EXPERIENCES OF HMONG GAY AND LESBIAN INDIVIDUALS

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By
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DEDICATION

This dedication is for my husband, Thai Yang, for all of his support and love through this journey. This is also dedicated to my sisters, Zoua Cha and Bao Cha, for encouraging me when the times were tough and the road seemed endless. Lastly, to my thesis chair, Robin Ringstad, and reader, Katie Galvin, for supporting me and guiding through this journey. I would like to say “Thank You” to all of my social work professors for always encouraging me to reach for what I want and to never give up.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of the Problem</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay and Lesbian Identity in Past Hmong History</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of Purpose</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of the Study</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II.</td>
<td>Literature Review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Research</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Structure</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Roles</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIV &amp; AIDS</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III.</td>
<td>Methodology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sampling Plan</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumentation</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protection of Human Subjects</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV.</td>
<td>Results</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disclosing</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clan and Cultural Challenges</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Beliefs</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Experiences of Being Gay or Lesbian</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectations</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges and Social Issues</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestions</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Summary ........................................................................................................... 37

V. Discussions and Recommendations ......................................................... 39

Overview of Major Findings ............................................................................ 39
  Family and Clan Support .............................................................................. 39
  Gender Role Expectations ........................................................................... 40
  Discrimination ............................................................................................. 42

Literature Base ............................................................................................... 43

Implications for Practice ................................................................................ 45

Implications for Research .............................................................................. 46

References ...................................................................................................... 48
ABSTRACT

The issue of Hmong Gay and Lesbian identity might be a sensitive topic but needs to be explored with Hmong individuals who are gay or lesbian so that there is a better understanding of this issue and so as social workers we have a deeper knowledge of the cultural background of the Hmong culture. This research explores the experiences of Hmong individuals who identify themselves as gay or lesbian, and explores what issues are a concern for them and their families. Five individual participants provided information about their experiences during individual face to face interviews. Results indicated family unity was a concern for almost all of the individuals in this study due to the traditional Hmong expectation that family is an important aspect of a person’s life and a cultural expectation of strong family unity. Additionally, most of the participants reported some difficulties in their family relationships and most had experienced a lack of family support.
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

The Hmong culture considers family to be the most important part of a person’s identity. A person is not seen as valuable by themselves but, rather, valuable as a part of a family unit. Boulden (2009) conducted a qualitative study in which he interviewed Hmong gay individuals from 6 different states. Results illustrated the importance of family in the culture. One participant from Boulden's study stated,

I don’t think the Hmong could live without family. That’s all they are—is family. All you have to depend on is your own family. My last name is [name] so the whole clan’s last name is [name]. We are all one big family that look out for each other as a community and depend on each other. (Boulden, 2009, p. 137)

Maintaining family reputation is highly valued in Hmong culture. It is very important not to disgrace the family or to “lose face” meaning that an individual is to uphold the reputation of the family (Yang, 2008, p. 84). This may mean that a person’s personal needs are put aside and the needs of the family come first.

Individualism is not supported by Hmong culture as it does not represent the clan or the family. A person’s choice can have an impact on the family and the clan. Each individual is considered a part of the clan so it is expected that an individual abide by what is considered acceptable within the clan. Many Hmong individual may
find it hard to comply with this expectation and follow what they feel is right for

In the Hmong culture, as in many other cultures, many parents like for their children to follow in their footsteps by having a family and carrying on the family name and traditions. In the Hmong culture, at birth an individual becomes part of his or her father’s clan. The clan offers social support as well as ritual, legal authority, and economic security. Further, women join their husbands’ clan once they marry. Conversely, a man does not change his clan when he gets married. The Hmong are organized into an eighteen-clan structure, includes eighteen surnames, and all members of a clan recognize that they are related by a common ancestor (Stanford School of Medicine, 2016).

Hmong families have clear expectations for their sons and daughters. Sons are expected to have children and learn about the ritual traditions. Daughters are expected to have children and learn the duties of a housewife. In Boulden’s (2009) research, one of the participants stated, “…marriage is probably the ultimate goal that everybody is expected to reach - having a family and having children” (p. 138). Another participant in Boulden’s (2009) study stated, “From what I’ve known, parents and families, they love the daughters, but in a way they’re trying not to love them as much, because at some point the daughters will get married. In the Hmong culture, when the daughter gets married, that’s kind of like the cut-off. She’s not part of the family anymore” (Boulden, 2009, p. 139). Daughters are also expected to remain married as long as possible. Sons on the other hand have the option of
marrying a second wife if they so choose. Divorce is the last option for a daughter to consider. Traditionally, Hmong families want their children to become successful parents and carry on the traditions of the Hmong culture.

Little is known about individuals’ experiences within the Hmong community when traditional roles are challenged. This is particularly relevant to those who challenge gender roles related to sexuality. Hardly any information is available about experiences of Hmong individuals who identify as gay or lesbian.

**Gay and Lesbian Identity in Past Hmong History**

Currently in the Hmong culture there is no vocabulary for the words “gay” or “lesbian.” Yang (2008) states, “…there is no direct translation for the words gay or lesbian in the Hmong language” (p. 2) and the topic of homosexuality is rarely discussed. Prior literature has indicated that due to the lack of acknowledgment and support from their clan, gay and lesbian Hmong individuals find it hard to sustain their sexual identity. For example, Ngo (2012) reported that one of the male Hmong participants in her study of the importance of family for Gay Hmong American men “revealed that he worked to maintain bonds with his family, he complied with the request that he marry while he simultaneously maintained his gay identity” (p.18). It was a struggle for this particular individual to find a balance between his family and his own personal needs.

Mayo (2013) identified several challenges for Hmong individuals who are gay or lesbian. One of the many challenges that these individuals encounter is the pressure to conform to the expectations of raising a family and holding traditional roles within
their community. There are several reasons why a Hmong individual would want to remain silent about his or her sexual orientation. One reason could be that there is an expectation to live up to the norm of a man and a woman being a married couple. In the Hmong culture, marriage is seen as between a man and a woman. If a man and a man were married, this would be considered taboo. This would be unthinkable in the Hmong culture. This could have a detrimental effect on the image and relationships of the immediate family and the clan. There are likely consequences for those individuals who decide to reveal their identities as being gay or lesbian. Some of the consequences that an individual can face include being outcast, being discriminated against, or receiving internal pressure from clan members and families.

