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## Bride Wealth and its Implications for Hmong Women

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# Bride Wealth and its Implications for Hmong Women

by

Elizabeth K. Soung, B.S.W.

MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the  
School of Social Work  
St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas  
St. Paul, Minnesota  
in Partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Social Work

Committee Members

Pa Der Vang, MSW, Ph.D., LICSW (Chair)

David Schuchman, MSW, LICSW

Tony Yang, LMFT

The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

## Abstract

This qualitative study explores the experiences of Hmong women and their perceptions of bride wealth practices within the Hmong community. A review of the literature reveals that there is little to no previous research done on Hmong bride wealth practices. In this study, eight Hmong women were interviewed regarding their experiences with the Hmong bride wealth practice and how it relates to their overall satisfaction in marriage and mental health. A content analysis of the qualitative data using a deductive approach and open coding found themes of the participants' responses that include the following: understanding bride wealth to be a monetary exchange between the bride and groom's families, respect for the tradition, financial stress, not defining their worth as a woman, and negative connotations for their younger selves. Although mental health distress was not a significant finding, implications for social work practice and future research are discussed.

## Acknowledgments

When I first embarked on this journey I understood how challenging this would be, but I did not realize how much I would grow personally and professionally from this experience. There were times when the end goal was difficult to see, but as I stand at the finish line I see that the outcomes are worth the effort, time, and work put into this. Undergoing this has also provided me with such a new profound appreciation for the individuals who do it on a regular basis.

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## **Introduction**

The United States has always been predominantly known as a nation of immigrants (Hilmer, 2010). Of those immigrants, the Southeast Asian population are considered as one of the many groups of people who come to the U.S. as refugees. The Hmong also make up a large percentage of Minnesota's Southeast Asian population. According to the 2010 Census, there are roughly 260,000 Hmong people living in the U.S. (Hmong American Partnership, 2010; Pfeifer, Sullivan, Yang, & Yang, 2013). In the past decade, the Hmong population has increased 40% from 186,310 people in 2000 to 260,073 people in 2010 (Pfeifer et al., 2013). In the U.S., the three largest concentrations of Hmong are in California (91,224), Minnesota (66,181), and Wisconsin (49,240) (Hmong American Partnership, 2010; Pfeifer et al., 2013). Even with the increasing number of Hmong in the U.S., there are some "Hmong who long to return to their homeland where their memories and ancestors once inhabited" (Hilmer, 2010, p. 231), and there are others who have acculturated into American culture and the "American way of life."

## **Literature Review**

### **Brief History on Hmong People**

The Hmong are a hill-tribe group of people who have ancestors that can be traced back to China (Hilmer, 2010; Tapp, 2001; Yang & Blake, 1993). In the early 1800s, the Hmong began migrating south towards Indochina due to a long history of persecution from the Chinese (Dana, 1993; Hilmer, 2010). The Hmong, while in Southeast Asia, lived in scattered villages in the highlands of Laos, Thailand, Burma, Vietnam, and southern China (Hilmer, 2010; Tapp, 2001; Yang & Blake, 1993). The Hmong

functioned independently in Indochina, and were marginalized from the dominant cultures in the countries where they resided (Dana, 1993; Hilmer, 2010). As a result of being marginalized, the Hmong habituated to fighting in order to “preserve their freedom and their way of life” (Dana, 1993, p. 8). In Southeast Asia, the Hmong lived separated “from mainstream society, engaging in slash-and-burn farming, and practicing their own form of animistic spirituality” (Hilmer, 2010, p. 15). In the highlands of Indochina is where the Hmong would call their home for decades to come.

The Hmong were recruited by Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operative Bill Lair during the Vietnam War (Hilmer, 2010). The CIA operatives and Americans who helped to recruit the Hmong would eventually say that they “believed the Hmong were exactly the kind of freedom fighters the United States was looking for” (Hilmer, 2010, p. 274). According to Hilmer (2010) the Hmong people played key roles in supporting the U.S. because they assisted in opposing the communist Lao. Furthermore, General Vang Pao was a Hmong leader who helped aid the CIA operatives and would eventually command all forces in Military Region 2 in Laos during the Vietnam War (Hilmer, 2010). General Vang Pao is regarded by many as a hero because of his leadership and vital role in the war (Hilmer, 2010).

It was not until after the Vietnam War that the Hmong came to the United States (Hilmer, 2010). After the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Laos, the Hmong who were left behind faced much persecution from the Lao communist government (Hilmer, 2010; Yang & Blake, 1993). As a result many Hmong families fled Laos and crossed the Mekong River into Thailand where they sought asylum and were placed in refugee camps (Yang & Blake, 1993). Hilmer (2010) stated that by 1977, the Nong Khai refugee camp



held 22,000 refugees (p. 196). While at the Thailand refugee camps, the Hmong had three options: (1) apply for migration to a third country, (2) stay in camps for an indeterminate period of time, or (3) secretly return to Laos (Hilmer, 2010). Many of the Hmong in the refugee camps were then dispersed to the United States, France, and Australia for resettlement (Hilmer, 2010). The Hmong who arrived in the U.S. obtained status as refugees and were assigned to resettlement agencies (Hilmer, 2010; Yang & Blake, 1993). The Hmong had little sense of where they were going or what life would be like in this new land (Hilmer, 2010), and that they would be faced with answering questions from Americans such as “where is Laos, and who are Hmong?” (Hilmer, 2010, p. 245).

### **Hmong Culture and Values**

**Beliefs.** The Hmong people take pride in their rich culture (Moua, 2001). For many Hmong, they “continue to practice or be influenced by Hmong traditional beliefs” such as animism (Hess, Yang & Goh, 2007; Moua, 2001). In addition, Vang (2013) also suggests that “human life is heavily dictated by ancestral spirits that are directly involved in the facilitation of human life from birth to death.” In research done by Hess et al. (2007), the Hmong’s animistic beliefs explain that a human has “intertwining physical, mental, and spiritual health and well-being” (p. 4). Although many Hmong still practice traditional beliefs, after coming to the U. S. many Hmong converted to Christianity (Hess et al., 2007). The Hmong also follow the lunar calendar and have similar cosmology beliefs and symbolic forms as the Chinese (Tapp, 2001). The Hmong also believe that many rituals and traditions were derived from folk tales and legends (Cha, 2003). For example, the use of an umbrella during Hmong weddings signifies that a marriage is in process (Cha, 2003). This is believed to have been given from the “Dab Pog couple”

folklore (Cha, 2003). The Hmong also believe that a celebration would not be complete without a proper meal with rice (Cha, 2010, p. 91). Dana (1993) found in her study on Hmong married couples that the Hmong value marriage and family the most, and that they will try to preserve these practices as they acculturate and adopt the American way of life.

**Family values.** “The Hmong people were farmers who were accustomed to producing their own vegetables and domesticating animals for consumption, so the family’s well-being relied heavily on family human resources” (Lee & Tapp, 2010, p. 164). Another study also finds similar results that the Hmong found value in having a large family with many children (Xiong, 2013) because it would mean more human labor in the home; thus, the more self-sufficient the family would be (Lee & Tapp, 2010). Along with having large families, one of the most crucial values instilled into the Hmong culture is that the family as a whole is valued over the individual (Moua, 2001). This is due to the “strong traditional family values that encourage interdependence among family members which is favored over individualism” (Vang & Bogenschutz, 2011, p. 167). The Hmong define family as being more than just the nuclear family; it also includes the network of extended relatives on both the father and mother’s side (Lee & Tapp, 2010; Moua, 2001). Within the Hmong family structure, a hierarchy or social stratification exists (Moua, 2001). In addition, the Hmong culture is a patriarchal society based on male lineage and dominance (Huong, Oosterhoff, and White; 2011; Moua, 2001). Moua (2001) also reports that in traditional Hmong practices, “women remain dependent on the moral, legal, and economic support of their father, brothers, and kinsmen, until they marry” (p. 90), then the husband would take on this role.

Dana (1993) and Moua (2001) both agree that in these patrilineal societies, status is determined by gender and age. Like other Asian family structures, the “birth order and the sex of a child are important factors for determining status” (Dana, 1993, p. 9). Furthermore, birth order and sex come with certain rights and responsibilities in the Hmong family structure (Hilmer, 2010; Moua, 2001). “In Hmong culture, the eldest son and the youngest son have different duties toward their parents” (Moua, 2001, p. 72). For example, the eldest son will take care of the family and share the responsibility of governing the family when the father is unable to (Moua, 2001). For the youngest son, he will take care of his elderly parents when they are no longer able to care for themselves (Moua, 2001).

