Gender, Ethnicity, and Acculturation in Intergenerational Conflict of Asian American College Students

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This study examined differences in patterns of intergenerational conflict according to gender, ethnicity, and acculturation level of Asian American college students. A survey containing a measure of acculturation and intergenerational conflict was completed by 342 participants. A 2 (gender) × 5 (ethnicity) × 3 (acculturation) multivariate analysis of variance for the 3 subscales of the Intergenerational Conflict Inventory revealed significant F values for all 3 main effects, but none for the interactions. On the subscale of Dating and Marriage, male students reported less conflict than female students, and Japanese Americans reported less conflict than Chinese, Filipino, Korean, and Southeast Asian Americans. On the subscale of Family Expectations, Japanese Americans also reported less conflict than Koreans and Southeast Asians. On both of these and a 3rd subscale of Education and Career, the acculturated group reported lower conflict than both the low-acculturated and bicultural groups. The implications of these findings for research and practice are discussed.
• Asian American • family • intergenerational conflict • acculturation • gender • ethnicity

Similar to the earliest Asians to come to the American shores, the recent wave (post-1965) of Asian immigrants arrive "overblown with hope" (Takaki, 1989, p. 21). They come in search of a better life and a brighter future for the family, unaware that few are left unscarred in the process of adaptation. Even for those who achieve the American dream, the cost of migration may not be fully realized until too late, the first

casualty often being that which is most valued—preservation of the family (Kibria, 1993). The purpose of this study was to consider one aspect of immigrant family life in which the cost of migration is often most keenly felt, that of intergenerational relations, and to examine patterned differences in conflict according to salient dimensions of diversity within the Asian American population.

Asian American families are confronted with many adversities in the process of migration and adaptation. In addition to coping with the most immediate difficulties of language and cultural adjustment, they must also face challenges to established familial roles and patterns (Thomas, 1995). As economic need drives women to work outside of the home, traditional gender roles and power relations are undermined (Kibria, 1993; Min, 1988). Parent–child roles and power relations are similarly affected. Chan and Leong (1994) found that Chinese American immigrant families faced role and status changes. As children acculturate and acquire English fluency more rapidly than their parents, they often function as cultural brokers, being called on to act as translators, cultural experts, and even family representatives to the outside world. Kibria (1993), in her study of Vietnamese immigrant families, found that these functions not only altered power relations between the generations but also contributed to decreased parental self-confidence and subjected the children to undue burden.

Generational differences in values and rate of acculturation often lead to a gradual divergence of perspective, with subsequent impact on intergenerational conflict (Ho, 1987; Lin, 1986; Min, 1998). Value contrast between individualism and collectivism may result in painful clashes between parents and their young-adult children (Zhou & Bankston, 1998) over degree of autonomy in making important life decisions. In situations involving mutual rigidity in which parental ethnocentrism clashes with that of adolescent egocentrism, alienation and segregation often result. In such cases, parents

and children may reside under the same roof but live in different worlds with little connection and mutual understanding. Lack of fluency in a common language exacerbates the situation, leaving families few bridges to span the ever-widening gulf (Lee & Cynn, 1991).

Despite the prevalence and importance of these issues in Asian American communities, surprisingly little empirical research is available on immigrant families, even within an increasing body of psychological research on Asian Americans in the last two decades. Recognition of and attention to these issues is a rather recent phenomenon (McGoldrick, Giordana, & Pearce, 1996). According to Uba (1994), existing studies on Asian American families are sparse and fragmented, with little recognition of the dimensions of diversity that exists within the population. Furthermore, much of the literature until recently was in the form of book chapters or general overviews that discussed broad features of various Asian immigrant families and the cultural bases for their familial roles and patterns (Ho, 1987; Min, 1988; Shon & Ja, 1982; Thomas, 1995). Although there has been a gradual increase in number of studies that examine parent–child relations in Asian American families (see Dinh, Sarason, & Sarason, 1994; Feldman & Rosenthal, 1990; Nguyen & Williams, 1989; Rick & Forward, 1992; Ying, 1999; Ying & Chao, 1996; Ying, Coombs, & Lee, 1999), there has yet to be a study examining the specific types and severity of intergenerational conflict.

