Intergenerational cultural conflicts in norms of parental warmth among Chinese American immigrants

Chunxia Wu and Ruth K. Chao
University of California at Riverside, USA

This study examines the intergenerational cultural conflict experienced by Chinese adolescents from immigrant families, and its consequences for their adjustment. Intergenerational cultural conflict is assessed as the mismatch between adolescents’ ideals and perceptions of parental warmth. The extent and consequences of such mismatches for these youth are also compared to European American adolescents—who likely did not experience such conflict. One hundred and eighty-four Chinese American (60 first- and 124 second-generation) and 80 European American adolescents completed measures of (1) parental warmth (the acceptance-rejection subscale of the Children’s Report on Parent Behavior Inventory), and (2) psychological adjustment. Chinese American adolescents' ideals exceeded their perceptions of parents’ warmth to a greater degree than they did for European American adolescents. Moreover, such discrepancies were related to greater adjustment problems for Chinese American adolescents. Although only a small proportion of adolescents reported that parents were warmer than they desired, this excessive warmth had more positive consequences for Chinese American than European American adolescents.

Introduction

Intergenerational cultural conflict has received increasing attention in the research conducted on immigrant families in the last decade (Lee, Choe, Kim, & Ngo, 2000; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Ying, 1999). Such conflict arises between adolescents and their immigrant parents when they hold inconsistent or conflicting cultural norms and values (Sue & Chin, 1983; Uba, 1994). Different studies on intergenerational cultural conflict have generally concluded that the adolescent’s experience of cultural conflict with his or her parents creates psychological stress that often results in increased levels of depression, anxiety, and somatic problems for the adolescent (Aldwin & Greenberger, 1987; Bourne, 1975; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Skillman, 1999; Szapocznik, Santisteban, Kurtines, Perez-Vidal, & Hervis, 1984; Uba, 1994). Most work has taken a general view towards intergenerational cultural conflict, measuring the overall conflict across many different cultural values. As such, the intergenerational conflict of specific cultural norms, such as those for parenting, is relatively unexplored.

It has been widely discussed that cultures vary in their norms for parenting or what is considered “good parenting,” and particularly for the expression of parental warmth (Jenkins, 1994; Sho & Davis, 1982; Uba, 1994). For instance, in some Asian cultures, parents were less physically and emotionally expressive with their children (Chao, 2001; Chao & Tseng, 2002). Due to the fact that adolescents usually prefer norms of the dominant culture, whereas their immigrant parents tend to espouse values consistent with their ethnic origin (Chao, 1994; Chao & Tseng, 2001; Uba, 1994), Asian American adolescents are likely to perceive parents as not expressing warmth to them in ways that they desire. Thus, discrepancies occur between adolescents’ ideals and their perceptions of parental warmth. Such discrepancies may be indicators of intergenerational cultural conflict between Asian American adolescents and their immigrant parents. These discrepancies may have negative consequences for the behavioural adjustment of these adolescents, particularly when the adolescents’ ideals exceed their perceptions of parents’ warmth. This study will investigate the intergenerational cultural conflict in norms for parental warmth that is experienced by Chinese American adolescents. Specifically, it will examine how the discrepancies in adolescents’ ideal versus perceived parental warmth is associated with their behavioural adjustment.

Cultural conflict between adolescents and immigrant parents

Cultural conflict usually arises when the behavioural standards and values of two cultures are inconsistent with each other but both demand conformances to their norms (Sue & Chin, 1983). It occurs not only between different ethnic groups, but also between individual members of a family living in a multicultural context, such as adolescents and their immigrant parents (Lee et al., 2000; Uba, 1994).

Although an individual’s cultural schema is instilled with the values of his/her family, it is ultimately filtered by his/her own interpretation of the family’s cultural training. Kim (2001) explained how the adolescent’s interpretation of the family’s
values is heavily influenced by the dominant culture. For adolescents from immigrant families, the family culture, characterized by ethnic cultural values, is usually the starting point for the formation of their cultural schema. However, the forces of Americanization draw adolescents toward the adoption of dominant values in the inevitable socialization process via media, schools, and peers. Such forces greatly affect adolescents’ perception of their family culture, and thus shape their cultural schema. In contrast, immigrant parents tend to maintain the values of their country of origin, although the dominant culture also demands socialization to American society (Kim, 2001; Lee et al., 2000; Uba, 1994). Consequently, discrepancies occur between adolescents’ and their immigrant parents’ acculturation levels or rates (Portes, 1997; Uba, 1994). Such increasing mismatches may finally result in intergenerational cultural conflict (Chung, 1999; Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1993).

