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*The Counseling Psychologist* 2003; 31; 564  
DOI: 10.1177/0011000003256350

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**Toward a Multicultural Positive Psychology:  
Indigenous Forgiveness and Hmong Culture**

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*The growing field of positive psychology is encouraging advances in the scientific research of developmental strengths and virtues like forgiveness. However, multicultural and indigenous psychology perspectives can raise valuable questions about positive psychology and the relationship between cultural particularity and virtues like forgiveness. In this article, the authors consider the meaning of virtue in psychology and then focus on the culturally embedded nature of forgiveness as a virtue. They illustrate the value of an indigenous psychology approach by describing some of the dynamics related to conflict resolution and forgiveness in traditional Hmong culture. They then consider ways forgiveness research and intervention might need to be contextualized with Hmong Americans.*

The topic of forgiveness has generated a long history of philosophical (R. C. Roberts, 1995) and diverse religious reflection (see McCullough & Worthington, 1999; Rye et al., 2000). People of diverse cultures and world religions have considered forgiveness a virtue or strength of character. Forgiveness has also generated interest among contemporary researchers and clinicians in the field of psychology (for reviews, see Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Fincham, 2000; McCullough, Exline, & Baumeister, 1998; McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000; Worthington & Wade, 1999). Much of the interest in psychology has focused on interpersonal forgiveness

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We thank members of Hmong communities in the United States and beyond who helped us with fieldwork that contributed to this project. In particular, we greatly appreciate the assistance of Dr. Gary Y. Lee, T. Cher Moua, Christopher Thao, Leng Xiong, and Dr. Z. Blong Xiong. This article was supported in part by a grant from the Bethel Seminary Faculty Cross-Cultural Fund. Portions of this manuscript were presented in P. C. Hill and S. J. Sandage (Cochairs), *Forgiveness as Positive Science: Theory, Research, and Clinical Applications*, symposium conducted at the annual convention of the American Psychological Association, San Francisco, August 2001. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Steven J. Sandage, Ph.D., Bethel Seminary, 3949 Bethel Dr., St Paul, MN 55112; e-mail: s-sandage@bethel.edu.

THE COUNSELING PSYCHOLOGIST, Vol. 31 No. 5, September 2003 564-592

DOI: 10.1177/0011000003256350

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as one way individuals, couples, and families try to cope with hurt and resentment following a relational conflict or injury.

Various psychological definitions of forgiveness have been offered (e.g., see Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; McCullough et al., 2000), but most have focused on forgiveness as a process of an individual moving past resentment toward a specific offender for some wrongdoing or relational injury. For example, McCullough (2001) offered one psychological definition of forgiveness as a "prosocial" transformation in motivations toward an offender where motivations become less vengeful and avoidant and more benevolent (p. 194). Surveys of mental health professionals have found that a majority of clinicians agree that (a) forgiveness frequently arises as an issue in therapy and (b) forgiveness can be therapeutic for some clients (Konstam, Marx, Schurer, Lombardo, & Harrington, 2002).

Scientific literatures on forgiveness are growing rapidly across a number of areas of counseling and psychology. For example, Enright's program of research on the development of cognitive reasoning about forgiveness has suggested important developmental and cross-sectional differences in how individuals approach the possibility of forgiving others (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000). Numerous studies have also tested psychoeducational group interventions to promote forgiveness, primarily with college undergraduates (for a review and meta-analysis, see Worthington, Sandage, & Berry, 2000; also, see Rye & Pargament, 2002). There is initial empirical evidence that a personality disposition toward practicing forgiveness can be related to certain indices of physical and mental health (Berry & Worthington, 2001; Toussaint, Williams, Musick, & Everson, 2001; Witvliet, Ludwig, & Vander Laan, 2001). Research on forgiveness has led to its inclusion in emerging lists of psychological strengths or virtues that are part of the positive psychology initiatives (McCullough & Witvliet, 2002; Seligman, 2002).

### **FORGIVENESS AND MULTICULTURAL POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY**

Martin Seligman (1999; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) has helped galvanize scholarly initiatives for further developing a positive psychology of strengths and virtues. Seligman suggested that in addition to treating mental illness, psychology should recover the two other missions of facilitating "the good life" and nurturing talent or genius. An emphasis on the strengths of human development is to be applauded, particularly by many in fields like counseling psychology, school counseling, marriage and family therapy, and social work, which all have a long history of emphasizing developmental

strengths. A focus on developmental strengths and health-producing assets, what Super (1955) referred to as *hygiology*, has been a unifying theme throughout the history of counseling psychology as a specialty area long before Seligman's positive psychology initiatives (Gelso & Fretz, 2001).

According to Seligman, an overarching goal for the two missions of positive psychology is to build human strengths and civic virtues (Seligman, 2002; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Seligman (1999) called for a taxonomy of the strengths or virtues that promote resilience and responsibility in individuals and families as a companion volume to the *DSM* taxonomy of psychopathologies. He also suggested that the field of psychology needs a better "I-We balance" with more focus on developing flourishing, positive, and just families and communities to balance the individualism of Western societies. Forgiveness is one of the strengths or virtues included under the rubric of positive psychology that might be related to both personal and relational health.

However, questions have been raised about the place of multicultural awareness within the agenda of positive psychology. Sandage and Hill (2001) affirmed the general goal of developing scientific research on constructs that represent positive psychology. But Sandage and Hill also drew on contextualist perspectives in the social sciences in expressing concern that theory and research on positive psychology consider the important role of culture and other systemic factors that shape what is considered virtuous in a given cultural context. Likewise, Lopez et al. (2002) pointed out that most positive psychology research has studied predominantly White populations and went on to argue that positive psychology needs to be "placed in a multicultural context" and should involve "valuing diverse meanings of the good life" and optimal human functioning (p. 700). Lamb (2002) has criticized forgiveness researchers, in particular, for a lack of attention to diverse social and cultural contexts (also, see Sandage & Wiens, 2001). A *multicultural* positive psychology will require that researchers and clinicians explore the roles of cultural and contextual factors in the diverse expressions of virtues such as forgiveness.

