

# ***Hmong Youth and Mediated Agency: A Contextual and Gendered Response to Assimilation***

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## **Abstract**

Through surveys and in-depth interviews with second-generation Hmong youth from Sacramento, CA, my research shows the gendered experiences and responses of Hmong youth to assimilation and discrimination. I employ the concept of “mediated agency,” to describe the active engagement of Hmong youth in their adjustment as youth are reacting to power and discrimination that vary in experience and outcome for boys and girls. The mechanism of racial discrimination works in gendered ways that initiate responses from youth that include risk, acts of violence, and resistance. In the face of exclusion, in which their ethnic pride, survival, and masculinity are threatened or denied, Hmong male youth engage in physical violence and gang formation for protection, to maintain their ethnic pride and dignity, and to assert their masculinity. The assimilation literature simplifies and normalizes discrimination in the receiving society and its impact on immigrant youth adjustment by focusing more on how immigrants can overcome discrimination through mobility or economic success. In contrast, my research highlights the gendered character of discrimination to show that race continues to shape the realities of immigrant youth and works to block their full integration into American society, particularly for the males, even when they employ the ethics of hard work and education, taught and instilled by their immigrant parents and ethnic community.

My research also contributes a gendered, context-specific account of assimilation among immigrant youth. Hmong youth maneuver between the traditional and assimilated in specific contexts and encounter multiple areas of conflict and tension in the process that initiate differing responses among boys and girls. With harsher cultural restraints and judgment placed on girls, they encounter more areas of conflict in the process of maneuvering between the traditional and assimilated. They respond with varying levels of behaviors and orientations that include some traditional elements, assimilation to mainstream culture and under some conditions resistance that are seen as “oppositional” by the Hmong community and dominant society. With the boys, they have more room to maneuver between the traditional and assimilated and thus have less areas of conflict and respond with less complicated behaviors and orientations than the girls. With the girls, we can see the strong influence of gendered roles and expectations on their choices and opportunities, demonstrating that the process of immigrant youth adjustment and response is a highly gendered experience. My contribution on gender extends the notion of segmented assimilation for understanding immigrant integration, which misses a discussion of gendered experiences and responses to assimilation.