Consequences of intergenerational cultural conflict

It is commonly hypothesized that intergenerational cultural conflict can be stressful for children because of difficulties in reconciling the dissonances of the two cultures between themselves and their immigrant parents (Uba, 1994). The adolescents strive to behave in accordance with “American” norms, but may be “torn” between the two cultures (Uba, 1994, p. 125).

Consequently, the stress of cultural conflict affects adolescents’ psychological adjustment. Aldwin and Greenberger (1987) found that Korean American college students who perceived their parents as highly traditional (emphasizing ethnic values) reported more depressive symptoms than those who perceived their parents to be “modern” (emphasizing mainstream American values). Studies of Chinese American adolescents also demonstrate that psychological problems are associated with difficulties in reconciling parents’ values of ethnic origin with mainstream American values (Bourne, 1975). Further support for the deleterious consequences of intergenerational cultural conflict for adolescent well-being has been found with Cuban refugees (Szapocznik et al., 1984) and Asian-, African-, and Mexican-American children of immigrants (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

Intergenerational cultural conflict in norms for expressing parental warmth

One primary source of intergenerational cultural conflict involves parental beliefs and practices (Hyman, Vu, & Beiser, 2001; Kim, 2001; Phinney, Ong, & Madden, 2000). Child-rearing beliefs and behaviors vary considerably across cultures. As children reach adolescence, they become more aware of differences in their immigrant parents’ parenting versus that espoused by the larger society (Hyman et al., 2001; Kim, 2001). They also tend to interpret the differences as ethnic or cultural differences rather than parents’ individual differences (Pyke, 2000).

Specifically, cultural norms for the expression of parental warmth, which are rooted in the broader cultural standards of expressive or restrained communication (Rotheram & Phinney, 1987), may lead to cultural misunderstandings between Asian American adolescents and their immigrant parents. Generally, Asian cultures value self-control and restraint, particularly in expressing emotions (Hsu, Tseng, Ashton, McDermott, & Char, 1985; Uba, 1994). According to Confucian doctrine, strong emotions are regarded as somewhat harmful to one’s health and relationships, and therefore should be avoided (Confucius, 500 BC/1992). Moreover, Taoism stresses that one must abandon emotions that may be distracting to the development of tacit knowledge or intuition and meditation (Laozi, 300 BC/2001). Truth is sought and conveyed not through language or verbal communication, but through tacit knowledge. This self-restraint of emotion is particularly reflected in the parental role; Asian parents do not primarily express affection and warmth openly or directly.

Instead, Asian parents demonstrate their love and affection to their children through their instrumental support and sacrifice for their children, especially their education (Chao, 1994; Chao & Tseng, 2002; Uba, 1994). In many Asian cultures, love for others is expressed through anticipating and meeting others’ needs (Hsu et al., 1985; Uba, 1994). Confucian doctrine stresses that one’s good intentions are conveyed through actions more than words (Confucius, 500 BC/1992). Thus, Asian parents express their love for their children through what they do for their children rather than through what they say to them. In contrast to Asian norms of parental warmth, mainstream American culture advocates more direct or expressive communication, and thus relies on more demonstrative expressions of parental love and affection, such as hugging, kissing, and praising children.

Youth from Asian immigrant families often prefer mainstream American norms of parental warmth to ethnic ones. Hyman et al. (2001) demonstrated among Southeast Asian immigrants in Canada that adolescents were highly desirous of Western values of emotional and physical expressiveness, and more “open” communication (p. 288). Pyke (2000) also found that Asian American adolescents were more likely to desire typical “American” parental behaviors such as affectionate warmth. Such notions of American parenting are reflected in examples they provided from popular television programmes such as the “Brady Bunch” (aired in the 1970s and early 1980s, featuring a modern or communicative couple with children from previous marriages). By using the image of a typical “American” family as references, these adolescents described their immigrant parents as emotionally distant and “deficient” (Pyke, 2000, p. 248), partly indicating their parents’ adherence to Asian norms for expressing warmth. Thus, Asian American adolescents may perceive parents as less warm than their ideals, especially when compared to European American adolescents whose families have been in the United States for generations. That is, European American adolescents should have ideals for parental warmth that are more consistent with their parents’ behaviours, because both adolescents’ and parents’ cultural norms are primarily derived from mainstream American culture. Although European American adolescents may also perceive some mismatches between their ideals and perceptions of parents’ behaviour on warmth, the discrepancies have different meanings for them than for youth with immigrant parents. Unlike Asian American adolescents, European American adolescents may perceive the discrepancies simply as typical parent–child generation gaps. This perception of generational gaps is fairly normative in the youth culture (Lerner, Karson, Meisels, & Knapp, 1975; Montemayor,
As such, it may not be as stressful as the cultural "deviance" Asian American adolescents perceive from their discrepancies. Consequently, the discrepancies in ideal versus perceived warmth may be less deleterious for European American than for Asian American adolescents.

