's legit (Participant 8, Animism).*

One participant recalled an awe experience participating in a healing ceremony from an entirely different culture

*...the Mayan healer pointed out and said that there's someone among you who has a very strong ancestral presence ... the Mayan healer pointed to me to say, "you have very strong ancestors who want to give you a gift to give you a power to help the world". I was just shocked...I had to reflect a little bit more about it because, you know, before my family converted to Catholicism, my family were one of the first to convert in Laos. But before our family converted to Catholicism, I did come from a line of ancestors who were shamans, very powerful shamans... So, when I heard the Mayan healer said that I was in awe... (Participant 7, Catholicism)*

Our participants shared experiences of their spirituality being influenced by both Hmong and American culture. Conflict was sometimes expressed in the form of external or internal questioning:

*Are you sure you're Catholic? Are you sure you're Christian? So that's something that I [have] struggled [with] balancing those identities... there's only a few people who will be willing to listen...I don't expect everyone to fully understand. (Participant 7, Catholic)*

*Balance my identity to being Hmong, but also being Catholic and believing that yes, I don't pray to my ancestors, like how other Hmong people do, but I do acknowledge that there are ancestral spirits. (Participant 7, Catholicism)*

*Growing up, I struggle a lot understanding shamanism, the practice that we do, and it's hard because as a child we asked - because we're like Americans, and we didn't grow up understanding shamanism and why we do it. So, it was really hard for my parents [to answer] my deep questions about those topics like oh, why do we do soul calling or why do we celebrate my new year every year and you know, why do we do this? And I didn't know and understand that, like, the deep meaning behind it. (Participant 4, Animism)*

*I feel like it could also just be like meditation or yoga or even prayers. I know that a lot of my religion beliefs is that we don't really pray because we're not Christian, but I feel like that kind of gives me some sort of spirituality....so I do pray. (Participant 4, Animism)*

### **Theme 3: Senses and Emotions**

Spiritual and awe experiences often overlap, being described in terms of sensory perception and experienced during moments of strong emotion. Spiritual and awe experiences were described in terms of sensory perception co-occurring with strong emotion. Participants described sensations such as sounds, smells, visions, physical touch and often paired these sensations occurring in the context of emotions. Particularly, strong emotions such as fear, surprise, or grief. Some of the experiences occurred during waking life, some during dreams, sleep paralysis, and during moments of prayer or ceremony.

*like when you sometime [get] like goosebumps because maybe like a spirit is there, kind of thing. So, how I experienced spirituality is more of where I'm living in both worlds, if that makes sense; where there's the spirit world and there's the human world. (Participant 2, Shaman; Animism)*

*...one of the experiences of all in my life was when my biological dad passed away... I would say that that's probably one of the most negative heart wrenching awe moments of my life, because of what I saw and what I experienced with odors... I felt like I had no control over my emotions, my sadness... I could not control the tears, the tears just started flowing...there was nothing I could do. It was just overwhelming - so that's an example of awe in my life. (Participant 5, Catholic)*

*[describing struggle with illness] ...whatever evil it is, can you take it away? All of a sudden the pain just went away. (Participant 7, Catholic)*

*[recalling an experience of awe] I found out that my pregnancy was non-viable. So, it was like a mixture of like a fear of what's going to happen... So that was an experience of awe that happened to me that stuck with me for a while. (Participant 4, Animism)*

*[describing an awe experience] sitting on the shrine and experiencing a shaking that I cannot control and usually when you shake and out of body experiences, stuff like that. (Participant 1, Shaman; Animism)*

Depending upon the experience, participants further described their perceptions of awe pairing with positive, negative, or mixed emotions.