In this article, we will start by defining virtue and relate the constructs of virtue and forgiveness. We then describe the cultural embeddedness of virtues like forgiveness and the value of an indigenous psychology approach. We chose to focus on forgiveness in this article because psychological theory and research related to forgiveness is rapidly accumulating, yet little attention has been given to cultural variations in forgiveness. Also, forgiveness is a construct that was of interest to Hmong professionals who agreed to consult with us on this project. We illustrate an indigenous psychology approach with the construct of forgiveness by describing Hmong approaches to conflict resolution, and we consider ways forgiveness interventions might need to be

contextualized for Hmong communities in the United States. We chose to focus on Hmong culture because it is a collectivistic culture far different from Western culture, and it will thus provide a useful contrast because most of the available psychological literature on forgiveness is Western and individualistic in cultural orientation. Hmong Americans also represent a significantly underserved population. Empirical studies and applied articles related to Hmong culture and Hmong Americans are few. Cerhan (1990) provided an overview of Hmong culture for mental health professionals, but a well-developed literature on counseling and intervention from the perspective of Hmong culture has not yet emerged. Furthermore, many Hmong Americans practice animism and ancestor worship, which are forms of spirituality and religiosity that have not been considered in psychological literature on forgiveness (for an overview of forgiveness and other world religions, see Rye et al., 2000). We hope this article contributes to a growing dialogue between educational and mental health professionals and Hmong and other ethnic communities about culturally contextualized approaches to counseling and intervention related to forgiveness and other virtues.

## FORGIVENESS AS VIRTUE

### Defining Virtue

Virtues are generally understood as embodied traits of character (Seligman, 2002), not simply moral actions, values, or principles (Doherty, 1995). McCullough and Snyder (2000) suggested that character represents the structure of the human psyche that results from life experience, and virtues represent specific expressions of a person's character. Historically, virtues have been defined as qualities or strengths of human development and excellence that enhance the capacity to flourish and live life well, to live "the good life" (Cawley, Martin, & Johnson, 2000; Meara, Schmidt, & Day, 1996; Seligman & Peterson, in press). Obviously, definitions of "the good life" are value-laden and influenced by cultural context, a point we will address shortly.

The concept of virtue lost favor in modern social science because of the moral valence of virtue language. The more individualistic and consumer-oriented language of "values" and "personality" seemingly offered social scientists morally neutral terminology for scientific inquiry and clinical practice (Leahey, 1999). For example, Allport and Odbert's (1936) cataloguing of 18,000 personality traits excluded evaluative or "moral" traits (e.g., conscientiousness) on the basis of Allport's later (1937) claim that personality, understood as "character devaluated" (p. 52), would be unnecessarily en-

cumbered by an evaluative dimension. As McCullough and Snyder (2000) pointed out, the exclusion of virtue language was probably a necessary transition in psychology but one that has left numerous classical human strengths relatively unexamined in psychological research (also, see Cawley et al., 2000). Postpositivistic approaches to the philosophy of science and more recent ethical reflection on the practice of psychology (Prilleltensky, 1997; Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999) and psychotherapy (Doherty, 1995; Tjeltveit, 1999) have revealed the unavoidable moral dimensions of psychology. This growing awareness of the moral dimension of psychological and sociological theory should serve to remove some of the modernistic ideological barriers to scientific research on virtue constructs (e.g., forgiveness, wisdom, humility, etc.) that have previously been banished to the realm of the subjectively moral.

A virtue-oriented approach in psychology can provide a helpful complement to the more cognitive and individualistic Kohlbergian approach that has dominated moral development in the past (Cawley et al., 2000). Many cultural and religious traditions promote virtues like forgiveness as expressions of spirituality with sacred meaning (Pargament & Mahoney, 2002), so the study of virtues will often involve investigating connections between moral, spiritual, and cultural meanings.

The differences between the terms *strength* and *virtue* appear to still be unclear in positive psychology literature and are used somewhat interchangeably. Seligman and Peterson (in press) outlined seven criteria they are using for their taxonomy of strengths or virtues. To be considered a strength/virtue, a construct must be (a) trait-like (i.e., relatively stable across time and situation), (b) valued in its own right rather than simply as a means to other ends, (c) commonly desired by parents for their children, (d) cultivated and ritualized by social and cultural institutions, (e) exemplified in real or mythical cultural role models, (f) exemplified in prodigies who demonstrate significant levels of the strength or virtue, and (g) valued almost universally.

Sandage and Hill (2001) also articulated an outline of the construct of virtue by drawing on moral philosophy and recent social science research related to virtue. In contrast to Seligman and Peterson (in press), they were not trying to identify specific criteria for a construct to be considered a virtue. Rather, they suggested six dimensions for the definition of virtue. These included the understanding that virtues (a) integrate ethics and health, (b) are embodied traits of character, (c) are sources of human strength and resilience, (d) are embedded within a cultural context and community, (e) contribute to a sense of meaningful life purpose, and (f) are grounded in the cognitive capacity for wisdom. Perhaps the most significant point of tension is whether virtues are construed as universal or culturally embedded, although the universal and culturally embedded categories are not necessarily mutually

exclusive. It seems possible that a particular virtue (e.g., wisdom, justice, gratitude, compassion, fortitude, or forgiveness) might be universally valued but still locally embedded in specific cultural institutions and rituals. Virtue constructs like forgiveness might be expressed or even defined differently in various cultural contexts and communities. The possibility that some virtues could be valued universally while also culturally embedded is analogous to the cross-cultural study of psychopathology and the way in which symptoms of depression appear across cultures while the meanings associated with those symptoms are socially constructed in diverse ways. These cultural differences could hold important implications for contextualizing psychological interventions aimed at facilitating forgiveness and other virtues (Sandage & Wiens, 2001).

### **The Virtue of Forgiveness**

The question as to whether forgiveness is actually a virtue or strength of human development raises other philosophical, cultural, and empirical questions. Some therapists have questioned whether certain expressions of forgiveness represent immature defense mechanisms rather than healthy traits of mature functioning. For example, a decision to forgive on the basis of a fear to confront, an unwillingness to acknowledge one's own anger (see Haaken, 2002), or a desire to overlook principled beliefs in the name of personal ease suggests that forgiveness is not always virtuous or a strength. Important concerns have been raised about the relationship between justice and forgiveness (see Exline, Worthington, Hill, & McCullough, in press), particularly for victims of abuse and trauma (Lamb, 2002). For instance, at least one empirical study (Katz, Street, & Arias, 1997) has validated concerns about forgiving abusers by finding that participants who were more willing to forgive their partners for physical abuse were also more likely to remain in the abusive relationship.