The purpose of this study is to examine the nature and consequences of discrepancies in adolescents' ideals concerning parental warmth versus perceptions of actual parental behavior, for Asian immigrant and European American families. The discrepancy between ideal and perceived parental warmth includes both the possibility that adolescents desire more warmth than they feel they are receiving from parents (indicated below as "ideals exceeding perceptions of warmth") and the possibility that they are receiving more warmth from parents than they desire (indicated below as "perceptions exceeding ideals of warmth"). By examining generational mismatches between parenting ideals and realities among immigrant and nonimmigrant families, the analysis sheds light on the role of intergenerational cultural conflict in Asian immigrant family life.

Because of the diversity among Asian Americans, the study focuses on only one subgroup, Chinese Americans. Additionally, two generations of Chinese immigrants were included, first-generation (adolescents not born in the United States) and second-generation (adolescents born in the United States to a parent who was not born in the United States), in order to explore whether there may be differences among Chinese Americans due to immigrant status. All the European American adolescents and their parents included in the study have been in the United States for generations.

The following hypotheses were proposed for ethnic differences in the levels of adolescents' perceived warmth, ideal warmth, and discrepancies in adolescents' ideal versus perceived warmth: (1) Chinese American adolescents will report lower levels of perceived warmth from parents than European American adolescents, but similar levels of ideal warmth because Chinese American adolescents are expected to have adopted mainstream American parenting ideals; and (2) compared to European Americans, Chinese American adolescents will report higher levels of discrepancies that capture the degree to which their ideals exceed perceived warmth from parents.

In examining ethnic differences in how discrepancies between adolescents' ideals and perceptions of parental warmth are related to adolescent well-being, the following hypotheses were proposed: (1) as adolescents' ideals exceed their perceptions, internalizing and externalizing symptoms will increase more for Chinese Americans than European Americans, even after accounting for perceived warmth; and (2) although it may be relatively infrequent that adolescents' perceptions of parental warmth exceed their ideals, internalizing and externalizing symptoms will decrease more for Chinese Americans than European Americans as such discrepancies increase. These discrepancies will have more positive consequences for Chinese American adolescents because they reflect the fact that adolescents perceived their parents to be more acculturated to mainstream American norms.

Finally, although it is not expected that there will be differences among the Chinese American youth due to their immigrant status (i.e., first- versus second-generation), immigrant status differences will be tested in all of the above analyses.

**Method**

**Sample**

The sample consisted of 184 Chinese American (60 first- and 124 second-generation), and 80 European American (primarily third-generation or later) students enrolled in the ninth through twelfth grade at four different high schools in the greater Los Angeles area. Participants' average age was 14.22 years ($SD = 0.49$, range, 13 to 16). Of the first-generation Chinese American adolescents, 21% had lived in the United States for 2 years or less and another 25% had lived in the United States for over 2 but less than 5 years. Of these, 18% of mothers and 31% of fathers had lived in the United States for up to 2 years, and 28% of mothers and 15% of fathers had lived in the United States for over 2 but less than 5 years. Approximately 47% of these Chinese immigrant adolescents and their parents were from Taiwan, 36% were from the People's Republic of China, 6% from Hong Kong, and 3% from other parts of Asia. Among the parents of second-generation Chinese adolescents, 18% of mothers and 11% of fathers had lived in the United States for up to 15 years, and 43% of mothers and 47% of fathers had lived in the United States for more than 15 but less than 20 years. In addition, of these same parents, 52% of mothers and 42% of fathers were from Taiwan, 11% of mothers and 13% of fathers were from the People's Republic of China, 9% of mothers and 9% of fathers were from other parts of Asia, and 5% of mothers and 7% of fathers were from Hong Kong.

A total of 126 male and 134 female students were included in the sample. There were 80 males and 102 females (44% and 56%) among Chinese American adolescents (2 adolescents did not report their gender), and 46 males and 32 females (59% and 41%, respectively) among European American adolescents (2 adolescents did not report their gender).

Chinese American parents had significantly higher levels of education ($M = 6.93$, $SD = 1.11$) than European American parents ($M = 6.31$, $SD = 1.02$), $t(242) = 4.40$, $p = .00$ (with a score of 6 being "some college or vocational training" and 7 being "finished 2-year community college degree"). Moreover, Chinese parents of second-generation adolescents ($M = 7.06$, $SD = 1.00$) had significantly higher levels of education than those of first-generation youth ($M = 6.67$, $SD = 1.26$), $t(167) = -2.18$, $p = .03$.