Lastly, without the support of their families, individuals can find it hard to sustain their personal identities as being gay or lesbian. This can lead individuals to depression, anxiety, or even suicide. For example, an article in the Fresno Bee reported about a young Hmong immigrant named Pa Nhia Xiong who committed suicide with her lesbian partner, Yee Yang (Ellis, 2002, p. 34). Pa Nhia’s family did not accept her lesbian relationship with Yee Yang. The article stated that Mai Yia Yang, mother of Pa Nhia Xiong, stated that, “To the Hmong we were never that way. It is kind of strange. Always husband and wife. What these two girls have is not acceptable” (Ellis, 2002, p. 34).

This is a tragic story that raises questions about how social workers, marriage and family therapists, and other professionals can help these individuals and their families bridge the gap between cultural traditions and individualism. Many scholars
and researchers of Asian culture have indicated that individualism is an American value. According to Mayo (2013) “The concept of homosexuality is viewed as a Western construct, although gay Hmong boys may act out gender non-conforming behaviors throughout childhood without altering the expectation that they will grow up to marry and father children” (p. 86).

Therefore, one can imagine how difficult and devastating an individual’s identification as being gay or lesbian might be in relation to his or her family and clan. Hmong Individuals who are gay or lesbian need the support of their families and their clan (Boulden, 2009).

**Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of Hmong individuals who identify as gay and lesbian, and to hopefully identify strategies to assist Hmong individuals who identify as gay or lesbian to help their families gain a better understanding of their experiences. The overarching research question guiding this study was: How do cultural traditions and gender role expectations impact those from the Hmong culture who identify as gay or lesbian? This study provided a better understanding of cultural expectations and how these expectations had impacted the lives of participating individuals. This study explored emotions and difficulties encountered by participants when presenting to their families as being as gay or lesbian.
**Significance of the Study**

This study is important in that it aimed to contribute to the growth and knowledge about the Hmong culture. Within the Hmong community there needs to be acknowledgement and awareness that there are individuals who are gay or lesbian, and that they have the right to be treated fairly regardless of their sexual orientation. Even though every individual is unique, we are all human beings and we need community and family support.

It is hoped that the results of this study will impact social work practice by acknowledging that each individual is unique and that his or her cultural background is important in who he or she becomes. It also impacts social work practice by adding to the knowledge base on providing culturally sensitive and appropriate services. The study gave gay and lesbian Hmong individuals the opportunity to express their feelings to others about how they can help others that might be in similar circumstances.

Hopefully, within the Hmong community, this research can help strengthen families by facilitating more open communications between gay or lesbian individuals and their family members. By having open communication, family members can be able to discuss openly any questions or misunderstandings they might have about being gay or lesbian. The hope is that in having more open conversations within the Hmong culture people will feel safe and supported within the Hmong community and be given the opportunity to speak about their experiences.
Family members and individuals need to know about any community resources that could assist in counseling services or family support if it was needed. It is important for social workers, marriage and family therapists, and other professionals to be aware of cultural boundaries and resources that might be given to gay or lesbian individuals or their family members who might ask for support.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is important to explore issues such as family structure, gender roles, discrimination, and HIV and AIDS experiences as they relate to gay and lesbian Hmong individuals so that future social workers, psychiatrists, counselors, marriage family therapists and other professionals can have a better understanding of the Hmong culture and how they can better assist individuals and their families. It is important for social workers to establish resources for individuals and their family members if needed.

It would be best practice for these professionals to have a deeper knowledge on how culture and family can affect an individual's perception and beliefs. Professionals who are aware of the culture and family dynamic may be more culturally sensitive to issues that their clients may bring forth.

Current Research

There is very little research available on Hmong gay and lesbian individuals. Therefore, it is imperative that research be conducted with this population. This literature review looks at Boulden's (2009) research with ten Hmong participants. In light of the limited research available specific to gay and lesbian Hmong individuals, this review also looks at research conducted with gay and lesbian participants from a broader Asian population.
In Boulden’s 2009 qualitative study, the ten participants ranged from ages eighteen to thirty years old. The participants were recruited from six different states. The participants were recruited from East coast, West coast, and Mid-American region. Boulden (2009) conducted interviews to ask the Hmong participants about their personal experiences of being gay in the United States. It was important to know how participants felt about being gay and what issues affected them personally. The research focused on how family structure affected the participants and how history and cultural expectations of the participants’ family members impacted whether the participants disclosed their sexual orientation to their family members.

Boulden (2009) found that there was a generational conflict between the older and younger Hmong generations. He reported that the younger generation was more independent while the older generation was more family oriented. The older generation was more traditional, as well, and valued keeping the traditional rituals as well as keeping family members together. Boulden (2009) stated that some, “older generation Hmong individuals fear that their children will assimilate into the America culture and will no longer be Hmong” (p. 140).

**Family Structure**

The Hmong culture values close family unity. Many Hmong families have taught their children to respect their elders, and that family unity is important. "In traditional Hmong culture, a person is defined by his or her family and clan, and the role, responsibilities, and position he or she holds within that family (eldest son,
father’s brother, third daughter, second brother’s wife, youngest son, etc.)” (Boulden, 2009, p. 137).

During his research, Boulden (2009) asked participants to talk about their families and gender roles. Participants reported that in the Hmong culture, individuals are identified by their families and their position in the clan. Further, in the Hmong culture, it is important to acknowledge that the male elders have the wisdom and authority within the family and clan. It is important not to bring shame to the family and clan. The participants within the study reported that everyone in the family had a role and responsibility based on their birth order. For example, the youngest son would take on the responsibility of taking care of the parents when they are older.

Some individuals feel that they do not want to disappoint their parents so they do not reveal to their parents that they are gay or lesbian. Many Hmong families would like for their children to follow in their parents’ footsteps, whether it is being a txiv tsev (father of the household) or a niam tsev (housewife). Hmong families are expecting their children to not disgrace the family name. Each individual is taught that it is his or her responsibility to preserve the family name and not bring shame upon the family. In the Hmong culture there has been an expectation of keeping the family together. With the expectations of keeping the families together many gay and lesbian individuals have found it difficult to disclose their sexuality to family members due to breaking up the family unity. Prior literature indicates that some gay
and lesbian individuals report struggling with coming out due to the unity of the family structure (Boulden, 2009; Operario, Han, & Choi, 2008).