In contrast to the prevailing myth of homogeneity, the past decade of research on Asian Americans has demonstrated that there are important dimensions of within-group differences. In particular, acculturation level, ethnicity, and gender are found to be related to various aspects of Asian American mental health and help-seeking attitudes (Atkinson & Gim, 1989; Gim, Atkinson, & Whiteley, 1990; Solberg, Ritsma, Davis, Tata, & Jolly, 1994). The consistency of the acculturation effect across different areas of psychological research led Pon-

terotto, Baluch, and Carielli (1998) to observe that acculturation has emerged as a leading variable. Even within the limited research on Asian American families, individual and collective acculturative process has been recognized as an important variable (Lin, 1986; Rick & Forward, 1992). Ethnic group differences have received less attention in the Asian American family literature. Existing studies have been conducted primarily on a single ethnic group. Although this approach is practical and allows for an indepth consideration of one group, comparative analysis across ethnic groups provides valuable data on ethnic-specific versus common factors related to intergenerational conflict. Gender differences have also received limited consideration with contradictory results. In one study of Chinese adolescent immigrants, no gender differences were observed in relation to family conflict (Florsheim, 1997), whereas significant gender difference was observed with female adolescents reporting more conflict with their parents than male adolescents (Rumbaut, 1996).

In light of the lack of adequate research on intergenerational conflict in Asian American families, this study was conducted to identify patterned differences in intergenerational conflict according to gender, ethnicity, and acculturation level. An examination of these patterns can lead to a better understanding of the unique and common factors that may contribute to intergenerational conflict.

Method

Participants

Participants ranged in age from 17 to 31 years, with an overall mean age of 21. Female participants (n = 208) outnumbered male participants (n = 112). Chinese Americans (n = 102) comprised the largest ethnic group, followed by Korean Americans (n = 83), Japanese Americans (n = 57), Filipino Americans (n = 40), and Southeast Asians (n

= 38). The ethnic classification was based on self-identification with the exception for Southeast Asians, which represents a grouping of those who identified as Vietnamese, Cambodians, or Laotians. Of the remaining 38 participants, 18 were from various other Asian groups with numbers too small to group together, 6 were multiracial, and the remainder failed to indicate their ethnicity. In terms of annual family income, a majority (55%) of the respondents came from families with incomes over $50,000. Consistent with overall demographic trends in Asian American communities, a majority (58%) of the respondents were foreign born (also known as first generation), with the remaining 29% being second generation and 13% being third generation or above. Generational status was self-identified based on selection of the description that respondents deemed most applicable to them on the basis of their place of birth and that of their ancestors.

Instruments

SUINN-LEW ASIAN SELF-IDENTITY ACCULTURATION SCALE (SL-ASIA). The SL-ASIA (Suinn, Rickard-Figueroa, Lew, & Vigil, 1987) was used to measure acculturation level. This 21-item instrument samples from six domains: language, identity, friendship, behavior, generation, and attitude. The alpha coefficient reported by Suinn et al. is .88. Responses to each item were added together to create a total score, which was then used to classify respondents into one of three acculturation levels. Those who scored within the bottom third of the possible range for the instrument were classified as low acculturated or Asian identified, those in the middle third as bicultural, and those in the top third as high acculturated or acculturated. Consistent with previous research using the SL-ASIA with the Asian American college students (Gim et al., 1990), participants in this study were unevenly distributed across the three levels, with 5% who were low acculturated, 85% who were bicultural, and 10% in the acculturated levels.

To create a more even distribution, I used the mean total SL-ASIA score of 64 and the standard deviation of 10 to create new cutoff scores for the three levels of acculturation. The revised range was 54 and below for low-acculturated, 55–74 for the bicultural, and 75 and over for the acculturated students. In the new distribution, 17% of the participants were classified as low acculturated ($n = 55$), 67% as bicultural ($n = 214$), and 16% as acculturated ($n = 51$). A detailed distribution of acculturation levels by gender and ethnicity is provided in Table 1.