These questions about the health and justice of forgiveness necessitate clarity in definitions and models of forgiveness, and construals of forgiveness that promote denial, disempowerment, or injustice and reward an unwillingness to face discomfiting decisions would seem inconsistent with the health-promoting criteria of the virtue construct. From a philosophical perspective, R. C. Roberts (1995) has suggested that the virtuous forgiver is characterized by compassion and humility but also a sense of justice and self-respect. He further suggested that "the forgiving person is not an indiscriminate forgiver; she may sometimes properly hold onto her anger" (p. 290). The wisdom of virtue is knowing when and how to hold various virtues, such as forgiveness and justice, in a healthy balance.



Empirical research on forgiveness has suggested some initial support for including forgiveness in a taxonomy of virtues. First, construct validity is emerging for two different measures of a trait-like disposition to forgive others (Berry, Worthington, Parrott, O'Connor, & Wade, 2001; McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002). As we suggested earlier, philosophical accounts of virtue have generally construed virtues as characterological or trait-like dispositions rather than transient states or behaviors subject to change according to the situation. Trait-like dispositional measures of forgiveness will be necessary for investigating how forgiveness might function as a psychological virtue. Second, forgiveness may involve other virtuous characteristics. For example, forgivingness may require the capability to transcend natural tendencies toward revenge and/or avoidance, thus utilizing the "moral muscle" of self-control (Baumeister & Exline, 1999, p. 1163). Third, forgiveness often leads to the restoration of relational closeness following a transgression, thus helping people maintain a more stable network of supportive relationships (McCullough, 2000). Fourth, there is initial evidence that forgiving others is positively correlated with certain indices of physical and mental health (Berry & Worthington, 2001; Maltby, Macaskill, & Day, 2001; Seybold, Hill, Neumann, & Chi, 2001; Toussaint et al., 2001; Witvliet, 2001). Virtues can generate altruism or personal sacrifice but should also be traits that generally promote the health of both individuals and communities.

The prosocial emphasis of McCullough's (2001) definition and model of forgiveness mentioned earlier is also consistent with a virtue orientation toward relational and communal well-being. Furthermore, when reviewing the literature, McCullough and Witvliet (2002) made the case that prosocial transformation is the key element of virtually all conceptualizations of forgiveness. Yet what is "prosocial" and how one displays prosocial responses through thought, intention, and behavior will be heavily influenced by social and cultural underpinnings. Yet forgiveness can also be defined in a more individualistic fashion that is harder to integrate with the construct of virtue. One of the main points of the current article is that psychological definitions and models of forgiveness will be infused with cultural and philosophical assumptions, and later we will attempt to illustrate ways in which forgiveness is understood within Hmong culture as an example of the cultural embeddedness of forgiveness.

### **Virtue as an Indigenous Concept**

A growing number of psychologists recognize that a more complete understanding of the individual must take into account alternative cultural and indigenous psychologies (see Gergen, Gulerce, Lock, & Misra, 1996;



Greenfield, 2000; Kim, Park, & Park, 2000; Misra, 1999; Shweder, 2000); that is, there must be sufficient congruity between the studied psychological phenomenon in its sociocultural context and the investigators' theory and methodology in studying said phenomenon. Underlying this indigenous psychology perspective is the insight that psychological processes are grounded in particular sociocultural and historical contexts that may account for culture-specific behavior. In contrast, a cross-cultural approach tests the generality of existing psychological theory, ostensibly for the purpose of developing a universal model of human behavior, across different cultural contexts (Miller, 2002).

Cultures around the world and throughout history have generated various moral psychologies that included catalogues of virtues or character traits of moral excellence (MacIntyre, 1984; Schimmel, 1997). Virtues are necessarily embedded in a cultural context, so descriptions or catalogues of virtue will differ depending on whether one is considering the virtue systems of Aristotle, Theravada Buddhism, traditional African cultures, Confucius, Aquinas, Stoicism, Jane Austen, or the many other cultural or religious virtue systems (Fowers, 2001; MacIntyre, 1984). Ryff and Singer (1998) illustrated the role of culture in shaping indigenous views of positive human health and virtue by offering a summary list of some traditional African virtues, including beneficence to one's community, improvisation, forgiveness, and justice. For some racial and cultural groups, such as African Americans, virtues link psychological and communal strengths of resilience, spirituality, and political consciousness (S. K. Roberts, 1999). R. C. Roberts (1988; also, see Schimmel, 1997) has even suggested that many psychotherapies can be viewed as contemporary "virtue systems" that, like the older systems of virtue ethics, offer (a) a catalog of virtues or traits of healthy development, (b) an understanding of human nature and motivation, (c) a system for diagnosing human problems or vices, and (d) a set of disciplines for effecting change in persons.

The application of virtue ethics to the more specific domain of ethics in counseling psychology has been previously considered and debated in *The Counseling Psychologist* (Ibrahim, 1996; Meara et al., 1996; Vasquez, 1996). Both Ibrahim (1996) and Vasquez (1996) questioned the relationship between virtue ethics and multicultural diversity. For some, the term *virtue* might be equated with a social and political conservatism or hegemony that fails to acknowledge and value diverse understandings of virtue across differing ethnic and religious communities. Volf (1996) has argued from sociopolitical and theological perspectives that the tendency to deny cultural differences and to thereby force assimilation to the dominant culture is one form of social exclusion. Exclusively universal or *etic* approaches to tax-

onomies of virtue that are not accompanied by efforts to also explore local, indigenous, and contextual understandings risk violating social justice. The ability to acknowledge one's own ethnic and religious traditions regarding virtue (or "the good life") and resist social injustice while also attempting to embrace *the other* who is different from oneself seems to represent several characteristics of mature multicultural development (Volf, 1996).

Attending to the role of ecological and sociocultural contexts in shaping diverse understandings of virtue requires the dialectical reasoning that Hanna, Bemak, and Chung (1999) associated with wisdom. Like Hanna et al., we suggest the development of contextual wisdom is necessary for effective counseling and intervention with diverse populations. Clients and students from various ethnic and religious backgrounds will bring diverse virtue systems into educational and mental health settings. An indigenous psychology of virtues like forgiveness that starts with a qualitative or "thick" description (Fowers, 2001) by attempting to understand the ecological and sociocultural context as well as the uniqueness of the client or student is vital for competent counseling practice given the diverse contexts that influence construals of virtue.