Compared to European American adolescents, a smaller proportion of Chinese American adolescents (14%) were from single-parent families compared to European American adolescents (29%), $\chi^2(1) = 9.14$, $p = .00$. Additionally, the proportion of single-parent households was greater among first-generation Chinese adolescents (25%) than second-generation (8%), $\chi^2(1) = 7.99$, $p = .01$.

**Procedures**

Participation of the adolescents was achieved through passive consent from the parents. All parents received copies of the consent letter in English and Chinese. They were required to send back the consent forms only if they did not wish their child to participate in this study. Adolescents were given 50 minutes, during each of their class periods, to complete paper and pencil surveys that included the following measures.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chinese American</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>European American</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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*Note:* Further details on the procedures can be found in the original source. The table above provides a simplified representation of some key findings.
Parental warmth measures. Adolescents’ perceptions of parental warmth were assessed by the acceptance-rejection subscale of the Children’s Report on Parent Behavior Inventory (CRPBI; Schludermann & Schludermann, 1988). The subscale consisted of 10 items that assess the degree to which adolescents perceive their parents as responsive and warm (e.g., “Smiles at me very often,” and “Often praises me”). Responses were coded on a 3-point scale ranging from 1 (seldom) to 3 (often). Adolescents’ ideals for parental warmth were measured by asking for each of the 10 items described above (i.e., the acceptance-rejection subscale), “Ideally, how often do you think a parent should do the following things?” Responses were also coded on a 3-point scale ranging from 1 (seldom) to 3 (often), as for perceived warmth. Two separate scale scores were created for perceived warmth and ideal warmth by computing the mean of the 10 items for each subscale. Cronbach’s α for the perceived parental warmth scale was .89 for the overall sample (.88 for Chinese Americans, and .89 for European Americans); the α for the ideal parental warmth scale was .86 for the overall sample (.86 for Chinese Americans, and .85 for European Americans).

In order to calculate the discrepancy score of ideal versus perceived parental warmth, the means for scales of perceived warmth and ideal warmth were first computed by averaging the scale scores across the 10 items for each scale. The mean for the scale of perceived warmth was then subtracted from that for the scale of ideal warmth.

Internalizing and externalizing symptoms. Adolescents’ psychological well-being was assessed by the internalizing and externalizing scales of the Youth Self-Report Form (YSR) of the Child Behavioral Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach, 1991). Liu and his colleagues (1997) have validated the YSR among Chinese adolescents and proved it to be applicable among this population. The internalizing scale consists of subscales for anxious/depressed symptoms, somatic complaints, and withdrawal. The subscale for anxious/depressed symptoms contains 20 items (e.g., “I cry a lot”), and the somatic complaint subscale consists of 9 items (e.g., “I feel dizzy”). Another 7 items such as “I am shy” comprise the withdrawal subscale. The externalizing scale consists of two subscales, aggression and delinquency. Twenty items such as “I am mean to others” comprise the aggression subscale. The delinquency subscale contains 11 items such as “I lie or cheat.” Responses for all the items of the internalizing and externalizing scales were coded on a 3-point scale ranging from 0 (not true) to 2 (very true or often true). For each adolescent, separate scale scores were created for internalizing and externalizing symptoms by averaging all the items comprising each scale. Cronbach’s α for the internalizing scale was .90 for the overall sample (.90 for Chinese Americans and .89 for European Americans); the α for the externalizing scale was .91 for the overall sample (.89 for Chinese Americans and .93 for European Americans).

Results

Differences in mean levels

First, separate multiple regression analyses, including one dummy coded variable (Chinese Americans were coded as 1 and European Americans were coded as 0), were conducted to test ethnic group differences in means for adolescents’ ideal warmth, perceived warmth, and discrepancy scores of ideal versus perceived warmth. All the analyses controlled for child gender, parental education, and single-parent status. Means and standard deviations of each of the above variables are displayed in Table 1.

Whereas no ethnic group differences were found for adolescents’ ideals for parental warmth, p = .43, differences were found for adolescents’ perceptions of parents’ warmth. Chinese American adolescents reported lower levels of warmth than their European American counterparts, t(240) = -3.28, p = .00. For both Chinese and European American adolescents, average discrepancy scores were positive—indicating that, on average, adolescents perceived that their parents provided less warmth than that reflected in their ideals. Ethnic group differences were found in the discrepancy scores. Compared to European Americans, Chinese adolescents had higher levels of discrepancies, t(240) = 3.02, p = .00. No differences were found between the two generations of Chinese in levels of ideal warmth, perceived warmth, or discrepancies between ideal and perceived warmth (ps = .26, .98, and .20, respectively).

