Mental Health Adjustment among Children in Immigrant Families:
The Roles of Culture, Language, and Family Dynamics

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Shifts in Racial and Ethnic Composition of the United States: from 1970 to 2013

FIGURE 1-5 Racial and ethnic composition of the United States, 1970.
SOURCE: Data from U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census data, 1970 (also see Gibson and Jung, 2002).

FIGURE 1-6 Racial and ethnic composition of the United States, 2013.
Children of Immigrant Families in the U.S.

- One-fourth of all children in the United States (17.4 million) had at least one foreign-born parent.

- The number of young children of immigrant parents has doubled since 1990; this increase accounts for the entire growth in the U.S. population of young children since 1990.
Challenges Facing Children of Immigrant Families

• More likely to come from low-income families and have less-educated parents
• Less likely to access and receive high quality early childhood education
• Often face language, cultural, and socioeconomic barriers to education:
  – Limited English proficiency
  – Discrimination
  – Unfamiliarity with the American school system
  – Limited parent involvement in child’s education
Developmental Opportunities for Children of Immigrant Families

• Bilingualism
Dual language learners: young children (aged 0-5 years) who are exposed to and learning in two languages

• Biculturalism
Simultaneous exposure to different sets of cultural values, norms, and practices: host culture and heritage culture
The Asian American Population

- The fastest-growing racial group in the U.S.
- 74% of Asian Americans are foreign born
- Comprised of over 50 subgroups
- The highest-income, best-educated racial group in the U.S.
- Recent Asian immigrants is a selected group

*FIGURE 1-4* Latino and Asian arrivals as share of all immigrant arrivals, 2000-2010.

SOURCE: Data from Jeffrey Passel presentation to the Panel on the Integration of Immigrants into American Society, January 16, 2014.
Poverty in Asian Americans (AA)
(National CAPACD, 2013)

- AA poor are one of the fastest growing poverty population sin the wake of the Recession (37% increase in AA in poverty vs. 27% increase in general poverty population)
- Dramatic increases in AA poor have not been reflected in the overall AA poverty rate (12.8% in AA vs. 15.9% in US total), which is due to large increases in the overall AA population base, including large numbers of highly skilled, highly educated immigrants
- AA poor are concentrated in the Western United States
Past Research on Mental Health Adjustment of Asian American Youth

• There is considerable diversity within the Asian American population in terms of family SES, acculturation experience, and mental health problems

• Researchers have identified a number of risk factors for psychopathology in AA youth, including parent–child acculturation gaps, language brokering, and experience of racial discrimination

• The paradoxical pattern of development: high academic achievement/low psychological adjustment in Chinese American adolescents (Qin et al., 2012)

• Little research has been done to study the mental health adjustment of young Asian American children
(The Ecological Model of Human Development, Bronfenbrenner, 1979)
An Ecological View of Child Adjustment in Immigrant Families

Socio-cultural factors
- Immigration/generation status
- Cultural orientations
- Language proficiency
- Socioeconomic status

Proximal Contexts
- Parenting & Family Dynamics
- Neighborhood
- School & Peer Network

Children’s Psychological Processes
- Emotion regulation
- Executive function
- Coping with stressors

Children’s Adjustment
- Mental health problems
- Socioemotional competence
- Academic achievement

Adapted from Zhou et al. (2012). Child Development Perspectives.
Cultural Orientations

- “the degree to which individuals are influenced by and actively engage in the traditions, norms, and practices of a specific culture” (Tsai & Chentsova-Dutton, 2002, p. 95)

- Bilinear
  - Adaptation to the host culture (acculturation, e.g., American orientation)
  - Maintenance or acquisition of heritage culture (enculturation, e.g., Chinese orientation)

- Multi-domain or multi-dimensional
  - Language proficiency and language use
  - Media use (TV show, movie, books, music, ...)
  - Social affiliation/friends
  - Values and beliefs
  - Identifications
Multidimensionality of Cultural Orientation
(Schwartz, Unger, et al., 2010)
Cultural Orientation in Immigrant Families

- Parent Cultural Orientation
- Parent-Child Cultural Gap
- Child Cultural Orientation
- Parenting & Parent-Child Relationships
- Parent Adjustment
- Child Adjustment
Cultural model of agency and self-regulation

- Self construals
- Universal needs
- Agency beliefs
- Goals for self-regulation
- Strategies of self-regulation
- Behavior

Independently
- Autonomy
- Disjoint agency
- Self goals
- Promotion focus locomotion mode
- Self-regulation

Interdependently
- Relatedness
- Conjoint agency
- Social goals
- Prevention focus assessment mode
- Self and interpersonal regulation

Examples for self- and interpersonal regulation
- Achievement: Self versus social focus
- Emotion regulation: Engaging versus disengaging emotions
- Communication: Self-disclosure versus empathic understanding

(Trommsdorf, 2009; Trommsdorf & Heikamp, 2013)
Traditional Chinese Cultural Values Influencing Parenting and Family Relations

- Family hierarchy: respect for and obedience to parental authority
- Family obligations: filial piety
- Parent’s role in training (Guan), teaching, and guiding the child on socially-appropriate behaviors
- High expectation for educational achievement
- De-emphasis on emotion and its open expression
Parent-child acculturation gap