INTERGENERATIONAL CONFLICT INVENTORY (ICI). The ICI was developed for this study to measure type and severity of intergenerational conflict between Asian American adolescents/young adults and their parents. Established family measures such as the Family Environment Scale (Moos & Moos, 1986), the Family Assessment Device (Epstein, Baldwin, & Bishop, 1983), and Family Adaptability and Cohesion Scale III (Olson, Portner, & Lavee, 1985) are either not specific enough or not sensitive enough to domains of conflict that are particularly relevant to Asian Americans, or they focus on family process rather than specific patterns of conflict.

The confluence of two conceptual criteria defined the content domain of the ICI. The first was a developmental framework based on Erikson's (1963) psychosocial stages, which identifies the primary tasks of adolescence and young adulthood as defining one's identity, forming meaningful relationships, and making a vocational commitment. The second criterion was to identify culturally relevant age-appropriate issues affecting an adolescent's relationship to the family and negotiation of independence. Within these parameters, the specific items were generated in consultation with the existing research literature on Asian American families reviewed previously in this article and my clinical experience as well as that of a colleague. The resulting measure was then distributed to participants in this study, who were asked to rate each item and indicate the extent to which it was a source of conflict between them and their parents. Responses were scored on a 6-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating greater conflict.

To determine the factor structure of the ICI, I performed a principal-factors analysis with oblique rotation to extract nonorthogonal factors on the initial 31 items. An examination of the scree test and the eigenvalues suggested a three-factor solution. Because the three-factor solution was also most interpretable and conceptually consistent, a subsequent principal-factors analysis with oblique rotation was performed with a forced three-factor solution. These factors ac-

TABLE 1 Tabulation of Acculturation Level by Gender, Ethnicity, and Generation

Variable	n	% low	% bicultural	% acculturated	% total
All groups combined	320	17	67	16	100
Gender					
Female	208	21	66	13	65
Male	111	11	69	20	35
Ethnicity					
Chinese	102	15	69	17	32
Filipinos	40	10	78	12	12
Japanese	57	7	54	39	18
Korean	83	26	70	4	26
Southeast Asian	38	26	63	11	12
By generation					
1st generation	182	28	69	3	58
2nd generation	90	3	75	22	29
3–5 generations	42	0	45	55	13

counted for 36%, 10%, and 7% of variance in the data. Items loading greater than .30 on a factor were used to construct the three subscales of the ICI (see Table 2). Seven of the original 31 items were dropped for not loading high enough on any factor or not being conceptually related to other items on the subscale. Of the remaining 24 items, 11 items were in the Family Expectations (FE) subscale, 10 items in the Education and Career (EC) subscale, and 3 items in the Dating and Marriage (DM) subscale. Coefficient alpha reliability measures for the three subscales were .86 for FE, .88 for EC, and .84 for DM. Test–retest reliability test conducted on 35 college students at a 7-week interval ranged from .81 to .87. There were low to moderate intercorrelations between the three subscales (see Table 3), with negative correlations between the FE and both EC and DM subscales. To test its face validity, I presented only the items of the ICI (without the title and instructions to rate each item on degree of conflict it causes) to 10 evaluators (ages 17 to 28) ranging from high school students to counselor trainees. They were asked to give a brief description of what they thought the survey was intended to measure. All 10 respondents identified the measure as referring to potential sources of tensions between parents and children in some form or another.

TABLE 2 Means, Standard Deviations, and Factor Analysis of the Intergenerational Conflict Inventory

Factor and item	M	SD	Factor		
			1	*2*	*3*
Factor 1: Family Expectations					
1. Lack of communication with your parents	3.02	1.70	0.51		
2. Your desire for greater independence and autonomy	3.36	1.72	0.38		
3. Following cultural traditions	2.76	1.53	0.75		
4. Pressure to learn one's own Asian language	2.81	1.63	0.52		
5. Expectations based on being male or female	3.24	1.73	0.53		
6. Expectations based on birth order	2.84	1.79	0.45		
7. Family relationships being too close	2.71	1.53	0.57		
8. Family relationships being too distant	2.84	1.65	0.56		
9. How much time to spend with the family	3.58	1.65	0.59		
10. How much to help around the house	3.54	1.58	0.68		
11. How much time to help out in the family business	2.66	1.76	0.50		
Factor 2: Education and Career					
12. How much time to spend on studying	3.84	1.70		−0.72	
13. How much time to spend on recreation	3.23	1.65		−0.68	
14. How much time to spend on sports	2.56	1.57		−0.36	
15. How much time to spend on practicing music	2.33	1.56		−0.38	
16. Importance of academic achievement	4.34	1.65		−0.59	
17. Emphasis on materialism and success	3.08	1.55		0.35	−0.36
18. Which school to attend	3.24	1.66		−0.78	
19. What to major in college	2.85	1.55		−0.78	
20. Which career to pursue	3.18	1.61		−0.80	
21. Being compared to others	3.64	1.69		−0.42	
Factor 3: Dating and Marriage					
22. When to begin dating	3.06	1.61			−0.56
23. Whom to date	3.48	1.66			−0.75
24. Whom to marry	3.93	1.72			−0.65