Additionally, the discrepancy scores were coded into three categories: adolescents perceiving parents as less warm than desired (i.e., when the discrepancy score was at least 0.15 SD above zero), adolescents perceiving parents as warmer than desired (i.e., when the discrepancy score was at least 0.15 SD below zero), and the adolescents whose perceptions of parental warmth were similar to their ideals (i.e., when the discrepancy score was within -0.15 and 0.15 of a SD around zero). Table 1 shows the percentage of adolescents reporting these different types of discrepancies. Within each ethnic group, the proportions for the three types of discrepancies differed for both Chinese Americans and European Americans, χ²(1) = 79.08, p < .00, and χ²(1) = 71.65, p < .05, respectively. For both groups, the highest proportion of adolescents reported that parents were less warm than they desired, followed by those who thought their parents were as warm as they expected, and only a small proportion of adolescents perceived that the parents were warmer than they desired. Moreover, a chi-square

Table 1
Means and proportions for warmth and discrepancy variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ideal warmth</th>
<th>Perceived warmth</th>
<th>Discrepancy (ideal-perceived)</th>
<th>Discrepancies (ideal vs perceived)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese Americans</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>2.23</td>
<td>0.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Americans</td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>0.50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
analysis based on this classification revealed that discrepancies and ethnicity are not independent, \( \chi^2(2) = 7.84, p = .02 \). The percentages in the table indicate that Chinese Americans were more likely than European Americans to report that their ideals exceeded perceptions of parental warmth, and less likely to report that their ideals were similar to or less than perceptions. Additionally, no generational differences were found in the distribution of the three types of discrepancies for the Chinese group, \( p = .10 \).

Additional \( t \) tests for mean differences in adolescents' internalizing and externalizing symptoms were also conducted. For internalizing symptoms, no significant differences were found between Chinese (\( M = 0.57, SD = 0.33 \)) and European American youth (\( M = 0.52, SD = 0.36 \), \( p = .26 \). For externalizing symptoms, however, significant differences were found, \( t(241) = -2.45, p = .02 \), such that Chinese American adolescents reported lower levels of externalizing symptoms (\( M = 0.43, SD = 0.27 \)) than European American adolescents (\( M = 0.53, SD = 0.39 \)). No differences were found in the levels of internalizing or externalizing symptoms between the two generations of Chinese adolescents (\( ps = .62, \) and .50, respectively).

**Effects of discrepancies on adolescents' behavioural adjustment**

Next, multiple regression analyses were conducted to address the primary hypotheses for the associations between discrepancies and adolescents' adjustment problems. Multiple regression models were estimated separately for internalizing and externalizing symptoms with discrepancy scores included as predictors. The discrepancy scores were not treated as one continuous variable in the models because the two conditions of discrepancies (i.e., ideal exceeding perceptions and perceptions exceeding ideals of warmth) may have different relationships with the adolescent's adjustment. Instead, they were treated as a piecewise linear function (Greene, 2003) by creating two continuous variables, \( X_1 \) and \( X_2 \), to capture the two conditions of discrepancies. Specifically, \( X_1 \) was calculated as the absolute values for the extent ideals exceed perceptions of warmth, with discrepancy scores below 0 (i.e., when perceptions exceed ideals of warmth) coded as 0. \( X_2 \) was calculated as the absolute values for the extent perceptions of warmth exceed ideal warmth, with all discrepancy scores above 0 (i.e., when ideals exceed perceptions of warmth) coded as 0. When \( X_1 \) and \( X_2 \) are both included in the model, the coefficient of \( X_1 \) represents the linear function of ideals exceeding perceptions of warmth on the adolescent's adjustment and the coefficient of \( X_2 \) reflects the linear function of perceptions exceeding ideals on adjustment. Ethnic group differences in the associations between discrepancies and adjustment problems were tested by estimating interactions between ethnicity (dummy-coded as Chinese American) and each of the discrepancy score variables (i.e., \( X_1 \) and \( X_2 \)) described above.