The Pew Research Center conducted an online survey of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community in April 2013. Results of this survey indicated that

56% of individuals have indicated that they have told their mother about their sexual orientation while only 39% have told their father. Of the individuals that disclosed to their mother 39% stated that it made their relationship stronger and 46% didn't change the relationship. A similar sized majority says that telling their father about their sexual orientation or gender identity didn't hurt their relationship. (Pew Research Center, 2013, p. 6)

In addition, “39% of the individuals stated that they were rejected by family members or close friends because of their sexual identity” (Pew Research Center, 2013, p. 1).

The Pew Research Center (2013) survey may or may not have included Hmong individuals, but it is still important to recognize that disclosing is a very hard choice to make no matter what ethnicity a person may be. In March of 2004 at New York University the Queer Asian Pacific Legacy had a conference. During this conference, a survey was distributed to the participants in the conference. The purpose of this survey was to collect information about personal experiences, demographic information, policy and political beliefs. Results from this survey revealed there were policy issues that were concerning to the participants.
Gender Roles

In the Hmong culture, females and males have different role expectations. Traditionally in Laos or Thailand the Hmong men would chop the wood and bring it home. The women would cook and take care of the children. The family, including men and women, would go and farm together. Farming was a family event where everyone helped in planting and making sure that the rice crop was growing. That was a responsibility for everyone.

Vang and Flores (1999) reported that, “the Hmong man is considered to be head of the household and has the power and authority to make decisions” (p. 10). Historically, men usually did the hunting while the women would cook. Men were also invited to meetings and engaged in practicing rituals. It is important for the men in a Hmong family to teach their sons the rituals and traditions of the Hmong culture. Many Hmong men want to raise their sons to be knowledgeable in the Hmong culture and traditions so that they can lead their own families or clans one day. For example, Hmong men often teach their sons how to play the instrument called the “qeej.” A “qeej” is an instrument made out of bamboo which is usually played at funerals. “Males make all the decisions and hold all the status because they are the ones who continue the family name and clan identity” (Boulden, 2009, p. 138).

A Hmong man who is knowledgeable in the rituals and traditions is well known throughout the Hmong community. Many Hmong families want their daughters to marry someone who has a good reputation. A man who is knowledgeable is a great asset for a traditional Hmong family. Men who can perform
rituals are needed at funerals and weddings. Respect is highly given to those men who are able to fulfill these needs in the community.

Women traditionally do not have much say when it comes to divorce in the Hmong culture. If there was a problem in a marriage, a man and the clan leaders would communicate with each other on how to possibly make the marriage work. In the traditional Hmong culture, women who are divorced are usually looked down upon.

Many Hmong mothers want their daughters to take on the role of a good housewife because it is a cultural expectation for girls to become good housewives, and if a daughter does not become a good wife, her reputation, as well as her mother’s reputation, would be at risk. In the Hmong culture a good mother teaches her children to become sufficient adults. To be a sufficient adult a person would know her or his role and would do what is expected of them.

During a wedding or “ua tshoob,” many Hmong elders and clan members from both of the clans are seated at the same table. At this table, the clan of the woman and the clan of the man get to know each other, and details of the wedding are discussed. The status of the daughter is also discussed at the wedding table. For example, if a daughter does not know how to cook or do household chores, this could be a discussion at the table. Usually the bride's mother would let the groom's family know that they would need to teach her how to do chores within the house. She (the bride’s mother) would also explain to the groom that it is now his responsibility to teach his wife now that they are marrying.
A “good” wife obeys her husband and has little resistance in her opinions. A woman would take care of the children and make sure that she cooks for the family. A woman would take on the responsibility of caring for her husband's family now. Within the Hmong culture, it is especially important for both males and females to maintain their gender roles. Gender roles are expected to be followed by every individual. However, not everyone is going to be able to follow these expectations.

Discrimination

Every individual's experience of discrimination is different. This work focuses on acknowledging the different kinds of discrimination that gay and lesbian individuals often encounter. It is important to see how discrimination within this community has changed through the years and how it has affected individuals who are gay or lesbian. Discrimination can happen to individuals within their own culture or it can come from society as a whole.

As social workers and other professionals in the community, it is important to understand what kind of discrimination LGBT individuals may encounter. Discrimination may be a sensitive issue for LGBT individuals and requires professionals to be knowledgeable in this area so that they can better serve the clients who have been discriminated against and help them heal from this process. It is important to acknowledge how discrimination can impact an individual and how, as a society, we can address these issues so that we can bring equality to all individuals.

In Boulden’s (2009) study, he found that discrimination did not just come from society in general, but also from within the Hmong culture, specifically. It is
important for individuals to not shame their families or clan members. According to Tatman (2004), “Problem solving implicates the family in different ways. Additionally, all support decisions and aid came from family or clan male elders and interventions or solutions given were primarily based in maintaining the family or clan” (p. 224). Within the Hmong culture, elders and parents are considered to be the most important aspects in a person's life. It is within the norm that children respect and listen to their parents and their elders. It would be disrespectful to shame your parents or elders. It is also shameful to not follow gender role expectations. There would be stigma attached to those individuals who did not listen to their parents or elders.

In 2013, The Pew Research Center conducted an online survey for the LGBT community. The survey asked gay, lesbian, and transgender individuals about their perception on discrimination, social acceptance, and the experience of coming out. Individuals were also asked if they told either their mom or dad about their sexual identity. The finding of perception of discrimination was that “39% say that at some point in their lives they were rejected by a family member or close friend because of their sexual orientation or gender identity” (Pew Research Center, 2013, p. 3). According to the Asian Pacific American Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People report (Dang & Hu, 2004), “54% of respondents in a 2001 statewide survey of lesbian, gay and bisexual New Yorkers had experienced discrimination in employment, housing and or public accommodation since 1996 and eight percent reported that they were specifically fired because of their sexual orientation” (p. 35).
According to Dang and Hu (2004) almost every Asian Pacific American LGBT person surveyed, or “95% of respondents had experienced at least one form of discrimination in their lives” (p. 36). According to Dang and Hu (2004) “Over half reported (52%) of those surveyed indicated that they had been discriminated against or harassed based on their gender expression, while close to half (44%) said they had experienced discrimination or harassment based on their gender or sex” (p. 36).