### **Indigenous Forgiveness**

We have argued that a primary challenge for a positive psychology of forgiveness and other virtues is that of multicultural awareness of *difference*. In the specific area of virtue, the multicultural questions could include (a) Whose view of morality or taxonomy of virtues will be privileged? (b) Who will benefit from certain construals of "virtue" or "strength?" (c) How can research on diverse construals of virtue and "the good life" be culturally contextualized? As systems-oriented researchers have demonstrated that approaches to family resilience differ across ethnic groups (McCubbin, Thompson, Thompson, & Fromer, 1998), so must positive psychologists ask which cultural views of virtues like forgiveness risk being overlooked or ignored.

There has been limited empirical research on forgiveness published to date that has investigated (a) forgiveness in non-Western contexts (for valuable exceptions, see Azar & Mullet, 2001; Azar, Mullet, & Vinsonneau, 1999; Huang & Enright, 2000; Park & Enright, 1997; Takaku, Weiner, & Ohbuchi, 2001; Temoshok & Chandra, 2000) or (b) ethnic or cultural variables related to forgiveness. To summarize the limited body of work, it appears the between-group differences in overall levels of forgiveness may not be as significant as (a) cultural differences in meanings and motivations for forgiveness and (b) cross-sectional differences in forgiveness within specific ethnic

groups. However, many scientific questions relating forgiveness to ethnic and cultural variables remain unexplored. McCullough et al. (2000) noted the significance of this omission, stating,

The field [of forgiveness research] still lacks a thorough understanding of the influences of religion, culture, and life situation on people's understandings and experiences of forgiveness. Without addressing religious, cultural, and situational variations, scientific notions of forgiveness are likely to be disconnected from lived experience. (p. 10)

McCullough et al.'s (2000) concern is especially relevant to the applied area of forgiveness interventions, where clients and research participants work on the sensitive issues of personal hurts and offenses. There is a paucity of literature addressing potential cultural differences in approaches to forgiveness-related issues (e.g., the role of apology) or in ways of contextualizing available models of forgiveness for different cultural groups (Al-Khanji, 2001; DiBlasio, 2001). One example of the danger of monocultural approaches to forgiveness is that highly urbanized Western cultures tend to construe conflict as situational with open options for dealing with a specific individual (Augsburger, 1992). Not surprisingly, most of the group forgiveness studies to date have followed this individualistic and situational model by using situational measures of forgiveness and focusing on a specific individual offender (Worthington et al., 2000). Eastern and less urbanized cultures tend to construe conflict within the communal context of certain social norms and guidelines. Therefore, forgiveness (or a lack thereof) in those contexts would be less situationally defined and more culturally proscribed.

We will illustrate the importance of attending to the particularities of culture and forgiveness by considering some relevant dynamics in traditional Hmong culture. There is evidence for the "metaphorical nonequivalence" of applying or translating Western psychological and mental health concepts and instruments with Hmong Americans (Dunnigan, McNall, & Mortimer, 1993). For example, English metaphorical language for depression includes "feeling blue" or "heavyhearted," while Hmong psychological metaphors frequently use modifiers with the word for liver (e.g., "difficult liver" can mean depression) (Dunnigan et al., 1993). A Hmong person who is feeling angry and bitter can be described as suffering from "rotten liver" using traditional Hmong linguistic devices. The implication is that there could be profound linguistic, metaphorical, cultural, and spiritual differences in how various ethnic groups, like the Hmong, understand forgiveness. While Hmong culture has some similarities to other Southeast Asian cultures, there are also unique features and important within-group differences to consider. We will offer a brief overview of the Hmong community in the United States and

describe some important contours of traditional Hmong culture that can shape Hmong approaches to interpersonal conflict and forgiveness.

## HMONG FORGIVENESS

### Hmong Culture

The Hmong are an ethnic group that has lived primarily in mountainous regions of Southeastern Asia for thousands of years (Chan, 1994). During the early 1800s, political oppression in China forced the Hmong to migrate into Burma, Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand, where some Hmong communities currently exist. During the 1960s and 1970s, the CIA recruited Hmong living in the highlands of Laos to fight against the communist North Vietnamese. Communists gained control of Laos in 1975 and began persecuting the Hmong for their U.S. alliance, and many Hmong fled to refugee camps in Thailand. The United States eventually provided some aid to the Hmong and started resettling refugees, primarily in California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, which are the states currently with the largest Hmong populations. U.S. Census estimates for 2000 suggest there are approximately 169,428 Hmong living in the United States (Pfeifer, 2000), which is a significant increase from a 1990 estimate of 94,439.

The Hmong in Laos have been characterized as a peaceful, preliterate, agrarian, and nomadic people who have traditionally valued communal interdependence and independence from outside authorities (Fadiman, 1997; Xiong & Tatum, 1999). In addition to the common immigrant challenges of acculturation and resettlement in the United States, the Hmong have faced nativistic racism (Hein, 2000). Hmong Americans have also demonstrated high levels of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Gates et al., 2000; Westermeyer, 1988; Westermeyer, Bouafuely-Kersey, & Her, 1997) and demoralization (Ying & Akutsu, 1997) resulting from the traumatic effects of war, torture, and frequent dislocation. Like all ethnic groups in the United States, Hmong Americans show significant within-group differences in acculturation and adjustment (Tsai, 2001). In this article, we focus on traditional Hmong cultural values related to forgiveness but do not intend to imply homogeneity of Hmong people in the United States or elsewhere.

In our review of the social science literature, we found no research specifically investigating Hmong culture and forgiveness. Several Hmong scholars and cultural informants confirmed that forgiveness has not been studied with Hmong populations. Therefore, we offer some tentative thoughts on the contextualization of forgiveness in Hmong culture based on related research

and fieldwork consultation with several Hmong therapists and cultural informants.

*Forgiveness* may not be a term with common equivalents in many Hmong communities. The Hmong phrase *thov txim* (pronounced in English like *thor tzee*) is probably more common and means to “ask for pardon or say you’re sorry.” Another term, *zam txim* (pronounced in English like *shja tzee*), is closer to what is often implied in psychological literatures by forgiving the offenses of another, but this Hmong term is reserved for forgiveness in close relationships such as between couples or parent-child relationships. Attempts to repair interpersonal conflict in the Hmong community might more commonly involve the use of language like restoring “respect” rather than the explicit term *forgiveness*. The language of “respect” and its role in forgiveness-like repair is connected to the restoration of social face, which we discuss shortly.

Four interrelated dimensions of Hmong culture and Hmong American social life are helpful for considering a contextualized understanding of forgiveness and relational repair. These include (a) spirituality, (b) collectivism, (c) third-party mediation, and (d) acculturation conflicts.