All the regression analyses controlled for covariates including levels of perceived warmth, child's gender, parental education, and single-parent status. In the models testing for ethnic differences in the associations between discrepancy and adolescent's adjustment problems, interactions between ethnicity (dummy-coded as Chinese American) and these covariates were also accounted for. These models are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2**

Multiple regression analysis—Chinese Americans and European Americans between groups: Discrepancies in ideal versus perceived warmth as predictors of adolescents' internalizing and externalizing symptoms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Internalizing symptoms(^a)</th>
<th></th>
<th>Externalizing symptoms(^b)</th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>Sig.</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Covariates</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child gender</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental education</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single-parent status</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>.98</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived warmth</td>
<td>-0.17</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Discrepancies in ideal vs. perceived warmth</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ideals exceeding perceptions of warmth</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>-0.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions exceeding ideals of warmth</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>0.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ethnicity (Chinese)</td>
<td>-0.42</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>.35</td>
<td>-0.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interaction of ethnicity and covariates</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity (Chinese) × child gender</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity (Chinese) × parental education</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity (Chinese) × single-parent status</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity (Chinese) × perceived warmth</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interaction of ethnicity and discrepancies</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity (Chinese) × ideals exceeding perceptions of warmth</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>0.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity (Chinese) × perceptions exceeding ideals of warmth</td>
<td>-1.38</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-1.21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\)\(R^2 = .22, F(13, 212) = 4.29, p = .00.\)

\(^b\)\(R^2 = .20, F(13, 212) = 3.80, p = .00.\)
Internalizing symptoms. With regard to the consequences of ideals exceeding perceptions of warmth, no significant ethnic differences were found in associations between these discrepancies and adolescents’ internalizing symptoms (see first set of columns in Table 2). In separate analyses for each ethnic group, however, it was found that Chinese American adolescents reported more internalizing symptoms as discrepancies increased \((b = 0.28, SE = 0.08, p = .00)\), whereas this association was not found for European Americans \((b = 0.12, SE = 0.22, p = .61)\). This was found even after controlling for the levels of adolescents’ perceived warmth.

In looking at the consequences of perceptions exceeding ideals of warmth, significant ethnic group differences in the associations between the discrepancies and adolescents’ internalizing symptoms were found. Compared to European American adolescents, Chinese American adolescents were more likely to have lower degrees of internalizing symptoms with increasing discrepancies (i.e., discrepancies for when parents were perceived as warmer than desired). Separate analyses by ethnic group showed that these adolescents had significantly lower levels of internalizing symptoms as discrepancies increased \((b = -0.85, SE = 0.38, p = .03)\). However, no associations between such discrepancies and internalizing symptoms were found for European American adolescents \((b = 0.53, SE = 0.35, p = .14)\).

Externalizing symptoms. Regarding the consequences of when adolescents’ ideals exceeded perceptions of warmth, ethnic group differences in the associations between the discrepancies and adolescents’ externalizing symptoms were also found between Chinese Americans and European Americans (see second set of columns in Table 2). Compared to European Americans, Chinese American adolescents were more likely to have externalizing symptoms with increases in discrepancies for when adolescents’ ideals were higher than their perceptions of warmth. Separate analyses by ethnic group revealed that for Chinese Americans, externalizing symptoms increased slightly as the discrepancies increased \((b = 0.13, SE = 0.07, p = .08)\). No associations between such discrepancies and externalizing symptoms were found for European Americans \((b = -0.31, SE = 0.24, p = .20)\).

In looking at the discrepancies for when adolescents perceived their parents were warmer than they desired, ethnic group differences were also found in the associations between the discrepancies and the adolescents’ externalizing symptoms (see second set of columns in Table 2). That is, compared to their European American counterparts, Chinese American adolescents were less likely to have externalizing symptoms with increases in discrepancies (i.e., when they perceived parents to be warmer than they desired). In separate analyses for each group, externalizing symptoms slightly increased as these discrepancies increased for European American adolescents \((b = 0.67, SE = 0.38, p = .08)\), whereas the symptoms slightly decreased for Chinese Americans \((b = -0.54, SE = 0.32, p = .09)\).

Additional analyses were also conducted to test for generational differences among the Chinese Americans in associations between discrepancies and adjustment problems by estimating interactions between generations (dummy-coded as first-generation) and each of the two discrepancy variables. No generational differences were found for any of the associations between discrepancies and adjustment problems.

Discussion

In the present study, we attempted to capture the cultural conflict experienced by Chinese American adolescents in relation to their immigrant parents by focusing on one aspect of conflict, that of cultural norms for the expression of parental warmth. Intergenerational cultural conflict may arise when these youth adhere to norms of warmth that are more in line with those held by European Americans, but their immigrant parents endorse the ethnic ones. By assessing the discrepancies between their ideals and perceptions of parental warmth, the present study was able to capture the adolescents’ experience of such conflict. The study revealed that although Chinese American adolescents express similar ideals to those expressed by European American youth, they report receiving lower levels of warmth from their parents. Furthermore, this study was able to demonstrate not only that Chinese American adolescents perceive their parents as less warm than they desire compared to European Americans, but this parental “shortcoming,” as perceived by the adolescent, has negative consequences for the behavioural adjustment of Chinese American, but not European American adolescents.