**Family clans.** There are 18 clans within Hmong society. The Hmong typically belong to one of these eighteen clans, or a derivative of those clans. The 18 Hmong clans are Chang, Chue, Cheng, Fang, Her, Hang, Khang, Kong, Kue, Lee, Lor, Moua, Pha, Thao, Vang, Vue, Xiong, and Yang (Cha, 2010; Moua, 2001). Family clans for the Hmong are important to note because of the complexity and strict cultural traditions to which it adheres (Moua, 2001). The clan system and its leaders play a big role in the organization in the Hmong community (Cha, 2010; Moua, 2001; Tapp, 2001; Vang, 2013). Clan leadership serves as liaisons between Hmong and non-Hmong groups, and is instrumental in settling differences between family members or different clans (Dana, 1993; Vang, 2013). Clan leaders would also help in family decision making processes as well and can be called upon as mediators for family conflicts (Moua, 2001). Subsequently, this leads to many clan leaders also being authority figures within the Hmong community; thus, some leaders could perform marriage ceremonies and

acknowledge two persons as a married couple (Cha, 2010; Moua, 2001). Hmong clan leaders can also be viewed as gatekeepers to the Hmong community because of their roles and responsibilities to protect clan members (Moua, 2001). Moua (2001) also states that the roles and responsibilities of clan leaders are to resolve conflicts within and between clans, maintain cultural rituals, be a peacemaker at weddings and funerals, and set oral rules to govern the Hmong people. In addition, the Hmong social structure operates as a way of life because it was a tradition passed down from generation to generation (Cha, 2010). The Hmong view this as a normal part of life; however, people outside of the community are not aware of it.

### **Hmong Marriages**

**Marriage practices.** In traditional Hmong marriage practices the bride would leave her home and become an integral part of her husband's household (Dana, 1993). In Hmong culture, marrying at a young age was an accepted norm (Moua, 2001). Likewise, Vang and Bogenschutz (2011) also state that Hmong girls would marry in their teenage years. However, in the U.S. the accepted marriageable ages are changing due to younger Hmong generations being exposed to the education system and American culture (Moua, 2001). In addition, the "occurrence of traditional forms of Hmong marriages is not well documented in the U.S., it is difficult to ascertain their frequency with any accuracy" (Vang & Bogenschutz, 2011, p. 167). In the Hmong culture, a marriage binds the two families or clans together, and it is more than just a man marrying a woman (Moua, 2001). A study by Cha (2010) found similar results that there is a heavier emphasis placed on "uniting the two families" rather than "making the bride and groom happy" (p. 72).

It is also important to note that in Hmong marriage practices, there is a rule that prefers individuals to marry from their same generation (Moua, 2001, p. 29). In addition, the Hmong typically do not allow marriages within the same clan name (Hilmer, 2010; Lee & Tapp, 2010). For example, a Hmong man of the Yang clan should not marry a Hmong woman of the Yang clan. This inter-clan marriage is not necessarily set by the clan system, but varies family to family (Cha, 2010). Another thing that is important to know about Hmong marriages is the timing. Hmong culture permits that only one person from the same family is allowed to marry in one cycle of the lunar calendar (Cha, 2010). If two siblings marry in the same year, it poses potential and grave consequences such as a “poor and miserable life, or one or both will die prematurely”; therefore, the Hmong take this seriously (Cha, 2010, p. 73). In addition, due to the costly bride wealth practices (sau nqis taub hau) two marriages within the same lunar calendar are also not recommended. Due to the expensive nature of the bride wealth collected, it is sometimes unaffordable to very poor families and this practice of not allowing two siblings to marry in one year helps to prevent families from suffering from too much financial hardship.

**Courtship.** Most Hmong marriages begin with courtship and the best time for this is during the New Year, a celebration normally tied to the end of the harvest season and roughly at the close of the lunar year (Dana, 1993; Hilmer, 2010). Hilmer (2010) found that “the New Year was also a time for reflection and renewal for the year’s good fortune and to honor dead ancestors” (p. 27). One primary means of communication during courtship between boys and girls was the ball tossing game during the Hmong New Year celebrations (Dana, 1993; Cha, 2010). Boys and girls would be dressed in their finest Hmong clothes and ball toss with potential suitors (Dana, 1993; Hilmer,

2010). The ball tossing participants would form two parallel lines, boys in one line and girls in the other (Dana, 1993). Dana (1993) further describes that the boys and girls would face each other while tossing a soft ball, about the size of a tennis ball, back and forth while having casual conversations (Dana, 1993) or singing Hmong poetry as a form of courtship (Cha, 2003). This form of courtship, a chanting of poetry, is sung rather than spoken (Dana, 1993). Premarital sex was not prohibited in the Hmong culture, but it did pose as risks to be socially rejected (Huong et al., 2011); nevertheless, premarital sex was not uncommon with potential spouses (Dana, 1993).

**Types of marriages.** Hmong marriages can be large festive events, but the Hmong understanding of a “big wedding” does not mean more people are invited, instead it means that there are more traditions incorporated into the marriage ceremony (Cha, 2010, p. 75). These traditions include the extensive cultural wedding song (zaj tshoob qhib rooj tuam tsa). This in-depth wedding song will signify that a Hmong wedding is taking place (Cha, 2003). According to Huong, Oosterhoff, and White (2011), there are three types of marriages in Hmong society: monogamy, polygamy, and levirate. The first type, monogamy is the practice where a man marries only one woman (Huong et al., 2011). In polygamy, a man may marry more than one woman, with or without the consent from the first wife (Huong, et al., 2011). In the third type of marriage, levirate, a widowed wife would be given to the younger brother or cousin of the deceased husband (Huong et al., 2011). Levirate practices were meant to help keep children, mainly sons, in the family and serve as a form of social support for the widow and her children (Huong et al., 2011).

**Marital procedures.** Hmong marital procedures are ways or situations that occurred leading to marriages within the Hmong community. There is a conflicted agreement on the different marital procedures of Hmong marriages, some say there are five marital procedures and others say there are six (Cha, 2010; Dana, 199; Huong et al., 2011; Lee & Tapp, 2010). In a study done on Hmong living in Vietnam, it reports that there are six known marital procedures in Hmong marriage practices (Huong et al., 2011); however, other sources say that there are five marital procedures in Hmong marriage practices (Cha, 2010; Lee & Tapp, 2010). One reason for this disconnect may be due to the different countries in which the Hmong who were being studied lives. For example, Huong et al.'s (2011) study was done on Hmong communities living in Vietnam, and Lee and Tapp (2010) explored Hmong communities living in western countries. The five marital procedures of Hmong marriages, not named in any particular order, are: arranged marriage, bride capture (kidnapping), mutual consent, elopement, and forced marriage (Lee & Tapp, 2010). Arranged marriages (qhaib) usually provided families with cross-cousin marriages such as a son marrying his paternal aunt's (father's sister) daughter (yuav phauj tus ntxhais or nkauj muam nraug nus txoj kab tshoob) (Cha, 2010; Lee & Tapp, 2010). This was a common tradition deemed as honorable which has a long history of practice (Cha, 2010).

The second marital procedure in a Hmong marriage is through bride capture (txhom poj niam yuav) (Cha, 2010; Huong et al., 2011; Lee & Tapp, 2010). Bride capture (kidnapping) is when the groom, with the help of friends, "grab" the bride and take her home to be wed (Cha, 2010; Lee & Tapp, 2010), and Huong et al., (2011) takes it as far as to say that this is done without the consent of the woman (p. S205). This

cultural marriage practice of bride capture or bride kidnapping conflicts in many ways with the laws in the U. S.; therefore, it poses as a barrier for Hmong cultural traditions (Hilmer, 2010; Moua, 2001). However, Lee and Tapp (2010) explain that the practice of bride capture does not always go against the bride's wishes, and that often times this is a form of pretense that the couple would act out in order to "obtain face" due to their humility of pursuing marriage. Similarly, this also leads to the sixth marital procedure that Huong et al. (2011) identified, which is "consenting pre-arranged bride capture (zij poj niam) (p.S205). In addition, Huong et al. (2011) finds that this marital form is "rare" and "remains infrequent" (p. S206); in contrary, Lee & Tapp (2010) state that Father Bertrais, a missionary who lived among and worked with the Hmong in Laos, reported that bride capture is one of the three most common methods (p. 166). Similarly, Vang and Bogenschutz's 2011 study finds that only one of 186 respondents reported being kidnapped into marriage.

The third marital procedure is through mutual consent (xav sib yuav) where the groom and/or bride request permission from their parents (Cha, 2010; Lee & Tapp, 2010). This mutual consent and mutual attraction is the "primary and most common" marital procedure of all methods (Lee & Tapp, 2010, p. 166). Vang and Bogenschutz's (2011) study also finds that 87.7% of the participants were engaged in voluntary marriages. The fourth marital procedure is by elopement (caum txiv) (Huong et al., 2011). Elopements are situations where the couple runs away together (Cha, 2010; Huong et al., 2011; Lee & Tap, 2010). Elopements may occur due to parents' disapproval of the suitor (Lee & Tapp, 2010). The fifth marital procedure is forced marriage (yuam sib yuav) (Huong et al., 2011). This usually happens when a woman



becomes pregnant out of wedlock and in order for the father-to-be to take responsibility for the child and mother they must marry (Cha, 2010; Lee & Tapp, 2010). This method is meant to mend the dishonor that transpired for both parties involved (Lee & Tapp, 2010). On the other hand, as a result of premarital sex, if pregnancies occurred it does not necessarily lead to marriage. If the man refuse to marry the mother of his unborn child, the man would have to pay a penalty to the woman's parents in order to make amends (Hilmer, 2010).