**HIV & AIDS**

There are few studies on Hmong gay and lesbians who have HIV and AIDS. It is important to acknowledge that there are individual Hmong gay and lesbian individuals who are dealing with HIV and AIDS, and much more research in this area is needed. It is important to reach out to those specific individuals so that as a community we will be able to provide these individuals with resources and will be able to support these individuals if needed.

It is important to know how these individuals function within their Hmong communities and to know what services are needed or if the services within the community are sufficient to assist these individuals and their families. As social workers and professionals it is important to know the effects of HIV and AIDS so that we can have better knowledge and can better serve our clients. It is important for social workers and other professionals to have a wide range of resources for the clients who may have HIV or AIDS.

It may be important for the LGBT individuals in the Hmong community to know what resources are available and to know preventative methods that can be used
against HIV and AIDS. If there is little research on this topic of HIV and AIDS, we as a community may not know how to culturally address this issue among Hmong LGBT individuals.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Preventions (2014), “…of the estimated 973 adult and adolescent Asians diagnosed with HIV infection in 2013, 82% were men and 16% were women” (p. 1). According to the Centers for Disease Control, “eighty-eight percent of Asian men diagnosed in 2013 were attributed to male-to-male sexual contact” (2014, p. 1).

The Asian Pacific American Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender People survey (Dang & Hu, 2004) results indicated that among “transgender [individuals] … 45% are concerned with HIV and AIDS” (p. 26). This issue needs to be further researched to see how these individuals’ concerns of HIV and AIDS can be addressed.

It is important to acknowledge that family and gender roles are issues that can be important for individuals who are gay or lesbian. Family and gender roles are issues within the individuals but also relate to the family that completes the individual. As professionals it is important to know how important these issues are to those individuals who are gay or lesbian and what issues are rooted within their culture. There also needs to be more studies on discrimination and HIV and AIDS. Discrimination and HIV and AIDS are issues within the LGBT communities that are concerning not only to those individuals but as a society. There is limited number of
studies on the Hmong gay and lesbian community on HIV and AIDS. It is important to expand this study so that any issues or concerns can be addressed.

**Summary**

There are many different issues that gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender individuals encounter. This chapter reviewed prior research related to what issues they encounter and their experiences related to the coming out process, religion, community identity and engagement, and social acceptance and public perspective. Prior literature indicates that the coming out process and telling family members are particularly difficult for many individuals. Telling family members, however, is typically seen as important for the individual to receive support. This work aims to bring to light the experiences of Hmong individuals who are gay or lesbian.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Overview

The Hmong culture is unique in that the immediate family and clan are so closely tied together. The clan and the immediate family are seen as one community, and within this community an individual is supposed to thrive. There are clear expectations within the Hmong culture, such as being married and raising kids. Little is known about what happens when an individual does not conform to these expectations, however. This study explored the experiences of Hmong individuals who identify as being gay or lesbian and the challenges they encounter within the Hmong community.

This was an exploratory research study. Exploratory research explores a topic area, but does not provide any definite answers to questions. Exploratory research was important in this study because it allowed for the exploration and in-depth understanding of the personal experiences of Hmong individuals who identified as being gay or lesbian. Exploratory research allows professionals such as social workers, marriage and family therapists, and other professionals to expand and extend their knowledge of cultures other than their own and to gain an understanding of expectations associated with those cultures. The overarching research question guiding this study was: How do cultural traditions and gender role expectations impact those from the Hmong culture who identify as gay or lesbian?
Design

Exploratory research allows for different methods to collect data for research. This was a qualitative study intended to gain an understanding of the personal experiences of being a gay or lesbian individual within the Hmong culture. In this particular study it was important for the researcher to accurately document the feelings and experiences of the participants.

For this particular research, the researcher conducted interviews of gay and lesbian Hmong individuals about their experiences. The researcher asked the individuals questions about themselves and about the Hmong culture. Questions explored how individuals felt about disclosing about being gay or lesbian to their families, how their families felt, whether their relationships with family members changed, and what was challenging or rewarding about disclosing their identities. It is important to understand how the individuals felt about their personal experiences and what others can learn from their experiences.

Sampling Plan

The researcher used snowball and convenience sampling methods to elicit participants. The first step in this sampling plan was to start with two known participants. The researcher asked these two known participants to help identify additional potential participants who would be willing to come forward and take part in the research study. The potential participants were given the researcher’s contact information. The potential participants who were either lesbian or gay were advised to contact the researcher if interested in the study. This process continued until the
desired sample size was met. It was anticipated that five to seven participants would be included. The final sample size for the study was five participants.

**Instrumentation**

The researcher designed interview questions for the participants in this study. The researcher chose these questions due to experiences with this population and information acquired during the literature review. Prior scholars have reported that family relationships can be very important in gay or lesbian individual’s life (Boulden, 2009). The researcher asked open ended questions to allow the participants to elaborate on their experiences during the interview. Interviews were intended to be audio-recorded unless the participants declined to be taped. At the time of the interviews, however, none of the participants wanted to be recorded, so data were collected via note-taking only. The questions asked to the participants allowed the researcher to explore the experiences of each individual and explore what it meant to the individual. It was important for the researcher to ask the individuals about any experiences such as discrimination or racism that the individuals may have encountered based on the literature review. The researcher also asked the individuals about whether the clan was in support of their choice of being gay or lesbian, and about what experiences they may have had with their clan.

During the interviews, the researcher also asked the participants what social issues they had encountered such as having been discriminated against or being rejected from family due to their sexual identities. Another question the researcher asked was if the individuals had received support from the outside community such as
friends or counseling services. This question was asked to have a better understanding of what resources were available to the individuals.

In learning about each individual’s experiences, it was important to capture how a Hmong person who self-identifies as being gay or lesbian is accepted in the Hmong culture. It is important for clinicians and other professionals to know about how the Hmong culture views a person who is gay or lesbian and to use this information to help make services more culturally accepted.

Many Hmong families have migrated to the United States and have encountered issues that may have not been talked about in their home countries but which are now emerging. As social workers it is important to understand these particular issues that families are experiencing and help families have more open communications where these issues can be talked about.