Note. Values less than .30 not listed. Higher means indicate greater conflict. The three-factor solution accounted for 53% of the total variance.

TABLE 3 Psychometric Properties of the Intergenerational Conflict Inventory Subscales

Variable	Family expectations (n = 319)	Education and career (n = 326)	Dating and marriage (n = 340)
M	33.10	32.24	10.46
SD	11.87	11.17	4.36
Mdn	33	33	10
Range	11–66	10–59	3–18
No. of items	11	10	3
Test–retest reliability			
(7-week interval: n = 35)	.81	.87	.84
Internal consistency	.86	.88	.84
Subscale correlations			
Family expectations	—		
Education and career	−0.45*	—	
Dating and marriage	−0.28*	0.26*	—

*$p < .001$.

Procedure

Surveys containing questions on demographic data, the SL-ASIA, and the ICI were administered to Asian American undergraduates at 4-year colleges and universities in southern California. Surveys were distributed primarily in Asian American studies courses and extra credit offered as an incentive for participation. Students were informed that their participation was voluntary, their responses were confidential, and their refusal to participate would not adversely affect their evaluation in the course in any way. The surveys were conducted in the first 2 weeks of each class to minimize the impact of the course itself. Of the 438 surveys distributed, 320 surveys were returned for a response rate of 73%.

Results

To examine patterned variations in sources of intergenerational conflict according to gender, ethnicity, and acculturation level, I conducted a 2 (gender) × 5 (ethnicity) × 3 (acculturation level) multivariate analysis of variance for the three subscales of the ICI. This analysis revealed significant *F* values for all three of the main effects but no interactions. Subsequent univariate analyses were conducted for each of the significant subscales along with Scheffé's post hoc tests to locate specific group differences. Table 4 provides a summary of these analyses.

Gender difference was observed only in the Dating and Marriage subscale, with female students reporting higher conflict scores than male students (see Table 5). Significant ethnic group differences were observed in the Family Expectations subscale, with Japanese Americans scoring lower than Koreans and Southeast Asians, and in Dating and Marriage, with Japanese Americans scoring lower than all of the other ethnic groups. Although the analysis of variance was significant for the Education and Career subscale, none of the post hoc tests were significant. For the main effect of acculturation level, significant differences were observed in all three subscales, with a consistent pattern of the acculturated group reporting significantly lower conflict than both the low-acculturated and bicultural.

Discussion

This study examined differences in intergenerational conflict according to gender,

TABLE 4 Gender × Ethnicity × Acculturation Multivariate and Univariate Analysis of Variance for Three Subscales of the Intergenerational Conflict Inventory With Significant Post Hoc Tests

Source	λ	F	df	p	Significant post hoc test
Gender	0.884	13.29	3	.0001	
Family expectations		0.09	1	.765	
Education and career		1.70	1	.193	
Dating and marriage		20.85	1	.0001	Female students > male students
Ethnicity	0.856	4.02	12	.0001	
Family expectations		5.34	4	.0001	Koreans and Southeast Asians > Japanese
Education and career		2.42	4	.049	
Dating and marriage		9.00	4	.0001	All groups > Japanese
Acculturation	0.891	5.48	3	.0001	
Family expectations		12.47	2	.0001	Bicultural and low acculturated > acculturated
Education and career		3.26	2	.040	Bicultural and low acculturated > acculturated
Dating and marriage		12.89	2	.0001	Bicultural and low acculturated > acculturated

ethnicity, and acculturation level among Asian American college students. The results indicate that there are patterned variations in intergenerational tensions over expectations regarding family interactions, educational and career concerns, and dating and marriage issues. These patterns suggest a number of underlying factors that contribute to intergenerational conflicts in Asian American families.