**Roles during the wedding.** During Hmong weddings, the groom usually takes a “humble and passive role while the father or clan leader of the groom takes charge of making sure the wedding goes smoothly” (Cha, 2010, p. 99). “The bride's role is also rather passive and inactive, yet she is the reason for the celebration” (Cha, 2010, p. 99). Similarly, Huong et al. (2011) found that young Hmong women may continue to not be in control of their future following marriage due to the patriarchal values in Hmong communities. Besides the bride and groom, there are others who also play important roles in Hmong weddings. The wedding party or crew usually consists of the bride, groom, two negotiators (txiv tuam mej koob and lwm mej koob), a bridesmaid from the groom's side (niam tais ntsuab), and the best man (phij laj) (Cha, 2010). Cha (2010) also states that in some circumstances, the bride's parents may request additional party members such as person who oversees ceremony (kav xwm) or a person who does the cooking (tshwj kab). The role of the two negotiators is to act as a representative for the groom's parents to convey their messages and make sure that the wedding negotiations (in regards to bride wealth to be discussed later) run smoothly (Cha, 2010). Stalcup (2000) also agrees that the negotiators would proceed with caution during weddings

because they want to remain neutral in order to bring families together and not to cause tension. There are two negotiators, one is the lead *mej koob* and the other is there as support (Cha, 2010). The role of the bridesmaid is to ensure that the bride does not have a change of heart or leave during the wedding ceremony; thus, the bridesmaid is appointed by the groom's family (Cha, 2010). The best man's role is to support the groom by kneeling and serving as a witness to the marriage (Cha, 2010). The overall role of the wedding crew is to act as witnesses and social supports for the soon-to-be husband and wife.

**Wedding procedures.** According to Cha (2010), “the average traditional Hmong wedding consists of four major parts” (p. 75). The first is the union of bride and groom. Second is her induction into the groom's family which happens on the third morning of their union. The third is the actual wedding negotiations and feast at the bride's family home. The wedding is then concluded with the groom's family feast (Cha, 2010). These four major parts are typical of a never-before-married bride so other derivatives of these parts may be applied to brides who have married before and choose to remarry. The type of marriage is important to identify because the wedding procedures will vary with the different types. There are many taboos and restrictions during Hmong weddings and to discuss them all would be out of the scope of this paper. However, one of the most important and longest parts of the dealings is the bride wealth negotiations (Cha, 2010).

### **Bride Wealth**

In discussing bride wealth, it is also important to discuss the terms dowry and bride price due to their similarities and common misconceptions. According to the Oxford University Press (2002), a dowry is “a practice in which the bride's family gives

the bride property to bring into the marriage.” Nadeau and Rayamajhi (2013) also define dowry as property given to the daughter at the time of marriage, but it also includes the giving of money. In regards to bride wealth, it is defined as payment made from the groom’s family to the bride’s family at the time of marriage (Brideprice and bridewealth, 2006; Nadeau & Rayamajhi, 2013; Vang, 2013). Subsequently, the definitions of bride wealth and bride price are the same. Although, “the term bride price is rarely used now due to its implications that women are being purchased” (Brideprice and bridewealth, 2006). The term bride price has been deemed “an inappropriate Western metaphor”; thus, it is used less and less in the more recent years (Brideprice and bridewealth, 2006; Oxford University Press, 2002). With the given definitions, the similarities of bride price and bride wealth can be used interchangeably. But with the term dowry, it is essentially what the bride’s family gives to her to start her new life with her husband. According to the Hmong, dowry is seen as the *khoom pij cuam*, which includes money, clothes, and property (gifts) given to the daughter from her parents (Stalcup, 2000). Even though the term bride price may still be used in some literature found today, for the purposes of this paper, the researcher will use the less derogatory term, “bride wealth”.

Bride wealth practices are symbolically complex (Oxford University Press, 2002) especially in societies that choose to continue to practice it. In societies that practice bride wealth, the groom may also be given the opportunity to offer services instead of property (also known as bride service) to the bride's family in exchange for their daughter (Oxford University Press, 2002). Bride wealth payments may help with economic gains and stability for cultures that continue to practice it (Hoogeveen, Van Der

Klaauw & Van Lomwel, 2011). These are not necessarily reflective of the Hmong's cultural practice of bride wealth.

**Hmong bride wealth practices.** In the Hmong language, to marry is literally translated as “buying a wife” (yuav poj niam) (Cha, 2010). So it is no wonder that in traditional Hmong weddings there is talk of money in bride wealth negotiations. Moua (2001) finds that there are two parts to the Hmong's bride wealth: 1) how much she is worth or the price for raising her (nqe mig nqe no), and 2) the wedding ceremony and the feast itself (p. 77). In the Hmong culture, bride wealth practices are also meant to help safeguard and protect a married Hmong woman against abuse (Dana, 1993; Hilmer, 2010; Moua; 2001). According to Cha (2010), the biggest part in a Hmong wedding is the bride wealth negotiation. These bride wealth negotiations “varies significantly one part of the world to the other” (Cha, 2010, p. 87) due to the different accepted standards set forth by the Hmong communities in diaspora (Vang, 2013).

Negotiations surrounding the bride wealth can also be very complex (Huong et al., 2011). This is why the different marital procedures on Hmong marriages are important. If the bride was “captured” and taken against her will without any prior discussion, the bride's parents could request a higher bride wealth payment (Huong et al., 2011). This can lead to “financially crippling some families”; thus, bride capture is not a recommended form of marital procedure and it has declined in recent practices (Huong et al., 2011, p. S205). Negotiating a bride wealth requires a delicate act of diplomacy and the amount of bride wealth paid varies from family to family (Hilmer, 2010; Lee & Tapp, 2010). “It was expected that no family would feign poverty, make excessive demands, or draw attention to real or imagined faults in either family's lineage” (Hilmer, 2010, p. 32).

Prior to coming to the U.S., bride wealth payments would usually include livestock (Hilmer, 2010). For poorer families, these payments could be “paid in-kind and not cash” (Lee & Tapp, 2010, p. S209). As for more westernized Hmong families, money is used in lieu of property because it is seen as more appropriate (Lee & Tapp, 2010). Promised bride wealth payments were typically due on the wedding day (Hilmer, 2010). Some families even had to resort to selling parts of their land so that they can pay for the wedding and its bride wealth payment (Huong et al., 2011).

**Bride wealth explanations.** Even with negative connotations around bride wealth practices and its implications that objectify women (Vang, 2013), some Hmong women “do not consider bride wealth as something to eradicate” (Huong et al., 2011, p. S209). This begs one to wonder, what is it about the practice of bride wealth that the Hmong continue to hold onto? In the Hmong culture, one reason for the practice of bride wealth is so that the bride’s parents can provide their daughter with money and property to ensure short-term security and respect in her newly forged family (Hilmer, 2010, p. 33). Cha (2010) adds that “the use of money as a gift or token of good faith from the groom is just a matter of convenience” (p. 86); and that these payments are good will gestures from family to family. According to Stalcup (2000), bride wealth payments recognize the many years her parents cared for her until the day she married. For some Hmong, the social meaning of bride wealth is complex because it may be understood or represented as the value of women within the Hmong culture (Huong et al., 2011). However, Hilmer (2010) states that bride wealth payments would remain entirely under the bride’s control in the marriage (Hilmer, 2010). Contrary to this, Huong et al. (2011) found that in his participants, the continued patriarchal nature of Hmong society allows

for the husbands and parents-in-law to have power over the wife or daughter-in-law, and this can severely limit women's autonomy and ability to realize their aspirations (p. S213). However, "there is incongruence among the Hmong community regarding bride wealth practices" (Vang, 2013), and even some clan leaders are "not clear about how to continue this cultural practice due to time, space, and environmental changes" (Moua, 2001, p. 78).

**Bride wealth in African cultures.** Aside from the Hmong, there are anthropological studies on African tribes whose culture also practice certain forms of bride wealth (Hoogeveen, Van Der Klaauw & Van Lomwel, 2011; Horne, Dadoo & Dadoo, 2013). For example, people living in rural Zimbabwe practice a form of bride wealth (Hoogeveen et al., 2011). According to Hoogeveen et al. (2011), within Zimbabwe culture, marriages can be a response to exposure to shock and these bride wealth payments can assist families in economic gains. During marriages, the bride wealth payment can consist of livestock, clothing, and money (Hoogeveen et al., 2011). Hoogeveen et al. (2011) and Horne et al. (2013) describe the bride wealth payment as usually paid in full at the time of marriage or could be made into a certain number of installments or partial payments over time. In these African cultures, if the bride wealth has not been paid in full the couple is not traditionally recognized as married, but some families may allow couples to live and have children as though they are married (Horne et al., 2013).