### Spirituality

Spirituality is central to the worldview of traditional Hmong culture, which combines animism and ancestor worship (Gates et al., 2000). Animism involves the belief that all “natural” objects have spirits and that the spiritual and natural realms are highly interactive. A significant portion of Hmong in the United States have converted from animism to Christianity (Gates et al., 2000), so there is spiritual and religious diversity in the Hmong American community. We focus on traditional animistic spirituality in this article, though Hmong Americans who are Christians or who identify with other religions might view forgiveness very differently. This latter point highlights the potential interactions of ethnicity and religion or spirituality in shaping understandings of virtues like forgiveness.

For traditional animistic Hmong, there are several types of spirits that can influence human life, including ancestral spirits, nature spirits, house spirits, and evil spirits (Bliatout, 1993). The primary attribution for suffering made by traditional Hmong is one of spiritual etiology (Fadiman, 1997; Johnson, 2002). A person or family that suffers from a physical or emotional problem or some other misfortune is thought to be experiencing a spiritual conflict. For example, various ceremonies and ritual sacrifices are performed to maintain the favor of ancestral spirits that can offer good fortune and protection from sickness. Ancestral spirits that are displeased can bring sickness, con-

flict, and bad luck. This could result from improper burial or funeral practices (e.g., sacrificing animals and burning incense) for ancestors or failure to pay debts to or for the deceased (Bliatout, 1993). Traditional Hmong often believe it is even possible that illness is due to the transgressions of ancestors (Fadiman, 1997). House spirits are also thought to be angered if a person from a different clan dies within one's house, and this could also lead to illness or misfortune (Bliatout, 1993). Rituals related to death are so important that a failure to inform the extended family of the deceased about the death is a significant offense that could result in a literal fine if the two families ever negotiate a marriage.

The cultural embeddedness of models of forgiveness is revealed in the fact that a common question considered by Western therapists and researchers interested in forgiveness is whether one can forgive a deceased relative for the sake of emotional well-being of the survivor. From an animistic Hmong worldview, the questions are much different and focus on how a family or clan can pay respect and guarantee they will, in a sense, be "forgiven" by the deceased to prevent calamity. This illustrates the way in which culture actually shapes the questions asked about a construct like forgiveness.

Traditional Hmong often consult a shaman for help with illness and other problems (Fadiman, 1997), which can also be due to a soul that is separated from the body as a result of fear, anger, or other causes (Johnson, 2002). The shaman is a healer who performs certain rituals and sacrifices and journeys into the spiritual realm to battle evil spirits and retrieve lost souls (Mottin, 1984). Shaman also perform rituals at Hmong family events and funerals. Interestingly, the calling to become a Hmong shaman starts with suffering some illness that represents the arrival of a healing spirit.

The animistic worldview of traditional Hmong is obviously very different from the dominant paradigms of Western medicine and psychology, which can create conflicts in health care and social service settings. Johnson (2002) conducted a multimethod ethnographic study with Hmong American patients at a primary care clinic and found that Hmong informants reported highly significant negative experiences with American health care professionals that involved a lack of intercultural communication. Fadiman (1997) powerfully chronicled the clash of cultural worldviews between a Hmong American family in California and their White public doctors. The family believed their little girl was suffering from soul loss, and the doctors treated her for epilepsy. The differences in worldview and the estranged communication between the doctors and the family contributed to tragedies at numerous levels. For instance, the family did not consistently comply with treatment guidelines for medicating the girl because the guidelines and rationale for medication did not fit the worldview of the Hmong family. Also, the rapport between the Hmong family and the largely White medical staff was often

poor and severely compromised by a lack of respect on the part of some doctors. Educational and mental health professionals and trainees could benefit from reading Fadiman's account and reflecting on both the interconnectedness of culture, virtue, and health as well as the potential problems that arise from a lack of culturally sensitive service delivery, such as a fragile therapeutic alliance and premature termination.

### **Collectivism**

Traditional Hmong culture is collectivistic (Gates et al., 2000; Xiong & Tatum, 1999), like many other Asian and non-Western groups. Younger generations of Hmong in America tend to be more acculturated and individualistic. At face value, individualism and collectivism appear to be unidimensional opposites. In reality, however, these two cultural orientations represent different dimensions (Rhee, Uleman, & Lee, 1996), rooted in alternative worldviews, that offer contrasting cultural and social patterns whereby different issues are made salient (Oyserman, Coon, & Kimmelmeier, 2002; Triandis, 1995). According to Triandis (1995), individualism is a social pattern that (a) involves individuals perceiving themselves as relatively independent of others; (b) emphasizes individual needs, rights, contracts, and attitudes; (c) gives priority to personal goals and boundaries over group goals and social identity; and (d) encourages rational cost-benefit analyses of social relationships. In contrast, collectivism is a social pattern that (a) involves individuals perceiving themselves as interdependent with others; (b) emphasizes social norms, obligations, and duties; (c) gives priority to family or group goals over personal goals; and (d) values social connectedness and commitment even when it is disadvantageous to individuals.

Some (e.g., Fiske, 2002; Miller, 2002) have argued that the individualism-collectivism conceptual framework is of limited predictive value. However, it is still quite useful in this analysis because forgiveness processes, as already noted, have been studied predominately in Western individualistic cultures. It is hoped that considering the role of forgiveness within a culture so different from Western individualism may help us understand the cultural embeddedness not only of forgiveness but of other psychological virtues or strengths as well. Furthermore, Hmong Americans, like many other ethnic groups with a recent immigration history, might fluidly shift between facets of both individualistic and collectivistic worldviews depending on the immediate context. For example, a 20-year-old, highly acculturated Hmong American college student might make an individual decision about whether to forgive a peer at college but also be involved in a separate clan ritual to mediate conflict in his or her extended family.



The differences in individualistic and collectivistic worldviews might also influence the ways differing ethnic communities approach interpersonal processes of conflict and forgiveness. For example, individualistic models of forgiveness would emphasize the personal health benefits of forgiving. From a collectivistic worldview, like that of traditional Hmong, forgiveness would only make sense if it benefited one's group or community. Individualistic models of forgiveness would also tend to construe forgiveness as a personal "decision" or "choice," while individuals in collectivistic cultures tend to operate according to strongly proscribed social norms.