*I'm always amazed when my dad performs a ritual for somebody or spiritual building or whatever and it makes the problem go away. You know, it's like, he came to my dad and he did a ritual for you and it was able to help, it was able to help you heal and get better. I think that makes me go... that's pretty amazing to me. (Participant 8, Animism).*

*I consider these [spiritual] experiences to be, I will say bittersweet...some are actually very positive...and some are kinda devastating (Participant 1, Shaman; Animism)*

*And then how people are interacting with each other and helping each other. I could even say it as simply as I can find awe in a moment being a high school teacher, where students, instead of waiting for me to help them, they'll get up out of their seats and help each other. And to me, that's a big awe moment. ... So, it doesn't have to be something grand and amazing...but like, as simple as those...little kind of acts of kindness. I find awe on those. (Participant 6, Catholicism)*

#### **Theme 4: Open-Mindedness**

As a capstone to the interview, we asked each participant if there was anything else that they wanted to share. An undercurrent in their responses was the need to be open-minded, open to the experience, open to possibilities and the path ahead. Two participants described awe experiences as “indescribable” or “unexplainable.”



*It's an experience where you can't put words to it like words alone, whether it's an English or Hmong, or any language. Can't describe it. It's like you had to be there to have seen, heard, experienced it, you know, to understand. (Participant 4, Animism)*

*People out there who are like, stuck, I would say just give it a chance to understand your spirit to take care of it too. So not just have one idea and think, oh, like that's it for the rest of their life. I would definitely say be open-minded. Listen to what the old generation has to say because after they're gone and they're gone...No one else really has any more knowledge than what the older people might know. (Participant 3, Animism)*

*... I feel like there's really a positive to everything... I feel like not a lot of people talk about sleep paralysis-they don't see it as a positive thing,.. or they see it as a negative alarm. "Why am I always experiencing these negative spiritual experiences?" They run away from it, or they shut down and they don't like to talk about it ...it's something that you have to assess and understand and be open, open minded to without criticism. (Participant 1, Shaman; Animism)*

Overall, our participants expressed an essential experience that spirituality and awe experiences are intertwined, often involve sensations or strong emotions, and may result in a sense of interconnection, spiritual identity, purpose, and open-mindedness. The significance, implications, and limitations of these results will be further examined in the discussion section.

## **Discussion**

This chapter presents the interpretation of our research findings as grounded in a constructivist lens and holistic framework. We show where our findings are consistent with the literature, examine any unexpected findings and study limitations. We then highlight any implications our findings have for holistic health in the Hmong community, and on future research.

### **Findings Supported by the Literature**

In this section, we discuss the themes' relationship to existing literature, beginning with our meta-theme. Similar to Cohen et al. (2010), Saroglou et al. (2008), and Van Cappellen & Saroglou (2011) our participants expressed an essential experience that spirituality and awe experiences are intertwined, often involve sensations or strong emotions, and may result in a sense of interconnection, spiritual identity, purpose, and open-mindedness. This is supported by the literature that spiritual experiences involve emotions and evoke a feeling of connectedness with oneself, whereas awe experiences also elicit powerful emotions associated with spirituality (Cohen et al., 2010; Saroglou et al., 2008; Van Cappellen & Saroglou, 2011).

### ***Senses and Emotions of Awe***

One of our main results centered on the theme that awe and spiritual experiences were perceived during moments of strong emotion. This is not a surprising finding given that awe is an emotion itself; however, it is a complex emotion that is on a continuum ranging from fear to admiration (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). Our results are consistent with the previous literature, which describes that spiritual experiences include feelings of connection to all life, strength, comfort, and gratitude (Underwood & Tersi, 2002). Similarly, feelings of sadness or pain were described as being central to spiritual experiences and can result in positive transformation (Cohen et al.,

2010). Kearns & Tyler (2022) also linked awe to spiritual or religious feelings. Emotions and sensations are integral to both awe and spiritual experiences within the second-generation Hmong community.

### ***Awe as positive or negative***

Our findings also revealed that while awe was often described as a positive experience, our participants just as often experienced awe from negative, or fear-based experience. To date, there is no evidence that fear and awe experiences have well-being benefits that are associated with positive awe experiences; however, there is evidence that negative experiences still contribute to spiritual feelings (Preston & Shin, 2017; Gordon et al., 2017). How the experience is interpreted (positive or negative), and what resources the person has to process negative awe experiences will factor into the impact on the individual's well-being (Gorden et al., 2017).