The function of the bride wealth in certain African cultures is to obtain new livestock and improve the family's economic circumstance (Horne et al., 2013). In addition, the practice of bride wealth often reinforces the norms of constraining female

reproductive autonomy (Horne et al., 2013). This means that women who marry and practice bride wealth are then “subject to conforming with the cultural norms which limit women’s right to their bodies and require women to defer to their husbands for reproductive control” (Horne et al., 2013, p. 506). The practice of bride wealth in these African cultures remains “remarkably persistent although practices may vary” (Horn et al., 2013, p. 505). The African cultures that continue to practice bride wealth are very similar to the Hmong cultural practices of bride wealth. The underlying similarity for both cultures is that they have an exchange of property or money from the groom’s family to the bride’s family and that they both operate in patrilineal dominant societies (Cha, 2010, Dana, 1993; Hoogeveen et al., 2011; Horne, Dodoo & Dodoo, 2013; Lee & Tapp, 2010).

### **Mental Health in Hmong Women**

According to Vang and Bogenschutz (2011), people who are raised in a patriarchal society with strict gender roles can lead to having a higher tolerance of abuse. This study also indicates “a possible link” between teenage marriage, marital abuse, and depressive symptoms in Hmong women” (Vang & Bogenschutz, 2011, p. 176). With the negative connotations attached to bride wealth practices, it is to no surprise that Hmong marriages can lead to depressive symptoms in Hmong women, especially when they tend to marry younger. For example, “women who marry young are more likely to experience marital abuse” and in turn, this “is related to increased reports of depressive symptoms” (p. 176). This indication of a possible link, along with Vang and Bogenschutz’s (2011) recommendation for future study, evokes the researcher to look at the perceptions of the

Hmong practices of bride wealth, satisfaction of marriages among Hmong women, and how it affects their mental health.

### **Rationale for Research**

In Hmong culture, marriage and family are important aspects of life that the Hmong hold the most value to (Dana, 1993). Likewise, Cha (2003) states that marriage is one of the three major life events for a Hmong individual; thus, it is important to note this rite of passage with the bride wealth practice. With this in mind, one begs to wonder why the Hmong community is in such incongruence on the practice of bride wealth and its implications. Overall, the current literature helps give meaning and clarity in understanding that bride wealth practices have significant impact on marriages and familial relationships within the Hmong community; however, it lacks the insight from the individuals who actually practice bride wealth.

As a result of this, there have been cultural misunderstandings about the practice of bride wealth that is harmful to the community. For example, on April 2, 2015 ABC30, a Fresno, California local news team, broadcasted that a Hmong woman, Zyang Vang was shot and killed by her ex-husband, Neng Moua (Haagenson, 2015). They also reported that Zyang “claimed she had been sold by her parents to Moua for \$3500 in 1993” (Haagenson, 2015). Although the media coverage did consult and interview with two other Hmong individuals on the sensitivity of the topic, one wonders how harmful this portrayal of the Hmong culture is to viewers who lack the knowledge about Hmong bride wealth practices. Haagenson (2015) informed viewers that an annulment written by Zyang, stated that she claims to have been “sold by her parents”, although this may be true statements from Vang, this statement should not be generalizable to other individuals



within the Hmong community. Consequently, this broadcast started a new movement among some Hmong individuals in social media known as the “#NotSold” movement. This movement involves individuals who speak out against the negative connotations of bride wealth practices in the Hmong community in hopes to shed light on the subject. Misunderstandings and misrepresentations such as those within the media can cause harm to the Hmong community; therefore, this inaccurate portrayal of bride wealth validates that research on Hmong bride wealth practices are relevant and important for social workers. This is especially important for social workers due to their professional Code of Ethics which calls for social justice (NASW, 2008). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the importance of bride wealth practices among Hmong women. In addition to the following research question: How Hmong women’s perceptions of bride wealth affect their overall marriage satisfaction and mental health?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The decision to research bride wealth perceptions and its implications on Hmong marriages is influenced by several assumptions. The social learning theory provides explanations of behaviors and attitudes which can link Hmong marriage practices such as those of bride wealth to their cultural implications as well as providing social workers with the understanding of an individual’s behavior. The social learning theory was developed by Albert Bandura which “emphasizes the importance of observing and modeling the behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others” (Bandura, 1977). Bandura (1977) states: "Learning would be exceedingly laborious, not to mention hazardous, if people had to rely solely on the effects of their own actions to inform them what to do” (p. 22). With this being said, it is important to understand that human

behaviors are learned from the environment through the observations of modeling (Bandura, 1977). For the Hmong community in regards to marriages, women observe past relatives' wedding ceremonies, and develop a social construction of how to behave during these cultural traditions. They observe other women model the bride's role in Hmong bride wealth practices, and some accept this as a norm and see the benefits of practicing bride wealth payments. As these women observe other women model the behavior, they start to understand the relationship between their behavior and its consequences; this is known as cognitive processing (Bandura, 1977).

Furthermore, Bandura (1977) explains that human behavior is a “continuous reciprocal interaction between cognitive, behavioral, and environmental influences” (p. 25). Contrary to the previous example, Hmong women are changing their behaviors regarding bride wealth practices because they are being exposed to new practices for getting married. For example, as second generation Hmong women interact with their environment, such as the American culture, they are learning new behaviors (i.e. attending school, marrying later in life, having an “American wedding”). The women who have been influenced by western culture then start to imitate these new behaviors they have observed. In addition, as Hmong women learn western culture behaviors, this challenges their perceptions and beliefs of their native culture. This observational learning is important in how Hmong women understand Hmong marriage practices.

The social learning theory helps social workers understand the Hmong culture and its traditions because it suggests that behaviors are acquired through the observation of modeling. The social learning theory is applied to two different aspects of the Hmong community. It is first applicable to how the Hmong practice of bride wealth has

sustained through the centuries of Hmong society. And secondly, due to the shifting culture of the Hmong community, the Hmong are exposed to new observations of modeling behaviors such as those of Americans. It is important for social workers to understand how social learning theory contributes to Hmong society and its cultural practices, particularly those of bride wealth.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

Due to lack of research on bride wealth practices in the Hmong community, the nature of this study was designed to be qualitative and exploratory. A qualitative research was appropriate for this study because it attempts to assess the subjective dimensions of how individuals understand bride wealth and implications of their marriage satisfaction and mental health (Padgett, 2008). The qualitative research also allowed for the “emotional depth and sensitivity of the topic” (Padgett, 2008, p. 15). Overall, the study explored whether the individual’s perception of bride wealth affects the satisfaction of their own marriages according to the individual’s lived experiences. Before starting the recruitment process, the researcher received approval from St. Catherine University’s Institutional Review Board.

### **Sample**

The population for this study is Hmong women over the age of 18 who are or have been married and live in the Twin Cities area of Minnesota. To recruit participants the researcher used a flyer (*see Appendix A*) that was distributed via email, social media websites, and popular online Hmong discussion forums. In addition, a snowballing sampling method was used. Participants were asked to forward the flyer to their friends,

family, and colleagues who they identified as potential participants. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, the researcher further assessed if the identified participants matched the given inclusion criteria of being a Hmong woman over 18 years of age and being married or have been married. The flyer provided information about the research topic and the researcher's name and contact information should there be further questions or concerns regarding the study.

All participants were self-selected and voluntary. The sample included eight Hmong women who had personal experiences with bride wealth practices. The participants' ages ranged from 22 to 54 years old. Seven of the women married in their twenties. The youngest age of marriage was 16 for one participant. Most of the women were also educated. The oldest participant had attended some adult school, while the rest had some level of higher education experience. One participant had some college experience, one participant had a 2-year degree, two participants had 4-year degrees, and three held masters degrees. Additionally, all participants had gone through the Hmong bride wealth practice (*sau nqis taub hau*). Five of the participants identified as being both married traditionally in the Hmong culture and legally in the U.S.; however, one participant was widowed and two were divorced legally. Of the two Hmong women whose marital status is divorced, one of them remarried traditionally. Seven of the eight women also married Hmong men, while the other married a Caucasian man. Religion was also collected as a part of demographic information. Four of the eight women reported being Christians, two reported practicing Shamanism, one reported having secular beliefs, and another reported practicing both Christianity and Shamanism.