In a related manner, Markus and Kitayama (1994) suggested that culture influences and shapes connections between emotions and social behavior. For example, emotions like shame, guilt, anger, and forgiveness can have very different meanings and social implications in collectivistic versus individualistic cultures. Communal or collectivistic cultures can be characterized by intersubjectivity, interdependent self-construals, and a privileging of awareness and attunement to collective self-esteem and the face needs of others. Individualistic cultures place more emphasis on individuality, personal subjectivity, and awareness of one's own feelings of self-esteem.

The very nature of interpersonal conflict and unforgiveness is also different in individualistic and collectivistic worldviews. What is common to both worldviews is that interpersonal conflict creates crises of social face. *Social face* refers to a person's sense of social worth or dignity. A *loss of face* involves a shameful or humiliating experience of being dishonored and disrespected before others. Efforts to save face can be directed at saving one's own face (i.e., self-face concern) or saving the face of others (i.e., other-face concern) (Triandis, 1995). Individualistic cultures promote self-face concern while collectivistic cultures promote both other- and self-face concern.

The tremendous emphasis in contemporary Western psychological literature on forgiving others and the relative paucity of literature on repentance (Exline & Baumeister, 2000) and seeking forgiveness from others (Sandage, Worthington, Hight, & Berry, 2000) highlight the Western emphasis on self-face concern above other-face concern. In contrast, traditional Hmong culture values both self- and other-face concern. Traditional Hmong value group harmony, so Hmong communities often attempt to contain conflict and loss of face to preserve group harmony (Gates et al., 2000). However, the Hmong emphasis on collectivism can mean that serious interpersonal offenses cause humiliation and loss of face not just for an individual but also for that person's community (i.e., family and clan). Therefore, it could be inappropriate to accept an offender's gesture of apology unless the offender performs a formal act of apology and restitution to "buy back" the loss of face for one's community (G. Y. Lee, personal communication, July, 2001<sup>1</sup>). In some contexts,

this can involve a formal ceremony that includes a meal and other rituals (see the Case Study section, below).

Hmong family boundaries are usually more porous than those of Euro-American families, and family conflict is often negotiated in the context of the extended family and clan. The well-organized and influential clan system among Hmong in America is rather unique even among recent immigrant groups. Clan leaders help families make decisions and mediate family conflicts. Danes, O'Donnell, and Sakulnamarka (1993) conducted a study with 60 middle-generation Hmong married couples in the Twin Cities area. When asked, "Who is involved in decisions about family conflict?" roughly 48% of the husbands and 32% of the wives said the clan was involved. When asked, "Who should be involved in decisions about family conflict?" roughly 44% of the wives and 32% of the husbands said the clan should be involved. This suggests that attempts to repair relational conflicts in Hmong communities frequently move beyond dyads to formally involve wider social networks.

### **Third-Party Mediation**

Collectivistic groups often utilize (or *triangulate*) third-party mediators to negotiate conflicts and the crucial dynamics of honor and face (Augsburger, 1992). This is certainly true with traditional Hmong culture (Gates et al., 2000), and Hmong-American communities usually have well-developed procedures and rituals for third-party mediators in dealing with conflict. This is not to suggest that Hmong families or clans will always employ third parties. In fact, one Hmong American therapist reported that he felt the underutilization of third parties was a major problem and hindered forgiveness for Hmong families he worked with clinically (L. Xiong, personal communication, March, 2002<sup>2</sup>). Conversely, Yang (2002) has cautioned that the leadership structure of the Hmong clan system is often male-dominated and that clan-mediated decisions can be disadvantageous to Hmong women.

The Hmong emphasis on third-party mediation is a significant divergence from common Western therapeutic models of conflict resolution. Triangulation is often considered a very dangerous systemic dynamic among therapists trained in Western models of psychotherapy. Available models of forgiveness rarely address the potential role of third-party cultural mediators in negotiating forgiveness clinically or psychoeducationally. A more traditional Hmong person who participates in therapy or a psychoeducational forgiveness group might find it strange if forgiveness is simply construed as an intrapsychic decision or process, and vital cultural resources might be overlooked. In some cases, enlisting the assistance of a clan leader might help therapists working with Hmong families if clients approve of such a move (Gates et al., 2000).

As described earlier, some third-party mediators include shaman who perform rituals and enter the spirit world to heal illnesses and resolve conflicts with spirits. This provides a rough parallel to ways in which people of numerous religious traditions might work on interpersonal conflicts and forgiveness with the help of clergy or a religious leader. However, the animal sacrifices employed by many Hmong shaman can be inconvenient and expensive in America, adding to the stress of acculturation.

### **Acculturation Conflicts**

Like other immigrant and refugee groups, Hmong American families face many challenges of acculturation (Faderman, 1998; Tsai, 2001; Xiong & Tatum, 1999). For example, the younger generations usually develop a better grasp of both the English language and the dominant American customs than the older, more traditional generations. Faderman's (1998) qualitative study of Hmong acculturation experiences in America poignantly narrates the painful conflicts between older Hmong who sometimes fear the loss of their traditional way of life and younger Hmong who feel a pressure to adapt to the dominant culture to succeed.

Acculturation challenges can shape the context of family conflict and what might be considered "unforgiveness" or disrespect. Again, psychological and therapeutic models of forgiveness to date have not adequately incorporated processes of acculturation. Intergenerational tension is a major dynamic for Hmong Americans as well as for many other groups with a recent history of immigration. Education about processes of acculturation could be an important source of gain for intergenerational peace, empathy, and forgiveness as well as for understanding why cutoffs replace forgiveness and reconciliation in some families.

Traditional Hmong social relations are hierarchical in nature (Faderman, 1998). Children are to respect and defer to parents and elders (Gates et al., 2000). Respect for elders is so strongly valued that some traditional Hmong believe disrespectful behavior toward elders can result in physical problems, such as a woman suffering a difficult labor, which can only be alleviated through apologizing and seeking the forgiveness of that elder (Fadiman, 1997).