This study is important because as social workers we need to advocate for programs that might be of service to Hmong gay or lesbian individuals. It is imperative that as social workers we understand the cultural expectations and be culturally sensitive to the Hmong gay and lesbian population that we might work with.

**Data Collection**

The researcher was the sole person conducting the interviews. Similarly, the researcher carried out the data analysis portion of the study. The aim was to include five-to-seven participants in this study. It was anticipated that each interview would last approximately two hours and data collection would take place over a three month
period. The final sample size was five participants and interviews took approximately an hour and thirty minutes for each participant.

One of the strengths of this data collection method was that participants were able to share their personal experiences. In utilizing this strategy, it was hoped that a more in-depth understanding of the topic would be achieved. The interviews were conducted in English or Hmong, depending on the preference of the participants, and the researcher was available to answer any questions that the participants had throughout the interview process. This data collection method allowed the researcher to take time to ask questions and ask for clarifications if needed. This kind of study can help others to have a better and in-depth understanding of the individual’s personal experiences.

A limitation of this data collection strategy was that it was time intensive, and since there was a limited amount of time for this study to be completed, there was a small sample size, resulting in a limited amount of data being collected. Additionally, participants were purposely selected, so they do not represent the population as whole.

Another limitation of the study was that this study does not produce a definitive conclusion. Everyone's experience is different so there is no definite answer that is concrete. In the future, there will need to be more studies similar to this so that there is a more comprehensive understanding of Hmong gay and lesbian individuals’ experiences.
Protection of Human Subjects

The researcher developed a consent form to explain the purpose of the study and seek permission from the participants to use the information within the study. The participants had the choice to decide if they wanted to participate in the research. The researcher offered to clarify any questions that the participants may have had, and spoke to the participants about confidentiality. The participants had the opportunity to opt out of the interview process at any time. Each participant was advised that he or she could stop the interview if he or she did not feel comfortable in answering the questions. Participants were not forced to answer any questions given by the researcher. Additionally, the researcher used pseudonyms in reporting the results in order to protect the identities of the participants.
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Four Hmong gay men and one lesbian female participant were interviewed during this research. The participants were interviewed at an agreed upon location. All participants declined to be audio recorded so data were collected via the interviewer’s written notes. An informed consent form was presented to and signed by all participants. Confidentiality was explained to all participants. The interview times varied with each participant. All interviews lasted between one hour and two hours. The participants’ ages ranged from twenty to thirty years of age.

The goal of this research was to learn about the experiences and challenges of the Hmong gay and lesbian community. It was important to acknowledge the cultural aspects of the Hmong community and to explore the experiences of those who identified themselves as gay or lesbian individuals from their cultural perspectives.

Data were analyzed by identifying what themes the participants seemed to have in common when responding to interview questions. Questions explored participants’ experiences related to disclosing, support, clan and cultural change, cultural beliefs, personal experiences of being gay and lesbian, expectations, challenges, and social issues and expectations. This chapter is organized by the interview questions, and provides information about what was shared by the participants.
Disclosing

The first questions posed to participants were: Have you told anybody that you are gay or lesbian? If so, who have you told? While it was anticipated that these would be relatively simple questions, surprisingly it was hard for several of the participants to talk about. A theme that seemed to appear in the responses from participants was disappointment from their family members and parents. The feelings of their family members and parents seemed to matter a great deal to the individuals participating in this study. All five of the participants were considerate of their family members’ feelings, and stressed that they did not want to disappoint their family members. One of the participants stated:

I told my mom and my sisters and brothers that I was gay. The only person that I did not tell was my dad. I know that he would be so disappointed if he knew that I was gay. He has shown me so much respect that I would crush his hope if I told him. I know that the clan members supported him and respected him so I did not want to take that away from him. I did not want the clan members to look down upon him due to his son being gay.

Another participant described his experience as his parents being very disappointed in him. He stated,

My parents want me to be a successful son so I know that I definitely disappointed them when I told them I was gay. My parents' facial expressions have shown me sadness and disappointment. My mom supports me many years later but my dad still does not.
A female participant reported she did not disclose to her family members due to the fear of disappointing them. She stated,

I did not want my parents to know because I did not want to disappoint them.

I do regret that now my parents have passed and I did not disclose to them that I was a lesbian. I believe that the biggest challenge that I have about disclosing myself to others is that I will be judged and I will disappoint other members in my family.

It was important for these individuals not to disappoint their family members. Family seemed to be an important part of these individuals’ lives. Some of these individuals wanted to make their families happy so they did not disclose that they were gay or lesbian. It was not an easy choice for these individuals to disclose because they believed it could cause conflicts among family members.

**Support**

Interview questions two and three were intended to explore family issues by asking about family support. Question two was: Do you feel that you have your family’s support? Question three was: How did your family react to you being gay or lesbian?

Responses to the second and third interview questions were varied, with some participants indicating their family members were supportive and others indicating family members were either not supportive or experienced feelings of sadness. Support was an important issue for these individuals, and made a big difference in
their personal lives. Every individual’s experience was different, however, so it was important to capture what support meant for each individual.

One participant stated,

In the beginning my mom was not supportive. I was very sad because she and my dad were not supportive. She told me that my dad did not want me living with them because I was gay. This was her subtle way of letting me know that she did not support me, but when I moved out of the house she started showing me support. My stepfather has never shown me support. It has been three years since I have talked with my father. I felt sad that he did not support me and does not want to have any connection with me.

Similar responses were received from other participants, and several individuals reported, specifically, that their fathers did not support them. Two individuals commented on their feelings of sadness related to not being supported by their fathers. All of the participants indicated that family support was very important to them.

An alternative response from some participants was feeling happy when they did feel supported by family members. Two of the participants reported feeling happiness for being supported. One participant reported that his mom was supportive and accepting of his relationships even though it was really hard for her in the beginning. This participant reported that his mother’s support was very important to him even though it took some time for her to be accepting.
One particular participant had not told her family members so there was no reaction to report. She indicated her parents were deceased, and indicated she was unsure of what the reactions of other family members might be. She stated,

I have not told my siblings so I don't know if they will support me. Both of my parents have passed on so I will never know if they support me or not. I know that I will disclose to my siblings but I do not know when exactly I will tell them.