### ***Connection to something greater***

Our findings support other literature suggesting that awe experiences are at the core of spirituality and influence an individual's sense of self and connection to the world (Monroy & Keltner, 2023; Mehar, 2018; Saroglou et al., 2008; Valdesolo & Graham, 2014; Van Cappellen & Saroglou, 2011). Our findings suggest that an individual's spiritual identity is strengthened because of spiritual and awe experiences. As Underwood & Tersi, 2002, suggest, our participants expressed peace, comfort, and a connection with God or a connection to their own spirituality through spiritual and awe experiences. These common findings support the importance of spirituality for our well-being (Joseph et al., 2021).

Our participants express a connection to a higher power. Some participants expressed this connection occurring during spiritual experiences such as rituals or ceremonies (praying, Animism, and Shamanic religious practices). The concept that rituals are capable of instilling

awe is supported by the literature (Gordon et al., 2017; Preston & Shin, 2017; Yaden et al., 2020). However, literature specific to the Hmong people by DeSantiago (2020a), notes that specifically-named spirits are phasing out and becoming more of an *essence*, *spiritual sensation*, or *feeling*. The loss of specifically named spirits may be secondary to acculturation and the loss of spiritual conversation. There may also be a component of loss regarding Hmong language translation and the evolution of words themselves (Guerra, 2019).

### **Unexpected Findings**

Our study had some unexpected findings including sleep paralysis, art and music, and the contemplation of the religious practice of Shamanism and Animism. These unexpected findings offer insight into intimate awe and spiritual experiences occurring among the second-generation Hmong population in Minnesota not reflected in the literature.

Sleep paralysis experiences stood out as a significant spiritual or awe-inducing event for two study participants. This prompted an exploration of the literature about sleep paralysis among Hmong and East Asian immigrants. Historical and ethnographic reports indicate that the experience of “*dab tsog*” (which translates into "a spirit sitting on top of you or a spirit that is heavy and on top of you") is not rare and is often experienced more than once (Young et al., 2013). Specific to traditional Hmong belief, sleep paralysis is described as an experience where a *dab tsog* spirit sits on the victim’s chest causing paralysis, difficulty speaking, respiration issues, and anxiety or fear (Adler, 1991). The emotions of fear and perplexity described by our participants as a result of experiencing sleep paralysis are supported in the literature about negative awe. Our participants described sleep paralysis experiences as spiritual and awe-evoking and understood the event to be entering a spiritual realm of knowledge that is not accessible in waking life. Participants described these experiences as frightening and with

perplexing meaning. Researchers have noted the association between culture-specific stress and sleep disorders (Adler, 1991; Young et al., 2013). Acknowledging the importance of the mind-body connection as it pertains to holistic health, this sleep-paralysis experience has implications for the mental, physical, and spiritual well-being of this population. It should be emphasized that threat-based experiences of awe (as described by some of our participants experiencing sleep paralysis) did not have the same well-being benefits as awe described through positive experiences (Gordon et al., 2016).

Art and music can be awe-inspiring experiences (Keltner & Haidt, 2003); however, neither were mentioned by our participants. This non-finding may be indicative of the relative inexperience of us as interviewers or the small number and ages of our participants, but the absence of these commonly awe-inspiring experiences/interactions was striking.

Participants stated “Animism” and “Shamanism” as answers when asked about their religious or spiritual affiliation; it implies that there is verbal overlap or confusion about the meaning of Animism as a religion versus Shamanism as a religious practice and being Shaman. For example, when asked what the participants’ religious or spiritual affiliation was, some participants said, “Animism and Shamanism” or recorrected themselves from “Shamanism” to “Animism” or only answered “Shamanism”. Although this does not have meaning for our research question, it may be evidence of religious acculturation.

### **Implications for Holistic Health**

In Holistic health, the goal is to achieve a state of wellness through healing and balancing the whole person -- mind, body, and spirit. Study participants note a spiritual connection between the mind and body; that to arrive at balance or understanding of life’s purpose, spirituality needs attention. Also, as our participant demographic data show there to be a range of spiritual beliefs

and practices among second-generation Hmong living in Minnesota; anyone working to support their well-being should take individual perspective into consideration.