Gender differences were observed, with women reporting greater conflict over issues of dating and marriage than did men. This pattern is consistent with previous research on minority adolescents. Rumbaut (1996) found that girls reported more conflict with their immigrant parents than did boys. This was attributed to the "clash between restrictive parental standards for behavior and dating and the girls' increasing sense of and desire for individuality and independence from parental control in the transition to adulthood" (p. 163). Interestingly, the same pattern of more protective and restrictive parenting practices over girls than boys contributing to greater intergenerational con-

TABLE 5 Means and Standard Deviations for the Three Subscales of the Intergenerational Conflict Inventory by Gender, Ethnicity, and Acculturation

Variable	Family expectations		Education and career		Dating and marriage	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Gender						
Female	33.24	11.99	31.59	11.46	11.18	4.29
Male	32.83	11.69	33.43	10.57	9.04	4.16
Ethnic group						
Chinese Americans	32.16	11.02	32.67	11.07	10.30	4.54
Filipino Americans	33.65	14.18	35.51	12.06	10.91	4.33
Japanese Americans	27.64	11.05	28.38	11.54	7.68	3.79
Korean Americans	34.69	11.20	32.20	10.42	11.30	3.76
Southeast Asians	38.86	11.21	33.21	10.56	12.52	4.16
Acculturation level						
Low acculturated	36.27	11.23	33.75	10.61	11.69	4.18
Bicultural	34.48	11.67	33.13	11.06	10.88	4.08
Acculturated	26.00	10.12	29.08	11.59	8.04	4.53

flict was observed among Italian immigrants in Australia (Rosenthal, 1984).

Another contributing factor to the observed gender difference may be the higher rate of outmarriage among Asian American women than men (Kitano, Chai, & Hatanoka, 1984; Lee & Yamanaka, 1990). Outmarriage is a matter of great concern to many immigrant parents (Tran, 1988). The injunction against outmarriage is often repeated from an early age with implied sanctions that would affect the individual and the family as a whole. Negative attitudes toward outmarriage not only reflect strongly ethnocentric views of racial and cultural superiority but also stigma because of its historic association with marriages between U.S. servicemen and Asian women. These negative attitudes associated with outmarriage, combined with more restrictive parenting practices, may contribute to greater intergenerational conflict for women in issues of dating and marriage. However, it is also plausible that outmarriage may be the result of greater conflict with parents as well as a reaction against patriarchal tendencies in Asian cultures. These hypotheses have yet to be adequately tested and should be addressed in future studies.

Interestingly, for Japanese Americans, rates of outmarriage appear to be unrelated to intergenerational conflict over dating and marriage issues because they have one of the highest rates of outmarriage (Kitano et al., 1984) yet scored significantly lower than other ethnic groups in this study. Their unique historic experience of internment during World War II may account for this. In the aftermath of such a traumatic event, there was a concerted push toward assimilation within the Japanese American community. Patterns of intermarriage, geographic and occupational integration, and political participation are reflective of this trend (Kitano & Daniels, 1995; Spickard, 1996).

Ethnic group difference was also observed for the subscale of Family Expectations, with Japanese Americans scoring lower than Koreans and Southeast Asian Americans. These patterns correspond to migration patterns to the United States in that Korean and Southeast Asian communities are relatively new to the United States in contrast to the Japanese, who have a much longer history in the country. Furthermore, the influx of immigrants from Japan is substantially lower than that of other Asian groups; Japanese Americans have a population with the highest percentage of those who are native born (Spickard, 1996). Because the items in the Family Expectations subscale assess conflict over culturally related expectations, such as following cultural traditions and pressure to learn the ethnic language, it is to be expected that those ethnic groups who are predominantly first generation will experience more conflict over these issues than those who are more homogeneously of a later generation.