Hmong American family conflicts frequently involve complaints by parents and elders that a particular Hmong adolescent is disrespectful or repudiating Hmong culture (Faderman, 1998), an obvious generativity concern of the elder generation. In such a scenario, social status tends to determine norms about how conflict is to be resolved and who is supposed to seek forgiveness. The family member with the higher status (e.g., parent or male family member) would find it extremely difficult, if not implausible, to seek for-

giveness from the lower status family member (e.g., child or female family member). Encouraging a college student to “forgive” a parent, as happens in some college-based forgiveness studies and counseling interventions, might seem countercultural to some Hmong individuals and families and may depend on acculturation factors for the student (Tsai, 2001). Verbally processing anger about family conflicts in therapy or a forgiveness workshop would also be contrary to more traditional Hmong norms and the value of preserving group harmony (Gates et al., 2000). When forgiveness or apology is processed between Hmong family members, it is often done in an indirect fashion using poetry, proverbs, or narratives to communicate the forgiving or repentant intention without engaging in direct address.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND RESEARCH

Models of forgiveness currently proposed and investigated in Western psychological literature may not be easily adaptable to Hmong American populations. Here we will consider parts of four forgiveness models that may require reconsideration when applied to Hmong populations. First, the frequent distinction made by Western psychologists between forgiveness and reconciliation (e.g., Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000) may not be valid with Hmong or any strongly collectivist culture where social harmony is a key ingredient; that is, for the highly interdependent self, reconciliation may be a necessary component of forgiveness. Most models of forgiveness to date in psychological literature are strongly individualistic, so there is a need for theoretical, empirically tested models that have been adapted to a more collectivist worldview.

Second, McCullough’s (2001) model of forgiveness as a suite of motivational changes and action tendencies whereby a person becomes less motivated by revenge and avoidance and more motivated by benevolence may require modification when applied to Hmong populations and culture. Avoidance, for example, may be less a motivating factor to withhold forgiveness and more of an *outcome* of a damaged relationship. Among the Hmong, the motivating factor for forgiveness may be the desire to reestablish social harmony and less the replacement of avoidance or revenge with benevolence.

Third, the degree to which cognitive dissonance plays a motivating role in forgiveness may be different among the collectivist Hmong than, for example, among Euro-Americans. Takaku et al. (2001) suggested that dissonance may be aroused more by relationship and normative motives for collectivists versus identity and justice motives for individualists. These researchers found that though hypocrisy-induced dissonance facilitated motivational transformation in both individualist (i.e., American) and collectivist (i.e.,

Japanese) cultures, it had a far greater effect on the attributional judgments, emotional reactions, and the decision to forgive among their American sample. Perhaps intrapersonal tension in a collectivist culture is less of a motivator for forgiveness; like avoidance, intrapersonal tension may be the *result* of intersubjectively perceived social disharmony.

Fourth, the role of apology, well established as an important factor in the propensity to forgive (Azar & Mullet, 2001; Azar et al., 1999), may play a different role among the collectivist Hmong. For example, apology may create a sense of equity in an individualist culture, especially if the apology involves some form of behavioral restitution. From the perspective of an interdependent self, apology may restore social face and reestablish social harmony in the relationship, which, in turn, becomes the primary motive for forgiveness.

Finally, research to date on forgiveness interventions has not achieved a level of specificity that examines the relative effectiveness of different forgiveness interventions for different cultural populations (Worthington et al., 2000). There is a great need to integrate a multicultural perspective with future research on forgiveness interventions (Quintana & Atkinson, 2002).

### CASE STUDY

The following is based on an actual clinical case, although the names and certain features have been changed to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of those involved.

Kasiab (female, age 27) and Pao (male, age 32) were a divorced Hmong American couple who requested couples therapy with a Hmong American therapist because they were considering the possibility of both forgiveness and marital reconciliation. They had divorced several years earlier, after Pao had a series of brief affairs, one involving another male. These affairs had come after a protracted health crisis involving the couple's infant daughter, who had eventually died of a rare blood disease. This loss had been stressful not only emotionally and financially but also because the professional medical treatment of the girl had generated constant cultural tensions with the beliefs and traditional health practices of the couple's Hmong American community. The couple's marital problems had also been considered by leaders from both clans; however, the decision to divorce was not endorsed by clan leaders. This was due in part to the fact that both Kasiab and Pao kept his same-sex affair a secret because of cultural prohibitions against same-sex relationships. The lack of clan leader endorsement had the effect of making the divorce shaming to the families of both Pao and Kasiab. In a very real sense, Pao and Kasiab divorced each other and their own clans.

After considerable individual therapy with a Hmong American therapist, Pao came to better understand his sexual feelings and behavior. He found additional help in a men's support group for Hmong Americans, which allowed him to talk about sexual issues that had been taboo in his family and community. He was also able to begin to work on his grief over the loss of his daughter. In the process, he decided he wanted to seek forgiveness from Kasiab for the affairs and to be reconciled in marriage. He wanted to live his life with her and as part of her family and clan. In the divorce, he had lost his connection to Kasiab, her family and clan, as well as his own family and clan. Pao was also sorry he had grieved his parents and wanted to restore their happiness. Kasiab still cared for him and agreed to be reconciled despite her concerns about his sexuality. Pao was eager to commit to remaining in a support group that would help him integrate healthy authenticity and boundaries.

This latter decision would probably raise concern for many therapists, particularly those with an individualistic worldview, who might be thinking, "Does Pao love Kasiab or her family and clan?" And, "Is wanting to please his parents a good reason for Pao to seek forgiveness and reconciliation?" These are legitimate questions, but they involve cultural assumptions. From a collectivistic worldview, it is understandable to make decisions based on the good of one's family and community. The acculturation challenges of recent immigrant communities are also relevant in this case. Pao was struggling with the tension between American norms that emphasize individuality and collectivistic norms that emphasize group harmony. He could individuate, but he might permanently lose his cultural community and identity, which he also valued. Fortunately, Pao's individual therapist understood these cultural challenges and supported him as he worked out a solution.

Couples therapy also proceeded with sensitivity to the cultural dynamics involved. When the couple was ready, they planned a formal ceremony with their clans. The couple worked with clan leaders by following detailed cultural procedures to publicly demonstrate rituals of forgiveness and reconciliation. A central part of this ceremony focused on Pao's need to request forgiveness from Kasiab's parents. A leader from Pao's clan sacrificed a chicken and a pig to appease ancestors who may have been grieved by the divorce. Pao also washed the faces of his mother- and father-in-law as a spiritual act to rectify the loss of face. From a traditional Hmong worldview, these rituals had the effect of achieving forgiveness by fixing the damaged liver of Kasiab's parents. It was helpful for the couple to combine culturally informed psychotherapy sessions with their cultural and communal practices.