## **Consent and Confidentiality**

Informed consent was obtained by providing participants with a written form, a verbal explanation of confidentiality, as well as a dissemination of data (*see Appendix B*). Each of the participants received and signed a copy of the informed consent form. The participants had the option to choose whether or not they wanted to answer individual questions that they deemed “uncomfortable” and were able to withdraw from the research at any time during the interview even after signing the consent form. Data from participants who wish to withdraw was not used for this research. In order to differentiate between participants, each participant was randomly assigned a number for reference purposes. All recordings and transcripts were kept on a USB drive in a locked drawer. The recordings were all destroyed by June 1, 2015.

## **Risks and Benefits**

The main risk to participants in this study was emotional or psychological distress due to the sensitivity of the topic. In discussing personal experiences, this may have evoked strong feelings. To minimize this risk, participants were reminded that they can stop the interview at any time or refuse to answer individual questions. The researcher also provided mental health resources for those participants who may have had some emotional distress because of the interview. Participants also received a \$5 gift card as a token of appreciation for participating in the study. There were no direct benefits for participating in this research.

## **Data Collection**

Data was gathered through a recorded semi-structured interview lasting between 30-45 minutes. The semi-structured interview (*see Appendix C*) consisted of nine open-

ended questions designed to explore the participants' experiences around marriage and bride wealth practices. The questions investigated how participants' viewed bride wealth practices in the Hmong culture and if these practices affected their marital relationship. Participants were also asked if there were any mental health distress due to the practice of bride wealth.

### **Setting**

The setting for the interviews were at a mutually agreed upon location determined by the interviewer and participant. The locations provided privacy and few distractions.

### **Data Analysis**

All interviews were recorded and then transcribed. Each transcript was analyzed using content analysis of the interview transcription. Content analysis refers to a systemic way of categorizing responses or number of incidences occurred (Padgett, 2008), therefore, the researcher used open coding techniques in the analysis by looking for repeated words or phrases in the participants' responses. Themes were developed using content analysis in which the researcher analyzed the transcription for repeated words and phrases. These were then placed into similar groupings. After coding the responses into conceptual groups, the researcher elaborated on the interpretive procedures. This helped to "set the stage for interpretation" which is often times the interpretation itself (Padgett, 2008, p. 151).

### **Findings**

The following findings presented in this section were developed from the responses of eight Hmong women. There were five major themes that emerged from the data analysis. The five themes were: understanding bride wealth as a monetary exchange,

respect for tradition, financial stress, not about worth, and negative connotation for younger selves.

### **Bride Wealth as Monetary Exchange**

Although some of the participants indicated that they did not know much about Hmong weddings, all of the participants indicated in the interview that they understood bride wealth to be a monetary exchange that takes place during Hmong weddings. The participants described bride wealth to be essentially an accepted amount of money that is to be exchanged for the bride from the groom's family to the bride's family. One participant stated that she believes that bride wealth is, "...just paying for the bride...because that is all that my in-laws and my mom kind of talked about. So they wanted to make it a price where my mom would feel like, yes you can take my daughter for that price!" (Participant 2, Line 16, 17, 25, 27). Similarly, another participant said that, "when the daughter marries a husband then they will decide on a price for the expenses and cost of raising the daughter" (tus ntxhais mus yuav txiv ces lawv sau me ntsis nqi ua nqi noj nqi haus) (Participant 3, Line 26). One participant understood it as "...an exchange of some type of monetary promise..." (Participant 6, Line 15), and participant 7 agreed that "...it's an exchange between the two families... The monetary amount that is attached to marrying the woman. And so whatever the amount is in order for you to marry my person it would cost you this much that you would have to contribute this amount of money" (Line 48, 77-79). Another participant indicated that it is not only money from the husband, but mostly from the help of his parents: "...they are in a sense being exchanged... there's just a price the husband pays for the wife... and its

usually paid by the husband's family, particularly the parents but not always" (Participant 8, Line 81, 90-91, 93).

Some participants even mentioned the suggested and capped price of \$5,000 set forth by the Hmong 18 Council. One participant stated:

But I know that there's a set price now and that they can't exceed an amount. But I don't, like for now I don't know, I mean I think it's still there that the money part is still there just to make sure that the guy promise to love the girl.

(Participant 5, Line 26-28)

Another participant goes on to say, "So the husband's side of the family would, um its saying through that money exchange that yeah we will take care of your daughter" (Participant 1, Line 59-60). This theme of understanding bride wealth as a monetary exchange was present throughout all of the participants' responses.

### **Respect for Tradition**

Six out of the eight participants identified that they also practiced the bride wealth because they saw how important it was to their parents, and they practiced it because they wanted to show respect for the longstanding tradition in order to honor their parents. One participant responded that:

They (the parents) see it in that context of seeing it as respect. This is a agreement between the two families coming together. Introducing the family saying that we are married each other. It's just not the husband (and bride) married each other it's the clan the whole clan married each other (Participant 1, Line 68-70)

Another participant also included that her parents wanted them to marry. She said, "they wanted us to marry, more than we wanted to at that time...so I felt like because it, my



husband and I we felt like because it was mainly their call, they could do it (Hmong bride wealth). They could handle it” (Participant 2, Line 109-112).

The older participant said, “In the past, the elders from generation to generation has always carried out the bride wealth practice. So that’s why we’ve always done it” (Participant 3, Line 43-45).

Respect is directly aligned with seeing value in the practice. One participant indicated, “I think that the traditions of you know having negotiators, I think that’s still, I think it’s still valuable. I do value our traditions and how it was.” (Participant 4, Line 136-137). Participant 5 responded that they practiced bride wealth out of “respect of the elders, for them to be able to understand it. Like to recognize that they’re getting married...I know that the price has always been like that so it’s just something that’s just tradition.” (Line 16-17, 9-10). One participant said:

It’s just a sign to, I see it as a sign of respect to my family that we appreciate whatever you’ve done. Um and that we’re making your daughter an addition to our family. And there’s nothing I can really give you, just this small monetary token of my promise to you guys to take care of her also. That’s how I see it.  
(Participant 6, Line 80-83)

### **Financial Stress**

The practice of the Hmong bride wealth deals directly with money and exchanging it for the bride. It is to no surprise that several of the participants talked about being financially stressed or having financial concerns. For one participant, she felt like her husband was stressed about money:

But it did for my husband. I remember my husband was freaking out about how he was going to come up with all this money...Um the thing was that, his mom was, been saving money for his marriage for when he was going to get married to do the bride price and his mom was saving all that money already. And his uncles was willing to give him money. And in my husband's mind it maybe have caused him a little bit of anxieties because he was thinking so much about how to come up with the money... Yea I remember it caused my husband more anxiety and stress. (Participant 1, Line 196-202, 207-208)

While other participants felt stressed themselves, one participant indicated that her mother was contributing some money, but the remainder was up to her and her husband.

Her response was:

She's just giving some money to pay for the food. Just for the food, for the American wedding. And then my in laws are giving a little bit of money to help for the food, but everything else I have to, me and my husband will have to come up with on our own. (Participant 2, Line 99-102)

Likewise another participant said that her and her husband had some concerns regarding payment. This participant married a Caucasian man and said:

'I don't have community to help me out with the bride price and the wedding.'  
We saved, he and I saved money for it. He said, I can't go and ask. We just don't do that, you know we just don't go and ask our aunts and uncles and everybody can help pay. And um I think that was my, my way to compromise was to say, ok we're gonna do the Hmong wedding and we're gonna do an American wedding

and we won't do the full bride price cause that's just ridiculous, it's too much.

(Participant 7, Line 130-132, 201-203)

Whereas, another participant responded that:

When the man plans to marry, he already knows that he and his family will need to prepare some money ahead of time to pay the bride's family. So he knows and is already consenting to pay in order to marry you. (Thaum nws yauv tuaj yuav yus nws yeej paub hais tias nws yuav npaj pob nyiaj nws thiaj yuav tau yus, them rau yus niam yus txiv nes. Ces nws yeej txaus nws siab qhov ntawd tuaj yuav yus.) (Participant 3, Line 66-68)

Nevertheless, it is evident that participants had concerns of money and worries over having enough money to pay the parents of the bride.

### **Not about Worth**

Participants did not indicate that they, themselves, felt like the Hmong bride wealth practice objectified them, but they did indicate that other women in the community may feel this way. Participant 1 reported that "It's not, I don't see it so much as um a value place on the women um whereas sometimes I feel like some people see it as a value of the women" (Participant 1, Line 44-45). Participants also reported that they did not associate the monetary price of the bride wealth with feelings of worthlessness.