As predicted, the study first demonstrated that Chinese American adolescents, compared to European Americans, reported higher levels of discrepancies for when parents were perceived as less warm than ideal. The ethnic differences in levels of perceived and ideal warmth might provide a plausible explanation for this finding. As the tests of ethnic differences demonstrated, Chinese adolescents had similar levels of ideals for parental warmth as European Americans. Given that ideals represent the cultural norms for expressing warmth, it might indicate that Chinese American adolescents tend to adopt mainstream American norms for expressing warmth just as their European American peers did. However, parents of Chinese American adolescents might not adhere to such mainstream American norms of warmth, as demonstrated by the lower levels of parental warmth reported by their children compared to reports from European American adolescents. Such lower ratings of parental warmth might be partly due to the adolescents’ devaluation of parents’ Chinese norms. Obviously, the reason for the remarkably higher discrepancy scores reported by Chinese American adolescents was the lower ratings they gave for their perceptions of parents’ actual warmth, as Chinese youth had similar levels of ideals for parents’ warmth to their European American counterparts. These larger mismatches among the Chinese reflected the cultural conflict these adolescents experienced between how warm their parents were perceived to be versus how warm their parents ought to be.

This study was also able to demonstrate that compared to European Americans, Chinese American adolescents who perceived parents as less warm than they desired were more likely to suffer greater behavioural adjustment problems, specifically externalizing symptoms. These discrepancies were associated with increases in adjustment problems for Chinese American youth, whereas no such associations were found for European American youth. Although significant ethnic group differences weren’t found in the association between these discrepancies and internalizing symptoms, within-group effects revealed that internalizing symptoms increased only for Chinese American adolescents when these discrepancies increased. These discrepancies were not simply parent–child generational gaps for Chinese American adolescents, but were
essentially indicators of youth’s perception of cultural conflict in relation with immigrant parents. Thus, the above findings provided some support for the expectation that intergenerational cultural conflict in norms for parental warmth had negative consequences for these young people’s behavioural adjustment. This is consistent with the literature that the experience of cultural conflicts with parents is usually stressful and causes adjustment problems among adolescents (Aldwin & Greenberger, 1987; Bourne, 1975; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Skillman, 1999; Szapocznik et al., 1984; Uba, 1994).

Conversely, European American adolescents did not suffer such deleterious effects because they might perceive the discrepancies just as a typical generational gap with their parents. The discrepancies, specifically when adolescents expected more warmth than they perceived, represented generational gaps that are quite normative among this group (Lerner et al., 1975; Montemayor, 1983). Thus, such generational gaps are not an atypical experience that may cause stress and concomitant adjustment problems. Moreover, for European American adolescents, the discrepancy scores for when they expected more warmth than desired reached at very low levels close to zero. Also, over a half of them scored below the mean of such discrepancies. Therefore, these discrepancies might not have enough variation to allow associations with the outcome variables. Additionally, the lack of correlation between these discrepancies and adolescents’ adjustment problems also implicates that there might be other factors leading to European American adolescents’ greater externalizing symptoms compared to Chinese adolescents at the group level.

Furthermore, the above findings for negative consequences of discrepancies among Chinese American adolescents may indicate that assimilation to the dominant culture without any appreciation of ethnic culture might create cultural misunderstandings with their parents. In the past, the assimilation of immigrants had been advocated by the larger society such that immigrants and their descendants were pressured to abandon their own cultures and languages (Alba & Nee, 2003; Zhou, 1997). However, “bicultural skills” involving a cross-cultural understanding are found to be very important for ameliorating adjustment problems for adolescents from immigrant families (Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1993, p. 404; Szapocznik et al., 1986). Specifically, in order to reduce the potential psychological harm to adolescents caused by cultural conflicts with immigrant parents, as Szapocznik and Kurtines (1993) proposed, adolescents need to be encouraged to understand and appreciate the norms of their ethnic cultures. Immigrant parents, on the other hand, must also try to understand the pressures adolescents experience in trying to fit in with the mainstream society.