Curriculums for health professions could state that spirituality and awe are deemed present for second-generation Hmong and may be significant to well-being and positive health outcomes (Balboni, et al. 2022). Asking a patient about their spirituality may invite whole-person care and better guide medical decisions. Health practitioners and mental health programs should incorporate spirituality into their care models: spiritual or religious engagement is associated with reduced likelihood of depression and lengthened life expectancy and better health outcomes overall (George et al., 2000; McCullough & Larson, 1999). Many Hmong Americans struggle to have a healthy relationship with their parents, and struggle as they transition into college (Lee et al., 2008). Hmong students are at risk of developing "neurotic tendencies, depression symptoms, and family conflict" more so than their peers who are not Hmong (Lee et al., 2008). For Hmong men and women in college, family conflicts accounted for anxiety, depression, drug use, somatic symptoms, and whether they will complete their first year of college (Lee et al., 2008).

Spirituality plays a role in mediating adversities by promoting healthy behaviors, lifestyles, social support, ritual psychodynamics, cognitive schemata, ego challenge, quantum effects, and has supernatural effects (Hodge 2007). To include Hmong spirituality experiences, Western medicine needs to acknowledge the cultural significance of Shamanism, with its potential Animistic components, to allow inclusion of these practices in healthcare and holistic healing.

While research linking awe to spirituality and health is underway, recent studies find that awe experienced with spirituality is a pathway to mental and physical health (Monray & Keltner, 2023). Our results showed that spiritual and awe experiences gave our participants a feeling of connectedness to themselves or God and their own spirituality. Practitioners and health care

models should incorporate spirituality and awe to promote holistic health and well-being among Hmong people.

### **Implications for the Hmong Community**

Study participants express a lack of conversation revolving around the topic of spirituality, spiritual experiences, and awe experiences within the second-generation Hmong community. Several of our participants thanked us for doing this research, explaining that “*no one talks about this stuff,*” but noting its importance. This lack of conversation may in part be due to generational communication barriers, acculturation factors, or the more individualized spiritual experiences rather than communal. As researchers and members of varying cultures, we have concern not only for loss of historical culture, but misinterpretation given multiple Hmong dialects and indirect word translation. The Hmong community are encouraged to talk about these topics to increase individual and collective awareness of cultural or religious practices and spiritual identity

### **Limitations**

Our results have several limitations. One of the most significant limitations is the lack of generalizability. The experiences shared with us were found amidst only those second-generation Hmong living in Minnesota that responded to our study advertisements. Our sample size of nine included Christians and Animists, leaving Atheist and other religious beliefs unrepresented. See Methods for other overall and design-specific limitations.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

It would be useful to extend the current findings by examining the current state of spiritual satisfaction, performing a needs assessment and asking explicit questions about awe and spirituality experiences to arrive at more substantial findings. There is a need to research how

second-generations (and beyond) rate their spiritual well-being and degree of spiritual fulfillment, asking specifically to identify unmet spiritual needs. This is important for the well-being of not only the Hmong in Minnesota, but for all who interact with Hmong people in hopes of furthering collective well-being.

Due to the descriptions of sleep paralysis and other frightening recollections of awe, future research should focus on the degree of fear-based awe experiences within this community, and their implications for well-being. The phenomenon of sleep paralysis among Hmong and East Asian immigrants as a spiritual or awe-evoking experience deserves further exploration. Present research about sleep paralysis in this population is known to reflect stressors and signs of unmet psychosocial needs.

An arts-based research study may be another approach to glean or apply information surrounding spirituality and awe experiences for this population. Perhaps a small group format with purposeful intergenerational participant selection may produce a richly diverse discussion.

### **Conclusion**

Nine adult second-generation Minnesota Hmong shared their spiritual and awe experiences with us during semi-structured interviews conducted in 2023. We find that Minnesota Hmong do experience spirituality and awe and that they have strong interconnections between spirituality and awe. While the specific term “well-being” was not used, participants stressed the importance of these experiences for the health of mental, emotional, and interpersonal relationships. Much work remains to be done before a full understanding of awe and spiritual experiences among second-generation Hmong is established, this study emphasizes that within second-generation Minnesotan Hmong, spiritual and awe experiences can be impactful to holistic health and well-being.