For example, one participant indicated that:

To me I feel like it's not about, you know if I had my doctors degree I am worth more because it, I mean, I'm in college right now and I don't think that had anything to do with my price that they paid for me. (Participant 2, Line 20-22)

Instead, the participants felt that their bride wealth amount did not define who they are as Hmong women. One participant testified that:

Of course it's not like an item you can buy and easily replace. We're humans and it's not like there's gonna be another me, another twin, another thing where you can just replace. Cause I don't see anything bad in it or in the community, it's that "oh you're selling off your daughter?" I don't view it that way. (Participant 6, Line 24-26, 20-22)

Another participant added, "The Hmong culture has always practiced this tradition and it is a good thing for you (the bride) (kab li kev cais Hmoob yeej ua li ntawd los ces, kuj yog ib qho zoo rau yus)" (Participant 3, Line 33). In addition, some participants alluded to the fact that the groom's family does care about the bride, enough that they are willing to pay for her. Some felt like the payment displayed the family's willingness and approval of the bride into the family because if they didn't see your value, then they would not pay such a large amount for you. For example, a participant said, "I think it's just to make sure that the family loves the daughter. You know, if you're and they're willing to pay that much money for a daughter, for a wife then um that way they will love you" (Participant 4, Line 53-55). However, one participant did not agree that the price will determine if the husband will love the wife. Instead she stated:

I don't believe it's true you know if your worth ten or your husband paid ten thousand for you and he'll treat you better, love you better than paying two thousand. I don't think so. I think it's really the husband himself what he values and how he sees you, as a wife... You know it doesn't determine that you know if you're more expensive your husband will love you more or if you're free they're

not going to love you in the end. I don't think it has anything to do with that, it's the man that determines if you're worth it or that your marriage will work out and last ever after or not last. It depends on the husband. (Participant 8, Line 195-197, 307-310)

### **Negative Connotation for Younger Selves**

In this last theme, five of the eight participants felt that when they were younger, they had less appreciation for the bride wealth practice. Some felt that since there was such a lack of knowledge prior to practicing bride wealth, they viewed the practice negatively. For example, one participant said that, "When I was growing up I viewed it negatively um like what is this and why does it have to define a women's value and now I'm a little older I don't see it as a negative thing" (Participant 1, line 38-39). Similarly, another participant indicated that:

Growing up I had a really negative view of the bride price and the practice around that and I know that growing up I always had this idea of myself that if I were to ever get married that's something, that practice, that I did not want to continue... But when I got married, I um I think I changed my perspective of it. That, I think to understand that it's a little bit more than a means of objectifying women.

(Participant 7, Line 9-10, 17-19)

Another also said, "I used to be against it because I wasn't educated about it" (Participant 2, Line 30). Meanwhile participant 4 indicated that her view changed after having children, especially a daughter. She said:

I think if you ask me before I had children what the value of it was, um I don't really think that the dollar amount like, I don't think that you should put a dollar

sign on a child. But then now, that was me before, but now that I have my daughter I'm like, I do want that person to pay because I want to make sure that she's taken care of. (Participant 4, Line 76-78)

### **Discussion**

The purpose of doing this study was to find out how much Hmong women knew about bride wealth practices, especially those women who had practiced the tradition whether it was voluntary or involuntary. The findings of this study indicated that there is a lack of knowledge on bride wealth practices among those who practiced bride wealth, particularly young Hmong women. Many of the themes found in this study were consistent with the literature. The following will discuss the findings in relation to the literature.

#### **Bride Wealth as Monetary Exchange**

According to Moua (2001), there are two parts to the Hmong's bride wealth: 1) how much she is worth or the price for raising her (nqe mig nqe no), and 2) the wedding ceremony and the feast itself (p. 77). In the interviews the participants discussed both parts of the Hmong bride wealth practice. All participants reported practicing the first part of the bride wealth exchange which involves the monetary price; however, not all participants reported the feast ceremony. Three of the participants reported that they completed negotiations of the monetary exchange, but did not complete the second part which is the meal or feast ceremony. One participant indicated that she was unable to complete the celebratory meal due to the war and timing of her marriage. However, when she and her husband arrived to the U.S., her parents did not require her to complete the second portion of the wedding.

Two participants came across situations that postponed the feast ceremony. The second participant's wedding did not follow the traditional route; instead her parents came together and decided on an amount which concluded her "Hmong wedding". This participant plans to do an "American wedding" which will then complete the second part of the bride wealth. The third participant's situation became complex because the two families were indifferent about the set bride wealth. This participant also plans to complete the celebratory meal in the near future. Therefore, all of the participants interviewed will or have completed both parts of the bride wealth according to Moua (2001).

Cha (2010) finds that the bride wealth negotiations "varies significantly one part of the world to the other" (p. 87) due to the different accepted standards set forth by the Hmong communities in diaspora (Vang, 2013). This is definitely apparent with the participants in this study. Several of the participants mentioned the Hmong 18 Council's recommended bride wealth amount of \$5,000. Of the eight women, two women disclosed that five thousand was their own bride wealth total, following the set standards from the Hmong 18 Council. However, one participant disclosed her bride wealth to be \$7,000 regardless of the amount that is set forth for Hmong Americans living in Minnesota. This increase in bride wealth was due to her parents' decision and what they considered a "justifiable" amount. This is also evident to the fact that bride wealth practices are changing in order to conform to different family values.

### **Respect for Tradition**

Several participants indicated in the interview that they wanted to respect and honor their parents; therefore, they agreed or in some cases they were required by their

parents to have a “Hmong wedding” which included the bride wealth practice. This is consistent with Moua’s (2001) conclusion that the family as a whole is valued over the individual in Hmong society. Likewise, Vang and Bogenschutz (2011) also suggest that strong traditional family values encourage interdependence among family members (p. 167). Thus, participants practiced bride wealth because they had strong family values that encouraged interdependence among their family members. Moua (2001) also states that in the Hmong culture, a marriage binds the two families or clans together, and it is more than just a man marrying a woman. This study is consistent with the literature in that participants indicated that they feel the bride wealth practice “is a agreement between the two families coming together...It’s just not the husbands married each other it’s the clan the whole clan married each other” (Participant 1, Line 68-70). Another participant also said that, “It’s just a sign to, I see it as a sign of respect to my family” (Participant 6, Line 80).

### **Financial Stress**

Financial concern and stress is a common theme among the participants in this study. Lee and Tapp (2010) find that more westernized Hmong cultures use money in lieu of property because it is seen as more appropriate which this study also supports. For example, seven of the eight participants married in the U.S. used monetary exchange as the bride wealth payment. This theme is also consistent within some of the literature. According to Cha (2010) these bride wealth negotiations “varies significantly one part of the world to the other” (p. 87). For example, two participants reported their bride wealth negotiations were \$5,000 and another reported \$7,000. Even though these participants do not live in different parts of the world, one can see that there are differences in bride



wealth payments within the Hmong community. Vang (2013) suggests that these price differences are due to the different accepted standards set forth by the Hmong communities in diaspora. For Hmong Minnesotans, even though the standard or maximum bride wealth amount is \$5,000, it still varies family to family. In addition, this also supports Hilmer's (2010) explanation that "it was expected that no family would feign poverty, make excessive demands, or draw attention to real or imagined faults in either family's lineage" (p. 32). Therefore, regardless of the families' "justifiable" amount, both families will come to a mutual agreement on the amount as long as it does not make excessive demands such as those of participant 4's \$7,000 bride wealth amount that was mutually agreed upon.

### **Not about Worth**

According to Stalcup (2000), bride wealth payments recognize the many years the bride's parents cared for her until the day she married. For example, participants reported that their worth is not because of their education level, and that they are not items that can be bought and easily replaced. These statements are testaments to Hmong women's understanding that their bride wealth amount does not define or dictate their worth as a Hmong woman. Literature also suggest that within the Hmong culture, one reason for the practice of bride wealth is so that the bride's parents can provide their daughter with money and property to ensure short-term security and respect in her newly forged family (Hilmer, 2010, p. 33). This literature is consistent with this study because participants described their experiences with bride wealth as their parents' way of securing their daughter's future so that the groom's family will love and care for the bride. Furthermore, participant 7 said that the bride's family can "have my trust that you're

gonna take care of my person and in the future if you don't then we have this money that you've given us to say, to use it against you later on if we need to" (line 69-71).