The significant acculturation effect across all three of the subscales supports Ponterotto et al.'s (1998) claim that acculturation is a leading variable in psychological research of Asian Americans. There was a consistent pattern of means across the subscales, with the highly acculturated group reporting significantly less conflict than both the bicultural and low-acculturated groups. This may seem counterintuitive at first, but a closer examination of the distribution of generational status (refer to Table 1) reveals a pattern that may explain the acculturation effect. It is notable that almost all of the first generation were in the low-acculturated to bicultural range, whereas almost all of the second and subsequent generation were in the bicultural to acculturated range. More specifically, only 10% of those in the acculturated group were foreign born (extrapolated from Table 1). This suggests that acculturated individuals have lower conflict scores because their parents are also born in the United States or have lived in the United States an average of 21 years (the mean age of the participants) and are more likely to be acculturated themselves. Rosenthal and Feldman (1990) found rapid acculturation of family environment among Chinese immigrants in first generation: "Acculturation to Western norms occurs substantially for

the first generation. Subsequent shifts in family dynamics are less noticeable" (p. 511).

Relatedly, the acculturative stress associated with rapid rate of cultural change may contribute to greater intergenerational conflict for those who are low acculturated or bicultural. Connor (1974), in a study of three generations of Japanese Americans, found that the first-generation families had both higher levels of acculturative conflict and higher cohesion than subsequent generations. In the context of such radical change involved in the early adjustment period, parental anxieties and fears regarding loss of their children to the host culture may be heightened as they see their children acculturate rapidly. Many immigrant parents respond to these fears by becoming more rigid and trying to adhere more strongly to traditional values at a time when those very values are being undermined by mainstream cultural values, particularly regarding matters of individuality and personal freedom. However, over time, as parents become more comfortable with the host culture, the contrast in degree of acculturation between the generations may lessen, leading to lower conflict. Thus, level of acculturation of the adolescent may not be the most critical factor in accounting for intergenerational conflict as much as the net difference in degree of acculturation between parents and adolescents.

Awareness of patterned differences in intergenerational conflict among Asian American young adults can help counselors to be better prepared to address these issues as they arise in therapy. Sue and Zane (1987) posited that to prevent premature dropout among Asian American and other minority clients, therapists need culture-specific knowledge to achieve credibility. Credibility, which can be operationalized as expectancy of benefit from counseling, can be enhanced by awareness of common sources of intergenerational conflict as well as the various cultural and developmental factors that contribute to them. Normalization of intergenerational conflict by contextualizing them as predictable consequences

of cultural adaptation not only can reduce the stigma and shame that is associated with seeking counseling but also can help to convey acceptance and understanding to Asian American clients. These are specific examples of "gift-giving" that can engender greater faith in the therapist and potential benefit of the psychotherapeutic process (Sue & Zane, 1987).

As is the case with many psychological studies conducted on the college student population, one of the weaknesses of this study is the generalizability of findings to the broader population of Asian Americans in the relevant age group. Although the vast majority of Asian American young adults do attend some kind of postsecondary institution, generalization to nonstudents should be limited until future studies confirm similar pattern and severity of intergenerational conflict. The fact that the participants in this study came predominantly from Asian American studies courses may also limit the generalizability of the findings. Student who take such courses may constitute a unique population of participants who already have a heightened awareness of issues affecting Asian Americans or may be motivated to take these courses because of their own struggles as an ethnic minority. However, it should be noted that the distribution across acculturation level in this study was fairly comparable with that of other studies that distributed surveys by mail (Atkinson & Gim, 1989; Gim et al., 1990).

This study represents an initial step in a systematic examination of intergenerational conflict in Asian American families. Not only was a tool developed to assess culturally relevant dimensions of intergenerational conflict, but also a baseline has been established for comparisons in future studies. The contribution of this study was to lay the groundwork for future studies on this important topic of intergenerational conflict in Asian American families by identifying patterned variations according to gender, ethnicity, and acculturation. Awareness of these patterns contributes to a better understanding of the diversity of this population

and assists in identifying factors contributing to intergenerational conflict. The results suggest that a complex interplay of unique and common factors associated with gender, ethnicity, and acculturation accounts for the observed variations. This information can be used to refine and test specific hypotheses on underlying causes of conflict, which in turn can lead to development of interventions to reduce intergenerational conflict in Asian American families. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the struggles of immigrant families as they negotiate the changes and stresses associated with migration and adaptation to life in the United States. These challenges also speak of the resilience and strength of these individuals and families as they strive to forge new lives in a strange land.

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