**Clan and Cultural Challenges**

Interview questions four and five were similar, and explored the cultural challenges that individuals encountered as well as their personal insights about the clan. Personal insights on the clan included whether they thought the clan either supported or did not support gay and lesbian individuals. Question four was: What are some cultural challenges within the Hmong community? Question five was: Do you feel that you have the clan’s support?

Three of the participants in this study reported that they felt overwhelmed with the challenges of meeting the culture's expectations while also trying to be who they were. These individuals encountered challenges because they believed they could not fulfill obligations such as meeting traditional gender role expectations. One participant stated,

The biggest issue that I have encountered with my culture is that it is hard for me to be who I am due to the expectation that is set upon me. I feel that sometimes I don't even know how to separate myself from my culture because
I am Hmong but I also try to be who I am. How do I differentiate from both? I feel overwhelmed a lot of times when I think about this situation. I don't want to choose between my culture, clan and my identity of who I am. I love my culture. I believe that I can still love my culture and be who I am, but some people find it hard to accept me.

Two of the participants stated that they “don't care” if the clan supports them or not. Both of these participants revealed that their families and friends were the ones that mattered in their lives. One particular participant stated, “it is great if I receive the support from the clan but it is not necessary.” Both of these individuals received support from friends and family which comforted them in who they were. Alternatively, three of the participants felt overwhelmed due being connected to the Hmong community. These individuals wanted to have a close connection with the clan but indicated the clan had not shown support. The support of the clan was important to each of these individuals.

All of the individuals in this study had separate challenges but all of them had experiences that caused them pain and heartache. One participant stated,

Being a lesbian in the Hmong community is already a challenge for me. Before the passing of my mom she expects me to find someone to marry and have children. She nags at me all the time on why I am a “nkauj laug” or an old unmarried women. I think that men and women’s expectations are a challenge for me because all of my aunts would always say, ‘Why are you waiting to have children. You should have children already while you are still
young. You need “Nyab” or daughter-in-law and “vauv” or son-in-law to help you while you are older.’ The women in my family look down upon me because I do not have a husband or children.

**Cultural Beliefs**

Interview question number seven was: Are you able to keep your cultural beliefs? This question was uncomfortable for some of the participants. Three of the Hmong participants had similar responses, and indicated they were unable to keep their cultural beliefs because they felt uncomfortable revealing their cultural beliefs to their boyfriend or girlfriend. Two of the participants reported they were able to keep their cultural beliefs. Both of these participants indicated they wanted to learn as much about the culture as they could so they would be able to pass some traditions down to their children. One participant stated,

I don't think that I will be able to celebrate the Hmong New Year with my boyfriend because he is Caucasian and he would not be able to understand why I cannot be seen with him during the Hmong New Year. I understand that my boyfriend does not understand my culture so I make it easier for us both if I do not practice my cultural beliefs.

It is up to each individual to determine what is best for himself or herself. It is up to individuals’ personal discretion if they should keep their cultural beliefs. Three individuals in this study felt that it was better not to keep their cultural beliefs, and two of felt that they could practice their cultural beliefs.
Personal Experiences of Being Gay or Lesbian

All of the individuals in this study had similar experiences regarding interview questions eleven and nine. Question eleven asked the participants: What is your experience being gay or lesbian? Question nine asked: When did you know that you were gay or lesbian? A theme that arose was that all of the participants had learned at a young age that they were gay or lesbian. Each individual had a different experience, yet they shared similar feelings of frustration, not being understood, and not knowing how to disclose to their families. One male participant stated,

I have known that I liked boys when I was in high school. I was confused as to why I did not like girls. I had one girlfriend but I did not feel an attraction towards her. I felt that she was more of a friend. I knew that I was attracted to guys instead of girls. It was very hard for me to reveal to my family that I was gay. I hope that anyone who is going through a similar situation like me has friends or family that are supportive.

A female participant stated,

I learned at a young age that I was a lesbian. I was in middle school when I learned to like my best friend. During this time I was so young I did not know that I would struggle with telling my family that I was a lesbian. I wished that I did tell my parents before they passed but because of my fear I did not disclose to them that I was a lesbian.

All of the participants in this study reported they had discovered that they were gay or lesbian at a very young age. Ages that the participants knew that they
were gay included ages twelve, fifteen, seventeen, eighteen, and twenty-one years old. It was hard for some of these individuals to come to terms with whether they should disclose or not to their families or friends. Family support and friend support were essential to these individuals.

**Expectations**

Interview question number six explored traditional gender role expectations in participants’ families. Question six was: What were the expectations for sons and daughters in your family? Responses to question six revealed a theme of sadness. Each individual was able to discuss gender role expectations in his or her family, but many revealed disappointment that their lives were not recognized as meeting family expectations.

Participants’ responses about gender role expectations in their families were remarkably similar. Each individual indicated that they were expected to promote the wellness of the family and to keep the family functioning. Each individual also felt that they had a special part in the family in which they participated to help the family grow and become a better part of the Hmong community. All five of the participants reported that their families wanted them to have children and carry on the family name. It was expected, they reported, that they would have children and teach their children about the Hmong culture. It was expected that each individual would teach their children about the Hmong New Year, Shamanism, and other important Hmong traditions.
One female participant illustrated how individuals were expected to teach their children traditional ways when she stated,

My mom always wanted me to become a mother. She wanted to me to teach my daughter how to be a good “nyab” or daughter in law. She would teach me that I would need to wake up early and cook rice. Since I was twelve years old she has taught me how to cook rice. It is traditional for young Hmong women to learn how to cook rice. It was frowned upon if I did not know how to cook rice. My mom would tell me that if I was a bad “nyab” or daughter-in-law I would be the talk of the town. All of my aunts and the women in my family would cook during events such as “hu plig” or soul calling. It was a woman’s duty to cook rice and other dishes during these events as well as cooking for the family every day. The daughter-in-law would be the main person cooking for her family. It was also her duty to take care of her mother-in-law and father-in-law during their old age.

This same participant reported that the men and women had different roles and expectations. She stated,

My mom wanted me to get married to a good guy so that I would be able to help my family in the future. My mom wants me to keep the traditional going with my daughter if I have a daughter. It was important for me to also learn how to sew. My mom also taught me how to sew at age twelve. I would sew my Hmong costume for New Year. My mom always told me that a daughter
who knew how to sew and cook would be more valuable than those that did not have these skills.