DAD I WANT TO BE ACTOR

SON, ITS PRONOUNCED DOCTOR

Phinney et al., 2000; Portes, 1997
Acculturation Gap and Child Adjustment

Parent-Child Acculturation Gap
- Language
- Media use
- Social relations
- Values

Parent-Child Relationship Quality
- ↓ Warmth & support
- ↑ Conflict/negativity
- ↓ Open communication

Child Adjustment
- ↑ Externalizing problems
- ↑ Internalizing problems
- ↓ Prosocial behaviors

Berry et al., 1987; Costigan & Dokis, 2006; Kim et al., 2013; Rumbaut, 1997; Tseng & Fuglini, 2000
Kids and Family Project: A Longitudinal Study of Chinese American Children in Immigrant Families
Our Research Questions

• How does the process of adjusting to a new culture shape parenting and parent-child relationship?

• How do immigrant families’ cultural orientations shape children’s psychological adjustment? What are the mechanisms?

• What are the risk and protective factors for mental health adjustment in children of immigrant families?

• How can we intervene? What can be done to prevent mental health problems in children of immigrants?
KFP Sample

**Wave 1 (2007-2009)**
- 258 Chinese American children (24% first generation, 76% second generation) in the San Francisco Bay Area
- Child age = 6-9 yrs (1st and 2nd grade), 52% boys
- 82% of participating parents were foreign born
- Parents’ average years of immigration = 11.8 yrs
- 57% children eligible for free or reduced-price lunch at school
- Children came from more than 80 schools and families were distributed across 129 census tracts

**Wave 2 (2009-2011)**
- $N = 239$ (93% of original sample)
- Child age = 9-11 yrs (3rd and 4th grade)

**Wave 3 (2017-2018)**
- Youth age = 15-17 years (9th – 12th grade)
KFP Study Procedures

- Recruitment
  - Community
  - School
- Phone Screening Interview
- Parent & Child Assessment: Lab Visit or Questionnaire Survey
- Teacher Survey
- Tracking

Wave One: 12/2007 – 06/2009 (lab visit)
Wave Two: 12/2009 – 06/2011 (lab visit)
Wave Three: 02/2017 – 07/2018 (parent & youth survey only)
Cultural orientation → Parenting → Child adjustment

Early elementary school (1st – 2nd grade):
1. Children’s higher American orientations across domains were associated with better psychological adjustment;
2. The above associations were partly explained by authoritative parenting: parents used more authoritative parenting with children who were more acculturated;
3. Greater parent-child gaps in cultural orientations (especially in English or Chinese proficiency) were associated with children’s poorer adjustment, partly because parents were less likely to use authoritative parenting in families with large parent-child gaps.

(Chen, Hua, Zhou, et al., 2014)
Language proficiency $\rightarrow$ parent-child conflict $\rightarrow$ Child adjustment

From early (1$^{st}$ - 2$^{nd}$ grade) to middle elementary school (3$^{rd}$ – 4$^{th}$ grade)

1. Parents’ and children’s language proficiency can influence each other over time:
   - Parents’ higher English proficiency $\rightarrow$ children’s higher English proficiency
   - Children’s weaker Chinese proficiency $\rightarrow$ parents’ higher English proficiency
2. Families in which children had higher Chinese proficiency experienced lower levels of parent-child conflict;
3. Higher parent-child conflict, in turn, was associated with more behavioral problems in children.

(Anicama & Zhou, in preparation)
Cultural orientation $\Rightarrow$ parental expression of emotions and parent-child emotion discussion

Parents who had higher American orientation (e.g., having higher English proficiency and more American friends):

- Displayed more positive emotions (smiling & laughter) when interacting with children;
- Engaged in more emotion discussions with children during shared book reading

(Chen, Zhou, Main, et al., 2015; Tao, Zhou, et al., 2013)
Language proficiency → child self-regulation

- Higher proficiency in English and higher proficiency in Chinese are independently linked with better self-regulatory skills (e.g., attention focusing, attention shifting, inhibitory control, behavioral persistence)
- Proficiency in two languages is associated with more benefits in self-regulation than proficiency in one language
- Bilingualism can be an “asset” for specific areas of executive functions in DLL children

(Chen, Zhou, Uchikoshi, Bunge, 2014)
Implications

- Both English and heritage language proficiency have socioemotional and mental health benefits for children of immigrant families, especially during early and middle childhood

- Support children’s bilingual (English and heritage language) development in early childhood education programs
  - Expose children to rich language
  - Provide opportunities to use language
  - Provide children with systematic vocabulary instruction
  - Encourage home language use and development
  - Make connections with home language and culture
Implications

- Encourage and support parents’ heritage language use in parent-child interactions and family activities

  ✓ Make home-school connections

  ✓ Educating parents about the benefits of bilingualism and heritage language development for children’s cognitive and socioemotional development

  ✓ Encourage parents’ use of heritage language in playing with children, book reading, story telling, and other family activities
Implications

- Parent-child communication and affective relationship is a salient issue in immigrant families
- Educating parents and youth about acculturation gap and its impact on parent-child and family relationships in immigrant families
- Encouraging and supporting immigrant parents to stay connected with children and stay involved in their education
  - Spending one-on-one time with children
  - Listening
  - Promote parent involvement at school (parent-teacher communication, making immigrant parents feel welcome at school)
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