Hmong Americans like Kasiab and her parents often affirm that emotional forgiveness is a process that usually takes time, which is consistent with most Western psychological literature on forgiveness. In this case, Pao worked out

his forgiveness and reconciliation with Kasiab through consistency and with her family through frequent visits that showed them honor and respect. But the formal ceremony ritualized the forgiveness and reconciliation in a manner that was loaded with cultural and spiritual significance.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELING AND PSYCHOEDUCATIONAL INTERVENTION

Several implications are relevant for counseling or psychoeducational intervention with Hmong American populations. Empirical research on forgiveness interventions has barely addressed cultural issues of any type (Worthington et al., 2000), so we offer these applied suggestions tentatively in the absence of data. First, definitions of "forgiveness" should not be assumed or taken for granted. As we have suggested, forgiveness is a thoroughly culture-laden construct. The explicit term *forgiveness* might not resonate with certain Hmong populations, particularly if forgiveness is not connected to issues of social face and respect. In other cases, implicit or explicit models of forgiveness or conflict resolution might exist but be very different from dominant Eurocentric models of forgiveness in psychological literature. Therapists and educators should be sensitive to the need to dialogue with clients and students about indigenous understandings of forgiveness and related constructs. Acculturation differences within Hmong American families and clans could also influence construals of forgiveness and conflict resolution, which means that therapists working with Hmong clients should employ a systems perspective.

Second, Hmong and other refugee populations in the United States have survived numerous traumas due to war, dislocation, resettlement, and discrimination (Ying, 2001). Hmong populations in the United States have demonstrated high rates of PTSD, which can involve symptoms such as anxiety, hostility, or depression that mitigate against interpersonal processes like forgiveness and relational repair. It is important for clinicians to assess refugee resettlement history and the potential impact of trauma. Psychoeducational interventions that teach forgiveness as a coping skill may be inappropriate for those who suffer from PTSD and have not received other clinical interventions, so clinical screening is vital for such psychoeducational interventions. Hmong American experiences of discrimination and racism have been found to be common (Hein, 2000), and those experiences of injustice and potential trauma are also outside the boundaries and design of published forgiveness interventions to date. Forgiveness may prove to be a strength or virtue that enhances individual and family resilience following trauma, but this hypothesis requires empirical verification.



Third, certain interventions designed to promote forgiveness could be less efficacious with some Hmong American populations. For example, letter-writing exercises are common for emotional expression in forgiveness interventions. Exline and Molnar (2001) have found some empirical support linking letter writing, forgiveness, and emotional health. However, such interventions assume English proficiency and have not been tested in other languages. For some Hmong American populations, other stress- and anger-reduction exercises might be more appropriate, such as meditation, relaxation, or sewing story cloths and other textile work. Spiritual resources are likely to be important to many traditional Hmong clients because problems are typically viewed as spiritual in etiology.

Fourth, Hmong consultants for this article frequently referred to various cultural proverbs and wisdom stories when talking about forgiveness. Oral narratives play a significant role in Hmong culture, with some Hmong narrating an intertextuality to life by moving back and forth between personal stories and cultural proverbs. The proverbs offer a kind of folk wisdom tradition of narratives to help interpret struggles and virtues in life. Connections between a narrative worldview and examples of resilient or virtuous living are common in many cultures throughout history (MacIntyre, 1984).

Finally, individual or even family counseling may not always be the most culturally appropriate form of intervention with Hmong American populations. Psychoeducational group interventions aimed at preventative mental health and conflict resolution will often be a more effective way of working with more traditional Hmong Americans. However, published psychoeducational group forgiveness interventions to date have tended to employ considerable verbal processing and have not been culturally adapted (Worthington et al., 2000).

### IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

Progress in understanding forgiveness-related practices and meanings among Hmong Americans will require multiple research methods. Qualitative research strategies could start with further fieldwork with Hmong American communities or similar ethnic groups to learn about cultural conflicts that can influence episodes of unforgiveness and cultural practices related to conflict resolution. Fieldwork studies should also target traditional Hmong spiritual practices, such as shamanism and funeral rituals to better understand the contours of a traditional Hmong worldview. Interview studies about forgiveness and unforgiveness could help identify narrative themes and hypotheses for quantitative studies and the development of appropriate measures. In particular, interview studies could focus on the meaning or definition of

forgiveness-related constructs, motives for forgiving or not forgiving, and family and clan dynamics related to forgiveness. A qualitative study that identified and collected Hmong proverbs related to forgiveness and unforgiveness would offer a particularly unique contribution to this area of research.

Quantitative research on forgiveness and Hmong Americans must start with measurement development. There are numerous measures of forgiveness currently used in psychological research (McCullough & Witvliet, 2002), yet there has been virtually no research on the cross-cultural validity of the measures. It is important that cross-cultural psychometric studies examine item score data and not simply scale scores or factor structures (Byrne & Campbell, 1999). Personality and intervention research on forgiveness with Hmong Americans could focus on culture-laden constructs like empathy and shame, which have become prominent in psychological literature on forgiveness. For example, empathy might mediate changes in forgiveness for Hmong or other ethnic populations, but studies could examine empathy oriented toward both individuals and groups or clans. Or empathy might be less predictive of forgiveness than attributions about future behavior among collectivistic groups (Takaku et al., 2001).

Forgiveness researchers can also build on substantive bodies of research on acculturation and family conflicts to investigate forms of coping that might be related to forgiveness and unforgiveness as well as the associated health consequences. Culturally appropriate psychoeducational and counseling interventions to promote forgiveness need to be developed and empirically tested for Hmong Americans as well as other populations (Quintana & Atkinson, 2002). In the case of Hmong Americans, psychoeducational interventions might be the most ecologically valid approach to forgiveness intervention and could be embedded in parent education or youth programs. Finally, any research initiatives with Hmong American and other underserved populations should consider the use of a collaborative action research approach that includes dialogue with participant constituencies and stakeholders about the process and benefits of such research (Greenwood & Levin, 2000).

## CONCLUSION

Initial advances in positive psychological research on forgiveness are promising for understanding whether forgiveness really is a virtue that contributes to the flourishing of individuals, families, and communities. The culturally embedded nature of virtues like forgiveness suggests we should give meaningful and sustained attention to dialogue with particular communities

like the Hmong Americans that exemplify some of the diverse approaches to conflict resolution and forgiveness that make up the rich tapestry of human culture. The psychological research and application of virtues like forgiveness must become multicultural to be positive.

## NOTES

1. Gary Yia Lee, Ph.D., is an anthropologist living in Australia with expertise in Hmong culture and diaspora.

2. Leng Xiong, LGSW, is a social worker who provides and supervises therapy and social services with Hmong families through the Hmong-American Partnership, St. Paul, Minnesota.

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