Similar responses were obtained from males in the study. A male participant explained this when he stated,

My dad wants me to have a family of my own someday and to help my family when I am needed. My dad wants me to learn how to play the “queej”, learn the marriage rights, and other Hmong traditions. I have seen my cousin, David, play the queej and his dad is very proud of him. His dad has a good reputation for teaching his son to become a better person and to benefit his clan. I believe that my dad wanted the same for me. My role expectation is to be a good husband and to teach my children the Hmong traditions and rituals. It is embarrassing to be a man and not have an understanding of the Hmong rituals and traditions. A man who knows the traditions and rituals brings ‘face’ to his family and clan. It is expected that I learn these traditions early on so that I can be called upon when my family or clan needs me. I cannot accomplish this role expectation that my dad wants because he feels that as I am gay I cannot perform as well as a heterosexual man. I am sad but I cannot change who I am so that I can make other people happy.

**Challenges and Social Issues**

Two interview questions (questions eight and twelve) in this study examined challenges participants had experienced. Each individual reported experiencing challenges and social issues. All five individuals found it frustrating to explain to
families and friends why they were gay. All five individuals also found it frustrating dealing with social issues such as not being accepted and being called names because they were gay or lesbian. One participant illustrated this point when he stated,

A challenge that I have been faced within the past is dealing with some of my family members who do not understand why I am gay. Some people tell me that it is a choice and I can change my mind if I wanted to. It is frustrating to me to explain this to my family and my friends. I have learned that I do not need to explain to them why I am gay. I just tell them that I am happy the way I am. Sometimes it does make me sad to see my grandmother be disappointed because sometimes she tells me ‘you are so handsome. A girl would be so lucky.’ This brings frustration and sadness to me but I am who I am.

Another participant stated,

Social challenges that I have encountered are not being accepted in the Hmong community. During the New Year I was kissing my girlfriend and people were looking at us. A man made a comment ‘Girls these days. That is what happens when you don’t listen to your elders. You become a disgrace to your family.’ I became frustrated and sad [because] some people judge me just because I am different.

Participants’ responses, overall, indicated that it was frustrating to these individuals when they were being judged because they were gay or lesbian. These individuals were also sad due to the misunderstanding of who they really were. It takes strength and courage for these individuals to come and talk about their stories. It
appeared it was important for these individuals to express their individual feelings of what they had gone through.

**Suggestions**

A single question in the interview (question ten) asked about any suggestions the participants had for other gay or lesbian Hmong individuals. Question ten was: What are some suggestions you have for those who are struggling with the idea of coming out? All participants indicated this was very important. All of the participants suggested that it would be better if there was someone to support the individuals who were going through a similar situation. One participant illustrated this well when he stated,

I want other people to understand that it is really hard trying to come out and still have my family support me. It is a risk that everyone has to evaluate and see if disclosing is something that they want.

Another participant stated,

I want other people to know that they have to be themselves and not to change who they are. It is disappointing to me that someone has to change themselves so that they can be accepted either into their family or into the public.

**Summary**

The responses of gay and lesbian Hmong individuals in this study do not represent all of the Hmong people or all of the Hmong gay or lesbian people, but it is important to acknowledge that each individual in this study reported that the Hmong culture was an important part of who they were. Similarly, all participants in this
study indicated some difficulties with being gay or lesbian and also being accepted by the Hmong culture. It appears that these particular individuals are seeking support and acceptance from the Hmong culture. In order to have support and understanding of being a gay Hmong or lesbian some of these particular individuals have sought support from outside the community. There are some individuals who have chosen to not reveal their sexual identities due to the lack of support and understanding. For future research it might be beneficial to explore support within the Hmong community and how support is shown to those who are different.
CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview of Major Findings

There are several critical issues that can be learned from this research study. First of all, it was important to the participants in this study that their families and clan show support, but it was found that some participants did not receive support from family or clan. Secondly, it was found that the Hmong culture presented challenges such as gender role expectations that affected the participants. Finally, it was found that participants encountered social issues such as discrimination.

Participants in this study also gave suggestions on how they believed the Hmong community could help others that might be going through similar experiences.

Family and Clan Support

In regard to family and clan support participants felt it was important for family members to be supportive of individual family members even when those individuals were gay or lesbian. Some participants revealed that when supported by family members they would feel a sense of happiness. Not all participants in this study received this support, however. Participants’ discussions of their families revealed that family members experienced mixed emotions when dealing with the participants’ disclosure of being gay or lesbian, and this, at times, limited the families’ ability to be supportive.
Some of the participants reported that they had to put aside their own feelings because they felt like they had to protect their families’ reputations. It was important for the participants to establish meaningful relationships with their family members but for some participants that was not possible. Some participants were rejected by their family members which caused heartaches for the participants. Having family support seemed to be an essential need in the participants’ lives and it was shown to be difficult for the participant when there was no family support. In spite of this, however, participants showed resiliency in overcoming obstacles such as not having family support by seeking support from friends or others outside of their family systems.

**Gender Role Expectations**

In the study some individuals acknowledged that clan and cultural challenges affected them. Issues related to both clan and culture had caused challenges for the participants in that several reported that it was overwhelming for them to fulfill their gender role expectations and clan obligations. In this study many of the participants acknowledged that it was important for them to keep a good reputation and to carry on the family name, but some reported they felt they could not fulfill the gender role expectations because it would require them to be heterosexual. For example, one of the participants reported that his family wanted him to get married and have children. This was important for his family because through this he would carry on the family name and cultural traditions. This participant was unable to fulfill these expectations,
however, because he was unsure if he wanted children and he would not marry a woman. This posed a challenge for him and his family.

Participants indicated that it is important to follow in their cultural traditions but sometimes it can be hard to choose which traditions they will follow. It can be overwhelming for participants when they have to choose to either do what is right for their family or do what is right for themselves. In the study most of the participants wanted to please their family members and clan so some of the participants did not reveal their identities to their family members or clan in order to keep the relationships intact.