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**Appendix A: Flyer, Social Media Advertising, and Google Interest Form**

NYOB ZOO! STUDENTS IN THE MASTER OF ARTS IN HOLISTIC HEALTH STUDIES (MAHHS) FROM ST. CATHERINE UNIVERSITY ARE SEEKING VOLUNTEER RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS.

Research Students: Mai Lee Xiong, BSPH, MPH; Megan (Knoll) Pfenning, RN, PHN, LSN, ACM; Sheri DeMartelaere, MD, MHE and Faculty Adviser Stasia Johnson Steinhagen, MA, CCH.

**Lived Experiences of Spirituality and Awe in Second-generation Minnesota Hmong Adults**

**PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**  
To describe spirituality and awe experiences within the second-generation Hmong living in the U.S.

**REQUIREMENTS**

- Must be 18 years or older
- Must live in Minnesota
- Must identify as second generation Hmong
- Must be able to speak English

**WHAT IS SECOND GENERATION?**  
Individuals born and raised in the United States who have at least one foreign born parent.

Please pass on this information to people you know who may be interested in participating in our study.

**INTERVIEWS**  
Interviews will be conducted by MAHHS students via Zoom (1 on 1) and are anticipated to take between 60 - 90 minutes of your time. Interviews will be in English.  
Compensation: A \$25 gift card.

**WHEN IS THE INTERVIEW?**  
All interviews will be done during the month of January 2023.

If you are interested in being in the study, please scan the QR code.

If have any questions, please contact us by sending an email to:  
awesomehmongstudy@gmail.com

**Appendix B: Social Media / FB Post**

We will post our flier with additional post comments:

Nyob zoo (Hello)! Are you a second-generational English-speaking Hmong adult between the ages of 18 and up who lives in Minnesota? We are seeking volunteers to participate in our research study.

Our research study is called, “Lived Experiences of Spirituality and Awe in Second-generation Minnesota Hmong Adults.” The purpose of this study is to describe spirituality and awe experiences within the second-generation Hmong living in the U.S.

Who will be conducting the interviews: One of the student researchers from the Masters of Holistic Health program. We are three student researchers (Mai Lee Xiong, MPH; Megan (Knoll) Pfenning, RN, PHN, LSN, ACM; Sheri DeMartelaere, MD, MHE) from the Master of Arts in Holistic Health Studies at St. Catherine University. Our research advisor is Stasia Johnson Steinhagen, MA, CCH. The interviews will be done as a one-on-one Zoom interview in English.

What is the second generation? Individuals born and raised in the United States who have at least one foreign born parent.

Why are you conducting this research? We have found that there is limited to no prior research on Hmong spirituality and awe experiences. We want to know how you describe spirituality and awe experiences. With the information we find, we want to pave the way for other researchers to conduct future studies relating to Hmong Spirituality, and Hmong awe experiences.

Please feel free to pass on this information to people you know who may be interested in knowing about or participating in our study. If you would like more information or if you are interested in the study, please feel free to contact us at [awesomehmongstudy@gmail.com](mailto:awesomehmongstudy@gmail.com).

**Appendix C: Google Interest Form**

## Thankyou for your interest in this research study!

Nyob zoo (Hello)! We are three students (Mai Lee Xiong, BSPH, MPH; Megan (Knoll) Pfenning, RN, PHN, LSN, ACM; Sheri DeMartelaere, MD, MHE) from the Master's of Holistic Health Studies program at St. Catherine University. Our research advisor is Stasia Johnson Steinhagen, MA, CCH and if you have any questions about the research study please feel free to contact us via email at [awesomemongstudy@gmail.com](mailto:awesomemongstudy@gmail.com).

As a reminder, here is more information about our research study:

**Research Study:** Lived Experiences of Spirituality and Awe in Second-generation Minnesota Hmong Adults

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to describe spirituality and awe experiences within the second-generation Hmong living in the U.S.