Findings for the consequences when parents were perceived as warmer than desired also seem to point to the significant role of intergenerational cultural conflict for adolescents’ adjustment. Typically, Asian American adolescents are likely to perceive parents as deficient in warmth (Pyke, 2000; Uba, 1994). However, a small percentage of adolescents perceived their parents as exceeding their ideals. As demonstrated by this study, the proportion of Chinese American adolescents who reported their parents were warmer than they desired was significantly smaller than the proportion who reported their parents were not as warm as they desired. And this difference was more pronounced for Chinese than for European Americans. Although it was quite uncommon that they received more warmth from their parents than they desired, Chinese adolescents were better off with such discrepancies, experiencing fewer adjustment problems. However, this protective effect was not found for European Americans. Moreover, Chinese American adolescents were more likely than European Americans to show decreases in levels of both internalizing and externalizing symptoms.

These findings demonstrated that youth from immigrant families place such a high premium on mainstream American norms that their well-being is enhanced when their parents’ behaviours are in line with these norms. Television is often the primary means through which children of immigrants learn about mainstream American culture (Pyke, 2000). However, in most television programmes, the reality of “American” family life is replaced or glossed over by a more idealized image of the family that portrays parents as emotionally open and physically expressive (Coontz, 1992). These television images are often incorporated wholesale into the cultural schemas of adolescents as the norms for expressing warmth (Pyke, 2000). These often exaggerated cultural norms become the yardstick with which adolescents measure their parents’ warmth. Adolescents with immigrant parents are particularly sensitive to the differences in their parents’ behaviours relative to the cultural norms. Therefore, although only a small proportion of Chinese American adolescents in this study reported that their parents’ behaviour with regards to warmth exceeded their ideals, these adolescents benefited from having parents that they felt were meeting up to “American” standards of parenting.

This study also tested generational differences among the Chinese American adolescents, and none were found. The similar findings between the two generations may indicate that both foreign-born and American-born adolescents experience cultural conflict with their parents. Both groups of adolescents may be more attracted to mainstream American norms than their immigrant parents are. However, due to the reduction in sample size when stratifying the generation, there may not have been adequate power to detect significant differences.

There have been no studies that have examined how intergenerational cultural conflict in parents’ expression of warmth to their children would affect children’s adjustment. Moreover, no studies have attempted to capture intergenerational cultural conflict through comparing adolescents’ perceptions of warmth to their ideals or norms for the expression of parental warmth. Theoretically, adolescents experience cultural conflict because they are holding different cultural ideals from their parents. Thus, comparing adolescents’ ideals to parents’ ideals may be another alternative to capture cultural conflict. Nevertheless, this study examined the cultural conflict experienced by adolescents. Differences in their ideals and parents’ ideals may not necessarily lead to adolescents’ experiences of cultural conflict in relation to their parents. Instead, adolescents experience cultural conflict only when they perceive that parents’ behaviours do not meet up with their ideals. Therefore, examining the discrepancies in adolescents’ ideals and perceptions of warmth might be a better way for getting at the cultural conflict perceived by youth.

However, this study was limited by the assumption that ideals of warmth reported by Chinese American adolescents represent mainstream American cultural norms just because they are similar to European Americans’ ideals. Although using European American adolescents as a reference group provided some validation of this assumption, greater leverage may have
been obtained by assessing adolescents' professed "American" ideals directly, and comparing them to adolescent perceptions of parental behaviour. Unfortunately, there are no established measures identifying "American" standards for parental warmth. However, the acceptance-rejection subscale of CRPBI (Schunkl & Schuldermann, 1988) used in this study may reflect mainstream American norms of warmth to some extent, because this scale has been validated mostly on European Americans. Adolescents' reports of their parents' behaviours are judged against these norms or standards, and as such represent the cultural conflict experienced by youth. Therefore, this study is capturing the cultural conflict as experienced by adolescents, regardless of whether parents may have actually acculturated to some degree to American mainstream standards. Nonetheless, future studies may be needed to identify mainstream American norms pertaining specifically to parenting or parental warmth for more accurate assessment of "American" ideals.

Perhaps the most important message to be taken from this study is that cultural conflict in parents' expression of warmth plays a significant role in the behavioural adjustment of Chinese adolescents from immigrant families. Not only do these adolescents experience a greater gap between parental behaviour and ideals, but such discrepancies have more deleterious consequences for this group than they do for European Americans. Additionally, this study highlighted the importance of employing a multicultural approach in studying adolescents from immigrant families. Adolescents from immigrant families are living in a culturally diverse context that exposes them to both ethnic and dominant cultural norms (Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1993). Exposure to such a diverse set of norms creates additional complexities for these adolescents, who cannot be fully understood by the values of either their ethnic culture or the dominant culture (Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1993). Instead, their behaviours should be explained in a multicultural context by examining how divergent values in that context are related to their behavioural adjustment.

References


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