Within the research questions gender role expectations had a considerable impact on participants who were gay or lesbian. Expected gender roles included having a family and becoming a community leader. It was a challenge, however, because the participants did not feel supported either by the clan or family members. Some participants who revealed that they were gay or lesbian did not receive any support at all. Due to the risk of losing family support, some individuals decided to keep their sexual identity a secret. These individuals felt that by telling their family members they would become a disappointment to their family members. Other individuals did reveal their sexual identities but were disappointed when they were not supported. It was very hard for some individuals to absorb the feeling that they were not supported by family members.

Other individuals revealed that they were confused. These individuals felt that they had to choose either their culture or to deny their sexual identity. These
individuals were confused because they loved their culture but they could not accomplish their gender role expectations. Some of the participants decided that they wanted to live their own lives even though it might not be accepted by the clan or family members.

**Discrimination**

Finally, it was important to recognize that the participants also encountered social issues and to acknowledge that the participants gave suggestions to help those that might be in similar situations so that others might feel supported. Participants in this study wanted others who might be in a similar situation to know that it is important for individuals to be themselves and to seek strong support.

A social issue identified in this study was discrimination. Some of the participants found that being gay or lesbian was difficult for some people to accept. Some of the participants had been called names because of their sexual identity. Some participants in the study reported that even with their own culture they had been discriminated against because of their identity.

Some participants felt the need not to disclose who they were because they felt that they would shame their families and or clan so they did not reveal their sexual identities. According to a Pew Research Center study about the LGBT population and what issues were important to these groups, “39% of the individuals stated that they were rejected by family members or close friends because of their sexual identity” (2013, p. 1). Disclosure has been difficult for many of the participants in the current study because of family and or cultural structures.
Literature Base

This study had similar findings as prior research regarding family support seeming to raise some conflict within the individuals and the culture. Some of the issues revealed in Boulden’s (2009) study of gay Hmong experiences in the United States were that there were generational differences between the older generation and the younger generation, and the lack of support from loved ones seemed to be a problem for those that did not have the support system. Boulden found that there were generational conflicts regarding becoming “Americanized” (p. 148). A conflict for the Hmong participants was that the older generational was not able to adapt to the changes within society. In Boulden’s study the older generational Hmong were very traditional and they needed the younger generation to help with interpretations, but the older generation also wanted the younger generation to keep the old traditions.

Similar concerns were reported by participants in the current study. Participants discussed the difficulty maintaining traditional Hmong roles and traditions, and being accepted by their families and clan given their lesbian or gay self-identity. Although not couched in a “generational context” participants’ experiences were remarkably similar. “In traditional Hmong culture, a person is defined by his or her family and clan, and the role, responsibilities, and position he or she holds within that family (eldest son, father’s brother, third daughter, second brother’s wife, youngest son, etc)” (Boulden, 2009, p. 137). Anything that threatens traditional definitions can potentially threaten one’s role in the family and clan. Several participants in the current study reported such challenges in their own lives.
Experiences of discrimination were also found in prior research. Boulden (2009) found that individuals encountered discrimination and that gender expectations were a concern for the Hmong participants in his study. These same findings were evident in the current study. Participants discussed discrimination from society at large, and from within the Hmong culture. It was hard for some of the participants to grasp that discrimination would come from within their own communities, but felt it was primarily a result of traditional Hmong cultural beliefs.

Boulden (2009) reported that his participants felt they had to “give up being Hmong, or fearing that they would be rejected by the Hmong community if it was discovered that they were gay” (p. 143). “Losing Face” is when a person goes against what is considered to be the norm, and there is usually disgrace that is put on the family due to an individual’s choice (Yang, 2008).

Lastly, participants’ experiences related to gender role expectations were similar to findings in prior research. Gender expectations were a concern for the individuals, and participants reported this also affected their families. There have traditionally been specific role expectations for males and females in the Hmong culture. Vang and Flores (1999) reported that “the Hmong man is considered to be head of the household and has the power and authority to make decisions” (p. 10). Men are usually expected to get married and have children. Women are expected to be household wives and to have children (Vang & Flores, 1999). In the current study participants found it hard to live up to these expectations and hard for families to accept that their sons or daughters would not be able to fill traditional expectations.
**Implications for Practice**

It is important for social workers and other professionals to identify if there are resources such as support groups within their community to help Hmong gay and lesbian individuals. In society, as social workers and other professionals, it is important to have resources available to Hmong individuals who are gay or lesbian. This needs to be put into practice so it can benefit these individuals who are lacking the resources. Social workers and other professionals should have knowledge of these resources and should also know how to access these resources for these specific population.

It is imperative that as a community we take into account the suggestions for changes that were given by participants in the study because it will help others who might be in similar situation. All of the participants suggested that it would be better if there was someone to support individuals who were going through a similar situation. As social workers or other professionals it maybe beneficial to the participants to find support even if it is not within the same culture. It is important to evaluate and communicate with the individual to see if support is what they need. Currently there are no policies that are connected to the findings in this research.

It is important for social workers or practitioners to continue their study and understanding of not just the Hmong culture but other cultures as well so that as professionals they have better knowledge of other cultures. Family unity is important to Hmong families and clans. It is important to know about the Hmong culture and to be sensitive to issues that gay and lesbian individuals are encountering so that
practitioners may have a better idea of what their clients are experiencing. It is important to acknowledge that there are Hmong families that might need support and that the more we understand about the culture the better we can assist those in need.

**Implications for Research**

It is important to acknowledge that there are several issues that need to be further studied. For example, family seems to be important to the individuals so it would be beneficial to conduct further research on family dynamics and how professionals can bring in support that can help build a foundation for families to connect better. As a society it is important to acknowledge that each individual can make a difference, and we cannot embrace differences if we cannot accept individuals who are different. Several participants in the current study have asked their family members for support, but some of the participants have not been supported. For future research it would be important to have an understanding of the family dynamics and to offer support to the participants and the families if support was needed by either. It is also important to understand what the family is feeling and to have a better understanding what the family members might not understand and how the participants can answer any question the family might have. Family bonds are important and everyone should have a chance to keep that bond if possible.

It is important to conduct similar research on a larger population to see if the results are similar or different. Boulden (2009) suggested in his research that it would be beneficial to conduct further research to see if the issues found would represent a
larger population of Hmong gay and lesbian individuals. The current study was a beginning step in this process.
REFERENCES