**Study:** Interviews will be conducted via Zoom (1 on 1) and are anticipated to take between 60 - 90 minutes of your time. All interviews will be in English.

**Compensation:** Each participant will be compensated with a \$25 gift card.

**Requirements:** Must be 18 years or older, must live in Minnesota, and must identify as a second generation Hmong.

**When:** All interviews will be done during the month of January 2023.

Please fill out this Google form if you are interested in being a participant for the research. We will connect with you for more information.

Please feel free to pass this information on to people you know who may be interested in knowing about or participating in our study.

Thankyou!

 [mlxiong@stkate.edu](mailto:mlxiong@stkate.edu) (not shared) [Switch account](#)



\* Required

First Name \*

Your answer

Last Name

Your answer

Email \*

Your answer

Phone number

Your answer

We are offering a \$25 gift card to all participants. Would you like to receive one after your interview session?

Yes

No

Submit

Clear form

Never submit passwords through Google Forms.

This form was created outside of your domain. [Report Abuse](#) - [Terms of Service](#) - [Privacy Policy](#).

Google Forms

## **Appendix D: Interview Guide for Spirituality and Awe Experiences**

Hello, my name is [researcher's name]. I'll be leading our interview today. As I mentioned over email and in our flier, I am currently working with [researcher partners' names] to describe spirituality and awe experiences among Hmong second generation adults who live in MN. Your participation is key to our work!

I'd like to start by thanking you for making the time to speak with us. Your presence is valuable and will be used to help future researchers and Hmong communities explore awe and spirituality. Just to confirm, I'd like to keep this interview up to 60 minutes. Does that still work for you?

Great. If you need a break or to stop at any time, please let me know. Feel free not to answer any questions if you do not feel comfortable. If you would like to stop the interview at any time, please let me know as well.

During this interview, I'll ask you a few questions around spirituality and awe experiences. My questions are going to be very open-ended to allow you to share your experiences. Later on, I might ask more directed questions based on your shared thoughts.

Please be aware that there are no wrong answers — you're the expert here! We're doing interviews like these to hear things from your perspective. We're doing this to better understand these experiences, so we need to hear your honest thoughts.

I want to remind you that this session will be recorded. The recording will only be used to help us in our research, and it won't be shared with anyone outside the research team we described in the consent form we reviewed prior to this interview. Recording this also helps me to ensure that I have accurately captured your words. You will have an option to review the transcript and discuss any concerns or clarifications at that time.

Finally, I want to confirm that you've received, reviewed, signed, and returned your participant agreement called our Consent Form? Did you have any questions? Great. Do you have any questions for me at this time?

### **Warm up**

Researchers such as neuropsychologist Pearsall and social psychologist Cohen have shared the following thoughts about awe and spirituality:

Awe is an emotion that can be experienced in many different ways. Awe experiences can be described as being either positive or negative. A positive awe experience is that of wonderment or amazement. It can be caused by viewing a beautiful piece of art, viewing a majestic vista, praying, or gazing at the stars. A negative awe experience can be one of an overwhelming sense of fear or powerlessness. It can be caused by seeing the aftermath of a tornado or the devastation



of a bridge collapsing. Both types of experiences often leave one feeling small in the vastness of all that makes up our world.

Spiritual experiences are often described as a religious, sacred, or mystical experience. They can be difficult to interpret and put into words. They often evoke a sense of a greater force being in charge of or directing the experience that is outside of our capability to fully understand or control.

### **Topic-specific**

Now, I'd like to ask you a few broad questions.

What does the term spirituality or spiritual experiences mean to you?

How do you experience spirituality?

(If additional prompting is needed ask them: What does the term awe or awe-filled experience mean to you?)

What is your experience of awe? Or Describe your experiences of awe

Do these experiences hold any significance for you?

Have your awe experiences informed or influenced your spirituality?

### **Wrap up**

As we finish, are there other questions you feel we forgot to ask about?

Is there anything else you would like to share with us?

I just want to remind you that you will have the option to review the transcript with me and discuss any concerns you have.

Final safety question - Would you like me to email mental health resource information to you?

Thank you so much for your time!