### **Negative Connotation for Younger Selves**

According to Huong et al. (2011) for some Hmong the social meaning of bride wealth is complex because it may be understood or represented as the value of women within the Hmong culture. This is not consistent with the participants in this study because several participants reported that they personally do not see the bride wealth practice as a value placed on women; however, participants reported that when they were younger they did view bride wealth negatively. This incongruence implies that as young Hmong women observe other Hmong women, such as sisters, cousins, or aunts get culturally married, they have a misconception or skewed understanding of the intentions behind the bride wealth practice. One participant said that "when my sisters got married, though they got the Hmong wedding um which is kind of different from me, and I guess seeing their experiences made me not like it" (Participant 2, Line 129-131). However, as Hmong women get educated from their families about the intentions behind the bride wealth practice, some gain a better understanding of it and a sense of appreciation for it. For example, a participant said:

So I think as young Hmong people, we don't understand the repercussions of not practicing the bride price. Um even in our own lives until we're experiencing it. There's a lot of sadness and loss. Some of them have gone back to finish it.  
(Participant 7, Line 221-223)

## Other Important Findings

There are other findings that were not reported as consistent throughout the interviews but are worth mentioning. Consistent with Cha (2010), “the bride’s role is also rather passive and inactive, yet she is the reason for the celebration” (p. 99). For example, one participant reported:

I didn’t, I feel like I didn’t have a say. So I was just, I didn’t really understand. I was told just what to do. And had to do what I had to do. And I didn’t really question it or really ask questions. Um but I just feel like I at that time my role was making sure that, that making sure I was just there. (Participant 4, Line 149-151)

A second participant also reported similar experiences. She said:

For the negotiation I didn’t have a say in anything really. The only thing that they asked me and my husband was “Do you both really like each other? Are you both really in love? You know like, do you love each other because we’re here to pay for you and on behalf of you two...you know, are you guys willing to be committed because we’re gonna pay this much. That was the only say we (bride and groom) had. Otherwise we had no say. (Participant 2, Line 82-87)

Similarly, another participant reported:

Well, first thing my parents would require it so I had no choice but to do it (Hmong wedding). But it was also important to me because I’m Hmong and that was important to me as well. Just, even though I didn’t play a big part of it cause I see it more as the two elders needed to come together and agree on things and what to do with each other. And so the bride and the groom, I mean, we have a

minimal role. We kind of just stand to the side and you know do what we are told.  
(Participant 1, Line 107-112)

This study is also consistent with Cha's (2010) findings because it found similar results that there is an emphasis placed on "uniting the two families" rather than on "making the bride and groom happy" (p. 72). This, in the researcher's opinion is directly linked to the passive roles of the groom and bride during the Hmong wedding, especially during the negotiation for the bride wealth.

The use of negotiators is also an important finding that is worth mentioning. Seven of the eight participants reported having negotiators on behalf of the bride's family that would be the individuals who would deal directly with the monetary bride wealth. Literature states that the wedding party usually consists of the bride, groom, two negotiators, a bridesmaid from the groom's side, and the best man (Cha, 2010). The other participant that did not have formal negotiators stated:

It was just, my parents decided that we're more modern now. They didn't want to do all that tradition stuff. So they, so what happened was my mom talked to my father in law and they set a time and.... it was like a meeting where we just came together and let's agree on a price for your daughter. (Participant 2, Line 55-57, 60-61)

Moreover, the lack of mental health distress is another important aspect to discuss. With such negative connotations attached to bride wealth practices, it is to no surprise that some Hmong individuals hesitate to practice it; however, this study does not indicate a possible correlation with bride wealth and mental distress. Seven of the eight participants indicated that they didn't have any mental health distress because of bride wealth

practices. For example, a participant said, “I never thought about making those two connections” (Participant 8, Line 339). Meanwhile, four others blatantly responded with a “no” to having mental distress. Due to the lack of research in this area, there is no literature that has connected bride wealth practices to mental health distress. This study attempted to examine if there was a link between Hmong bride wealth practices and mental distress, but concluded that participants did not associate any mental distress towards the Hmong cultural practice of bride wealth. Nevertheless, two participants did respond that within their marital relationship their husband would sometimes “joke” about the bride wealth payments. One participant stated, “I mean we’ll joke about it but no. Like, (husband would say) ‘hey I spent, I paid for you’, I was like whatever...*laughs*” (Participant 5, Line 46). While the other noted that:

It probably did. A lot of stress. I think a lot of stress. I know that we argued a lot about not just the bride price but I felt bad about the fact that he was pulling it out and using it against me kind of throughout our marriage. Again, whether it was like to poke fun at me or to get my mother to yell at me. You know like, like a joke. (Participant 7, Line 234-237)

Lastly, this study also attempted to examine Hmong women’s overall marriage satisfaction. The participants were asked an open ended question on how satisfied they were in their marriage. Five of the eight participants responded that they were “satisfied” in their marriage. This question was left open for interpretation from the participants. One of the three participants who were not satisfied in their marriage stated that she “was not satisfied” because she did not voluntarily consent to marrying her husband in the beginning, so she felt that there was no sense of satisfaction in her marriage. The second

participant referred to her first marriage as not being satisfied. She said, “So it was a very very difficult marriage... he was hardly ever home...I was not satisfied” (Participant 8, Line 265, 267, 268). The third participant stated that, “In some ways I satisfied me but in other ways, his lack of awareness around the importance of community. Like for me, my life um we clashed a lot” (Participant 7, Line 159-161).

### **Strengths and Limitations**

A strength of this study is that useful and insightful data were obtained around bride wealth practices within the Hmong community. It’s important to note that there was little to no previous literature around Hmong bride wealth practices and its relation to marriages and mental health. Regardless, this study was able to contribute to this topic of research. Another strength of this research was that it was qualitative; therefore, the stories of the participants were unique and specific to their experiences. There are also possibilities that personal interest in this topic helped to motivate the individuals’ participation.

One limitation of this research was that only a handful of individuals were interviewed. The research design had an initial goal of recruiting 8-12 participants, but was only able to recruit a minimum of eight participants. Due to its nature, the ability for content to be generalizable will be limited. A second limitation is the misinterpretation of the responses from Hmong to English and vice versa. A third limitation is the researcher’s jargon and language on mental distress. The language used in asking participants about their mental health may have hindered their responses due to common cultural misunderstandings of individuals who have mental health issues. Often time, mental health is understood or termed as being “crazy” in the Hmong community. Even

though the researcher clarified symptoms of mental distress such as feelings of sadness, low energy, or sleep disturbances to the participants, a less direct line of questioning could have given more accurate implications for mental health.

Another limitation to the study is the sampling strategy. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, and the interest of reaching a wider range of ages, such as the elder Hmong women, recruiting through social media, email, and popular Hmong forums may have limited the sampling population. Some elder Hmong women may not have had access to social media, email, or online forums. Finally, another limitation is that this study only focused on Hmong women. It would be interesting to find what Hmong men think about bride wealth practices especially because they and their family are often times the ones who pay the bride wealth payment.

### **Implications for Future Research**

This study gained insight on Hmong women's perception of bride wealth practices; however, further research is necessary to fully understand the motivations and factors that help contribute to the practice of bride wealth. In addition, more areas of statistics should be collected on Hmong marriages such as the type of marriages, marital procedures, and an in depth research on what the Hmong community would term the practice instead of the western given term, bride wealth. Furthermore, future research is necessary to explore the perceptions of Hmong men on how they perceive bride wealth since their families are the main source of monetary exchange within Hmong bride wealth practices.

## **Implications for Social Work Practice**

The purpose of this research was to explore how Hmong women understood bride wealth practices specific to the Hmong community with regards to the overall satisfaction within Hmong marriages and any mental health implications. Even though there is not a strong indicator from the findings that suggest Hmong women have mental health distress due to the Hmong bride wealth practice, it is still important that social workers are sensitive to cultural and ethnic diversity among Hmong individuals. The National Association of Social Workers' (NASW) Code of Ethics calls social workers to be culturally competent in providing services to clients from diverse backgrounds. The Code of Ethics states that:

Social workers should obtain education about and seek to understand the nature of social diversity and the oppression with respect to race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, marital status, political belief, religion, immigration status, and mental or physical disability.

(NASW, 2008; section 1.05)

With that being said, this study provides social workers with insight on how to approach work with individuals within the Hmong community. This is especially important for school social workers and mental health professionals in their work with Hmong adolescents who may face issues with their cultural identity. The findings suggest that as young Hmong women, the participants experienced a more negative understanding of bride wealth practices; therefore, school social workers and mental health professionals may have to help Hmong adolescents in their journey of learning more about their culture.



Social workers also need to consider the impact that social learning theory has on the Hmong culture. It is important to note that many young and emerging Hmong individuals often times have one foot in each world, and struggle with biculturalism. Therefore, in utilizing the social learning theory, social workers can help Hmong individuals understand how their perceptions are shaped due to their unique experiences. Social workers value individuals as being their own experts; therefore, having the cultural capacity to work alongside all individuals will be important to utilize when working with the Hmong.

### **Conclusion**

According to the 2010 Census, there are roughly 260,000 Hmong people living in the U.S. (Hmong American Partnership, 2010; Pfeifer, Sullivan, Yang, & Yang, 2013). With the ever increasing Hmong population, social workers need to realize the importance of understanding the Hmong culture as it relates to the overall community. There is now a shift in the Hmong community where some Hmong women and men are changing their understanding regarding bride wealth practices. It is not surprising that many Hmong families now are choosing to adapt the traditional Hmong bride wealth practice into something that makes sense for them and their children. Regardless of the changes made to the practice, it is crucial that social workers continue to respond to cultural competence and social justice, and help young Hmong individuals define their cultural identity.

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## Appendix A

### **Participants needed for Graduate Research on Hmong bride wealth practices!**

I am looking for Hmong women, who are 18 years and older who are or have been married, to interview about how you perceive Hmong marriage practices. You do not have to be married in the traditional Hmong culture, but you do have to be married or have been married. Participants also need to be able to speak English or Hmong.

Your thoughts and opinions matter! Your experiences can contribute to research that will benefit social work practice in working with the Hmong community.

We will meet for about half an hour at a mutually agreed upon private setting in a public location. Questions that will be asked include inquiry about your marital status, marital relationship, age, family, mental health, and culture. Some examples of these questions may include: what type of marriage ceremony did you have (traditional/American), how you understand marriage procedures/rites, what you value in marriage, what you value about Hmong culture, and are there any mental health implications. All of your identifying information will be kept confidential. There is also a \$5 gift card for participants.

Research will be conducted by a social work graduate student, Elizabeth Soung, at St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas, and she will be working with faculty advisor Pa Der Vang, MSW, Ph.D., LICSW.

Elizabeth Soung can be reached at 651-329-5454 or by email at [soun7673@stthomas.edu](mailto:soun7673@stthomas.edu), and Pa Der Vang, MSW, Ph.D., LICSW can be reached at 651-690-8647 or [pdvang@stkate.edu](mailto:pdvang@stkate.edu).

Please consider calling and participating or passing it on to others who may be interested.

Thank you.

## Appendix B

### Bride wealth and its implications for Hmong women

#### INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

**Introduction:**

You are invited to participate in a research study investigating Hmong women's perception of bride wealth and its effect on their marriages. This study is being conducted by Elizabeth Soung, a graduate student at St. Catherine University under the supervision of Dr. Pa Der Vang, a faculty member in the School of Social Work. You were selected as a possible participant in this research because you were identified as being a Hmong woman who is married or has been married. Please read this form and ask questions before you agree to be in the study.

**Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is to investigate how Hmong women perceive or understand bride wealth practices and how this affects their overall marriage satisfaction, and their mental health. Approximately 8-12 people are expected to participate in this research.

**Procedures:**

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to do the following things: read and sign this consent form, meet with me for a one-time 30-45 minute interview in a mutually agreed upon private setting in a public location (e.g. conference room in a public library), answer questions focused on your thoughts and experiences in regards to your wedding and marriage, which will also be recorded for research purposes. Additional questions may be asked to gain clarification.

**Risks and Benefits of being in the study:**

The only risk this study offers is the potential emotional distress due to talking about sensitive subjects. Participants will be reminded that they can stop the interview at any time. The participant also may choose not to answer any question(s) if they are uncomfortable. Resource information will be provided at the end of the interview in case you decide you need it.

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this research.

**Compensation:**

If you participate, even if you only answer half of the questions asked, you will receive a \$5 gift card after completing the interview.

**Confidentiality:**

Any information obtained in connection with this research study that can be identified with you will be disclosed only with your permission; your results will be kept confidential. In any written or verbal presentations of reports or publications, no one will be identified or identifiable.

I will keep the research results and recorded audio data in a locked file cabinet in my home and/or stored in a password protected computer. Only my advisor and I will have access to the records while I work on this project. I will finish analyzing the data by May 18, 2014. I will then destroy all original reports and identifying information that can be linked back to you. All audio recordings will be locked in a file cabinet and will also be destroyed along with transcripts by June 1, 2015.

**Voluntary nature of the study:**

Participation in this research study is completely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relations with St. Catherine University or the University of St. Thomas in any way. If you decide to participate, you are free to stop at any time without affecting these relationships. If you do withdraw, you also understand that you will not receive the \$5 gift card.

**Contacts and questions:**

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me, Elizabeth Soung, at 651-329-5454 or email me at [soun7673@stthomas.edu](mailto:soun7673@stthomas.edu). You may ask questions now, or if you have any additional questions later, the faculty advisor Dr. Pa Der Vang 651-690-8647 or [pdivang@stkate.edu](mailto:pdivang@stkate.edu), will be happy to answer them. If you have other questions or concerns regarding the study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you may also contact Dr. John Schmitt, Chair of the St. Catherine University Institutional Review Board, at (651) 690-7739 or [jsschmitt@stkate.edu](mailto:jsschmitt@stkate.edu).

You may keep a copy of this form for your records.

**Statement of Consent:**

You are making a decision whether or not to participate. Your signature indicates that you have read this information and your questions have been answered. Even after signing this form, please know that you may withdraw from the study. I also understand the researcher has the right to withdraw me from the study at any time.

---

I consent to participate in the study and I agree to be audio recorded for research purposes.

---



Signature of Participant

Date

---

Signature of Researcher

Date

## Appendix C

### Interview Guide

Name of Interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_

Time of interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Location of interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Opening script:

Hi, my name is Elizabeth Soung. I am a Master of Social Work student at St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas. I am conducting a research project for the completion of my clinical research paper and would like for your participation. Participation includes a one-time 30-45 minute in-person interview with me. The questions asked in the interview will pertain to your opinions on bride wealth in weddings, your relationship with your spouse, and how this impacts your mental health.

The consent form will discuss the research and the protection of your information in its entirety. You have the option to choose to participate in this study and your decision on whether or not to participate will not affect your future relations with St. Catherine University or the University of St. Thomas in any way. If you decide to participate, you are free to stop at any time without affecting these relationships.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me. You may ask questions now, or if you have any additional questions later, my faculty advisor, Dr. Pa Der Vang, will be happy to answer them. If you have other questions or concerns regarding the study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you may also contact Dr. John Schmitt, Chair of the St. Catherine University Institutional Review Board. My contact information along with my advisor and the Chair of the St. Catherine University Institutional Review Board are listed on the consent form given to you.

Are you willing to be a participant in this research?

If yes: By signing this consent form, you are consenting to participate in the study and agree to be audio recorded for research purposes. Your signature indicates that you have read this information and your questions have been answered. Even after signing this form, please know that you may withdraw from the study.

Here is a copy of this form for your records.

If no: Thank you for your time and consideration. Have a great day!

### Guiding questions:

The first set of questions will provide me with some demographic information about yourself.

1. What is your marital status? How long?
  - a. If married, are you legally married?
  - b. How old were you when you got married?
2. Do you identify as being Hmong? Or of Hmong decent?
3. What is your age? How old are you?
4. What race or ethnicity is your spouse?
5. In what country were you born?
  - a. At what age did you come to the U.S.? What year was that?
6. In what country were you raised?
7. What is your highest level of education?
8. Do you have any children? How many? Their age(s)?
9. What is your religion, if any?

The next set of questions will be asked about your understanding, perception, and opinion on bride wealth practices (Hmong weddings), and how this affects your relationship with your spouse, or ex-spouse. In addition to how this affects your mental health.

1. Tell me what you know about Hmong weddings or kev ua tshoob ua kos?
  - a. Or what is your opinion on it?
2. Tell me what you know about bride wealth practices? How do you define it?
  - a. How do you see (perceive) it?
3. What do you think the intentions of the bride wealth practices are? What values are embedded in these practices?
4. How was your wedding conducted in terms of the procedures, rites or practices used?
  - a. Traditional?
    - i. Use of mej koob (negotiator), other roles?
    - ii. What was your role during the wedding? Did you understand it at that time?
    - iii. Voluntary? Forced?
    - iv. Why did you choose this route? Significance?
  - b. American?
    - i. How?
    - ii. Why this route?
    - iii. Significance?

5. Do you think (practicing or not practicing) the Hmong bride wealth affected/affects your relationship with your husband? In what ways?
  - a. How does your understanding of bride wealth affect your dynamics in your relationship with your spouse?
    - i. How do you understand it to affect your relationship?
    - ii. Is gender role expectation ever brought up in your relationship?
    - iii. Is inter-clan relationships ever brought up in your relationship?
6. Overall, how satisfied are you in your marriage?
  - a. What components do you think are important in defining the overall quality of marriage?
  - b. What do you value in a marriage? What are some values you that you see in marriage?
7. What values, traditions, or practices within Hmong wedding practices should be reformed? If any. Please provide an example.
8. Does your understanding of bride wealth in any way affect your mental health? How so?
  - a. Does the practice cause any strain in your relationship
  - b. Evoke any emotions?
  - c. How does that apply to your own identities as a Hmong woman?
  - d. What are some distress that you feel when you talk about bride wealth and what it means to you?
9. If you could, would you do it again?

Debriefing:

This brings us to the end of the interview. I have a few more questions to ask you in closing.

In participating in my research today, do you have any questions for me?

Was there anything that was unclear in my research and in the interview?

Did you feel suspicious at any time during the interview?

Do you feel at least as okay as when you first came to meet me? Are you feeling distress in any way due to the interview?

What future suggestions do you have for improving my research?

Closing script:

Thank you for taking your time to help me with my research project. The information that you have share has been really helpful. If you have any further questions for me, please ask them now.

I would like to ask you for permission to contact you in the future if I need more clarification on your answers, would you be okay with me contacting you?

Thank you again. Have a great rest of the day!